

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 23 January 1998

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

FORUM: QUORUM

The Chairman: Yesterday the Business Committee examined the Rule relating to the quorum. A Forum meeting cannot start until 22 Members are present, though if the number falls below 22 business can continue unless the matter is drawn to my attention.

FORUM: ELECTORAL REFORM COMMITTEE

The Chairman: The Business Committee agreed yesterday to recommend that the Committee on Electoral Reform change its terms of reference to allow it to make a contribution to the Government's review of the system used for parliamentary elections, to consider and recommend an appropriate system for any future election to a Northern Ireland Assembly and to report back to the Forum.

Resolved:

That the existing terms of reference for the Committee on Electoral Reform be deleted and replaced by the following:

- “(a) to monitor the Government's review on electoral reform in Northern Ireland;
- (b) to make a contribution to the Government's review of the electoral system to be used for parliamentary elections;
- (c) to consider and recommend an appropriate system for any future election for a Northern Ireland Assembly;

and to report to the Forum.” — [The Chairman]

FORUM: INTERNET WEBSITE

The Chairman: The Forum now has its own Internet website, which contains details of the membership, including that of the Committees, and reports of debates to date. I have arranged for Members to receive a copy of the press release which gives the address.

BEEF INDUSTRY CRISIS (BSE)

Mr David Campbell: On Wednesday Mr Poots, Mr Ford and I, accompanied by Mr Barnes, attended a meeting of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee of the European Parliament and then met a number of MEPs to discuss the lifting of the ban on the export of beef from Northern Ireland.

Yesterday we met with Commissioner Franz Fischler to thank him for his determined efforts on our behalf and to emphasize the need for continued pressure on national Governments to ensure that the ban will be lifted speedily. He indicated that the Standing Veterinary Committee would be considering the matter at an early opportunity and that the Commission remained reasonably confident that a qualified majority would be achieved. Failing that, the Council of Farm Ministers will be asked to endorse the Commission's proposal to lift the ban. The Commission will then conduct a further inspection in Northern Ireland before ending the ban on the export of beef from our certified herds.

Commissioner Fischler also said that the measures under the date-based scheme, which hold particular hope for our flagged farmers, are progressing well, though obviously at a slower rate. We thanked the Commissioner and invited him to visit Northern Ireland soon to see the standards here for himself.

We were then briefed by his officials on the Agenda 2000 proposals for reform of the common agricultural policy. The indications are that firm proposals will be tabled by the Commission towards the end of March, and Standing Committee D will be commenting on them in the Forum.

It was a successful visit, and I would like to thank Mr Nicholson and Dr Paisley for facilitating the meeting with Commissioner Fischler. It is extremely difficult to obtain a meeting with a European Commissioner, so we appreciated the opportunity.

NORTHERN IRELAND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCE (NATIONAL RETAILERS)

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

That the Forum adopts the report 'The Sourcing in Northern Ireland of Agricultural Produce by National Supermarkets and Retailers' prepared by Standing Committee D (Agriculture and Fisheries Issues) and asks the Chairman to forward the report to the Minister responsible for agriculture and fisheries, Lord Dubs, with a request that he give serious consideration to the recommendations contained in it.

The influx into Northern Ireland over the past few years of national retailers such as Sainsbury's, Tesco and Safeway has brought about a retailing revolution. How these supermarkets source their products affects everyone, though the Committee is concerned primarily with agricultural producers.

On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank all the companies and organizations that gave evidence. I am particularly grateful to the senior board members of the national retail companies who took the time to come. This demonstrates the seriousness with which

our report was taken and the sensitivities that surround the whole issue of sourcing Northern Ireland produce by the new retailers.

The Committee generally welcomes the opportunities afforded by the arrival of these retail chains: for the consumer there has been a tremendous expansion of choice and improvement in the quality of produce available; there have been new job opportunities in construction as well as on the service and supply sides; and there has been substantial investment in key areas of the province. One aspect that is not normally highlighted is that the arrival of companies like Tesco and Sainsbury's and the further expansion of Marks and Spencer have resulted in uniformity of retailers throughout the United Kingdom.

However, in welcoming their arrival, the report exposes the associated challenges and concerns. We are concerned at the job losses in the traditional businesses that have been drastically affected. The family butcher and baker are in danger of extinction, and the change in social structure is being driven dramatically.

We welcome the retailers' commitment to sourcing produce locally where possible and the substantial targets that each company has set. For example, Sainsbury's objective is to source £200 million worth of local produce annually over the next few years. These targets have been set in stone and given in evidence to the Committee. We must ensure that they are met, so one of the report's key recommendations is that we seek the co-operation of the Secretary of State to ensure that either her Government or the body that succeeds Standing Committee D, in whatever arrangements are worked out for Northern Ireland, monitors them.

We also want to ensure that local producers receive a premium price for the significant effort that they will have to put into meeting the quality standards that are required. The produce should also be fairly priced for the consumer, and we want to see the savings that were promised.

Another key recommendation is that the General Consumer Council conduct a much more comprehensive review of sourcing and pricing by retailers. Let me give an example. Last year we debated at length the crisis in the potato industry. When producers were supplying under contract, major retailers were giving them almost £80 a tonne — well below the production price but reasonable given the crisis that existed then. Yet that tonne of potatoes was being retailed for between £500 and £600. Who was making the money? We demand a fair price for the consumer, but the producer must also get a fair price so that his efforts to ensure quality are rewarded.

10.15 am

It is fair to say that members of the Committee and their constituents have vested interests in different sectors of the agricultural industry, and I praise every member for highlighting those interests to the various retailers who gave evidence. At one stage, Mr Chairman, I was almost expecting you to come along to extol the virtues of Ulster honey.

The Chairman: I resisted the temptation.

Mr David Campbell: Members will speak about the areas that are of particular interest to them.

I reported to the Forum some weeks ago that for the first time Marks and Spencer are going to buy all their fresh meat from Northern Ireland producers. That is a significant development and one that was stimulated by this Committee's work.

The opportunities are there for Northern Ireland producers, but they must provide the quality required, and in order to do so they will have to co-operate with each other. They will need the support and encouragement of the Government. There are several recommendations asking the Government to consider what grant-aid is available. Perhaps there could be a redefinition of some of the IDB and LEDU grant programmes specifically to cater for the additional processing and higher standards that will be required.

Our producers have the ability and are willing to produce to the required standards, but they do need time and help. One matter of major concern to us — this is highlighted in the report — is the efforts of the retailers to influence farms' methods of production. In many cases standards are being set by the major multiples. Issues of animal welfare are being raised, for example, which have less to do with food safety and animal welfare than with gaining an edge over competitors.

We look to the new Food Standards Agency to set safety standards, and we look to the Department of Agriculture and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to determine welfare regulations. It is not a role of the supermarkets to determine how an animal is raised; that is a matter for the veterinary experts. It is not for the supermarkets to make decisions about the nutritional quality of our produce; that will be up to the Food Standards Agency. The Committee is part of the consultative process that will lead to the development of the agency, and we will bring to the Forum a report highlighting the implications of the new body and our concerns for the agriculture industry.

I would like to refer to a comment made by a senior director of Marks and Spencer that shows better than anything else just how producers in Northern Ireland are meeting the standards and how they care about their produce. He said

"We do not like using the word 'commodity' in Marks and Spencer. It is a terrible thing for a grower to be told that something he spends his life growing and caring about should suddenly be called a commodity. A potato is not a commodity to us; it is a terrific raw material with the opportunity to add value, as are beef and chickens. These are high-quality products produced by caring growers."

Northern Ireland producers must be able to compete on a level playing-field, and we look to the new Food Standards Agency to ensure that appropriate legislation for full product labelling is implemented. Let us take an example. Compare the labelling of Northern Ireland beef — the commodity that has dominated business in the Forum for the past two years — with that of American beef being imported into the United Kingdom. This is of crucial importance. Northern Ireland beef can be labelled "Certified BSE-free" as it has come from certified herds. It can be labelled as having come from extensive green-field production and as having the minimum of concentrates, no meat-and-bone meal and no hormones. That must all go on the label, but the product will have to command a premium price.

American beef is hormone-enhanced. The animals are fed concentrates containing meat-and-bone meal, genetically modified cereals and staple proteins, and there are no traceability standards that come close to those in Northern Ireland. But the imported product is much cheaper, and a housewife, if there is no proper labelling, will no doubt choose it. Which product would Members choose? I guarantee that they would be willing to pay significantly more for Northern Ireland beef.

This is a substantial report which challenges the retailers to be fair to producers, to be fair to processors and to be fair to consumers. It challenges the producers to co-operate and to deliver quality. It challenges the Government to be the single agency that determines standards and provides grant-aid to enable those standards to be delivered. Finally, it challenges the consumers because it is they who can play the most important part in ensuring that the retailers' targets are achieved. Consumers — and Members — must all demand Northern Ireland produce. And if we do not see foodstuff clearly labelled to show that it has been sourced in Northern Ireland we must ask why and demand Northern Ireland produce. That must be the Forum's key recommendation to consumers.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is very important that we should know the source of produce. There is a certain amount of skulduggery — attempts to pass off as Northern Ireland produce something that has not been sourced in the province. That is a very serious matter, for it amounts to deception on the part of some of the big stores.

Mr David Campbell: I totally agree. That is why labelling is the key provision for which the Forum and our Members of Parliament must push when the Food Standards Agency legislation comes before the House of Commons.

In conclusion, I thank all the Committee members who contributed fully to the preparation of this report. Others will speak about the specific recommendations. I have tried to be general. I particularly want to record our thanks to Mr Barnes and his staff for all their help.

I have the greatest pleasure in proposing that the report be adopted by the Forum.

Mr Poots: Some people might ask why the Committee got involved in a report which deals with supermarkets and their buying policies. Northern Ireland's economy is based largely on agriculture and is therefore very dependent on it, so it is very important that produce sold in the province should have been sourced here. For that reason the Committee decided to take on this task, and we have produced a very comprehensive report. Our thanks must go to the Chairman and to Mr Barnes in particular for the hard work that has gone into its production.

Recommendation 43 touches on the General Consumer Council, which could do more. The task of that organization is to ensure that consumers, not producers, get a fair deal. I go into shops occasionally — I am not one of those men who say that the wife should always do the shopping — and I look more for bargains than does my wife, and generally get a better deal. Eggs may have leapt in price by 250% to 500%, and potatoes by 300% to 400%, whereas the price of meat has gone down, but by only 3% although what the producer

gets has dropped by 30%, and in the case of pork the consumer is not benefiting at all despite the fact that the producer has suffered a cut of 40%.

In a free market when the price of a product comes down consumers tend to buy more of it because they are getting good value for money. But here, although the prices to the producers are coming down, the consumers are not getting any benefit. Therefore they are not buying more, and the producers are not getting the benefit of greater demand. As supermarkets are so strong — they have more than 70% of the sales of food in Northern Ireland — we do not have a free-market economy as such. That is why it is essential that the Consumer Council keep a careful watch and bring to the public's attention what they should be paying for their goods. And they must put pressure on the supermarkets.

May I contrast the work of the Agriculture Committee with the work of the Ministers who have been involved. Government members have largely ignored the impact of the supermarkets on trading in Northern Ireland. The supermarkets have undoubtedly brought jobs to the province. Many have seen the expansion of Forestside and other places, and we cannot but welcome the jobs that are being created. On the other hand, we have had the closure of Kennedy's and O'Hara's, the fruit market in Belfast is less than half the size it used to be, and butcher shops all over the place are closing. So it has not been a one-way process.

Mr Empey: Does the Member agree that when we hear reports of major multiples coming here and creating 2,000 new jobs we should realize that those are not additional jobs? What we have is displacement because a large retailer is more efficient. The probability is that in the end fewer people will be employed and that they will be different people.

Mr Poots: I wish I could always agree so fully with the Member. It is redistribution of jobs that has taken place, and it is doing away with much enterprise in Northern Ireland. It used to be that a young man who became a butcher's apprentice really wanted to have his own shop — that was his aim in life. Those who went into the bakery business, or any other business, really wanted to set up for themselves at some stage. Now, with the large supermarkets, all that they can ever hope to be is a section manager.

Farmers will have to meet the standards that the supermarkets are setting, and they will have to adapt to meet them. But that will require more investment in the industry, and the money cannot come solely from the producers. The producers need help from the European Union and the Government to introduce the cold-storage systems and management systems that are required to meet the standards being demanded.

10.30 am

The same standards must also apply to importers, from no matter where in the world. Chickens are being imported into Northern Ireland from Thailand, and they are costing the supermarkets 10% to 40% less than home-bred chickens. These imported chickens are of poorer quality; they are not produced to the same standard as home-bred chickens, yet they are put on the same shelves at the same prices. It is completely unfair that consumers do not know the country of origin, how an animal was reared, or its standard. This is why a "country of origin" label is essential.

Supermarkets have many products labelled "Sourced in Northern Ireland". That may mean that they were indeed produced in Northern Ireland, but it could mean that the product was imported by a Northern Ireland processor who packaged it and sold it to the supermarkets. We need to take our labelling system a step further. Labels should say either "Country of origin: Northern Ireland" or "Country of origin: Brazil. Processed in Northern Ireland". It must be made absolutely clear to consumers what they are buying. If they want to pay less they can buy the cheaper, imported products; if they want to buy safe and healthy food they can buy the better-quality United Kingdom products.

It has been said that animal welfare standards must be applied equally throughout Europe, and it is the Government who are leading the way in applying the new standards. However, I am concerned that the United Kingdom's farmers are being penalized. It is costing them money to set up expensive new systems, yet they are not receiving any compensation for doing this. Furthermore, there is no marketing advantage to be gained over those who are not introducing those systems. If we are part of a free and single market, the same standards must apply across the European Union. We cannot have a single market which applies different animal welfare standards. The Government must not move ahead without the rest of Europe. If they want to go down this road, they must trail Europe along with it. They cannot put the United Kingdom's people at a disadvantage.

I support the Committee's detailed report. It has not been a supermarket-bashing or Government-bashing exercise; it identifies how the industry should pull together in order to benefit from the supermarkets' entry into the Northern Ireland market.

Mr McCarthy: I too pay tribute to Mr Murray Barnes and his staff for their excellent work in producing this report. I also pay tribute to the Committee's Chairman, Mr David Campbell, who has shown leadership and fairness, and I thank all my colleagues on the Committee for having worked very closely together.

I fully support the comments made by Mr David Campbell and Mr Poots. The arrival of the multinationals has led to changes in retailing and the way in which we shop. It is going to take time to adjust. These new supermarket chains will bring value and choice with them, but in many instances they have also brought job losses, anxiety and inconvenience for local consumers. We can only hope that long-term prosperity will be the result. Indeed, I was delighted to hear about the companies' commitment to source as much local produce as possible and their willingness to consider new suppliers from the province. Let us hope that they will actually do that — it is up to us all to ensure that they will.

Local producers have reacted very well to the changing pattern, and we must encourage them to continue to move with the times. Failure to do so will surely mean a loss of business and a loss of jobs, and the local economy will suffer.

I hope that as many of the Committee's recommendations as possible will be adopted. I also want to place on record the plight of those retailers in villages and small suburban communities. For example, look at the effect of the closure of O'Hara's Bakeries. I am concerned not only for the family grocer or butcher but for all those involved in retailing and wholesaling. As people start to shop in these large multinationals, the village shops are

having to fight harder and harder for business. We are undoubtedly facing the prospect of many local shops having to close and jobs being lost. Indeed, we may be facing the end of the village main street as we know it. I call on everyone to prevent this from happening.

I support the report.

Mr Casey: I too congratulate Mr David Campbell and his Committee for producing a very thorough and comprehensive report. I also thank Mr Murray Barnes and his staff for their assistance.

Labour welcomes this report. The arrival of three of the largest United Kingdom supermarkets — Tesco, Sainsbury's and Safeway — demonstrates the confidence that these companies have in Northern Ireland. Consumers have benefited from the improved quality and increased variety of foods available now, while local producers have been given the opportunity to sell their products at local and national levels. However, in spite of this we have to ask who has really benefited from the supermarkets' arrival. Have the savings brought about by the elimination of duplication been passed on to the consumer? Have the prices negotiated by the supermarkets for local produce been below market value?

We must temper the euphoria brought about by the arrival of large companies with some of the things that are happening to local industry and local commerce. I would not like the same thing to happen to the local agri-food industry. For example, let us remember what happened to the Saracen factory in Lurgan. Marks and Spencer, which has been trading in the province for 30 years, was faithfully served by this firm, yet, as we all know, the Saracen factory was closed. We have also mentioned the local bakeries, some of which were in existence for 100 years but are now gone. Bread-servers have lost their living. There have also been three or four recent closures in the clothing industry, and the local butcher, the independent shopkeeper and the corner shop — which we have all come to know and love over the years — have nearly all gone by the wayside. The same is happening to those filling stations which were franchised to local people. We had one in Craigavon, which also served as a shopping centre, but it is now gone. Sainsbury's is to have its own station there instead — another local person has bitten the dust.

Can local producers increase their output to meet this new challenge? Farmers and those in the agri-food industry will have to invest heavily, but what guarantees will they have? What is to prevent these supermarkets from purchasing cheaper produce elsewhere? I do my own shopping, and often I do not find the supermarket's meat or fruit and vegetables nearly as cheap as those from the local greengrocer. Yes, they may be more attractively packaged, but you are paying for that. Likewise, the cost of eggs in some supermarkets has gone through the roof. I can buy them in the local butcher's for 25% or 30% less than in the larger supermarkets. So, are we really benefiting from the arrival of these supermarkets or are we being conned? I admit that they create quite a lot of employment, but they also have the capacity to create a lot of unemployment. Yet, in spite of what I have said, I do not think it appropriate in this debate to point a finger at anybody or to criticize.

I welcome the report, and the Labour Party supports it.

Ms McWilliams: I too want to thank those who served on the Committee and the staff from the Secretariat who helped them.

10.45 am

It is difficult to concentrate on this issue today, though it is right that we should, given the terrible times we are living in. The macho-militant assassins going about this country also affect people who go into shops. Shopkeepers are beginning to make emergency exits at the back because they are frightened that someone may come in to shoot one of the workers. However, we are killing not just individuals but our communities too.

This is an important issue with regard to consumer choice in Northern Ireland. We have always had to pay higher food prices in this country. That is why many people here are poorer than those in other countries. Indeed, our food prices are, on average, 8% higher than those in Great Britain in spite of the fact that our benefits are exactly the same. So those on social welfare are hit hardest. But as consumers we all have an interest in keeping prices down because higher prices only increase poverty. Also, as a consumer and a mother, I am very anxious to know what my children are eating. And when I am at the supermarket till I wonder why I am paying so much for a product when others elsewhere are paying less. Our money is hard-earned, and I want answers to the questions about food quality and value for money.

The supermarkets here need to respond to some of the issues that have been raised in this report. I am aware that the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland — and I am glad that we have a body that takes such an active interest in these matters — has approached the supermarkets' council with a number of questions. The supermarkets have been asked to source produce locally where possible, subject to availability, quality and price considerations. The Consumer Council has also asked that local food producers and processors be encouraged to supply food to the supermarkets and, if necessary, be given assistance to do this. If huge demands are going to be placed on them to achieve certain standards they may need some help. We should encourage the Consumer Council to think through the best ways of doing that and to take up the recommendations in the report.

The Industrial Development Authority may need to offer some assistance during this transitional period to those who cannot afford to remain in business because of the number of regulations that their businesses are required to implement. And, as Mr Casey said, the last thing we want to see in Northern Ireland is small businesses going broke because they cannot keep up with the paperwork and the demands of the new regulations. I do not want those regulations to disappear if their aim is to improve standards, but I do not want small retailing businesses to disappear either.

We depend greatly on agriculture, which is one of Northern Ireland's three main industries. The other two (textiles and engineering) have almost disappeared, but we are still reliant on agriculture — much more so than Scotland, England or Wales. Therefore we need to pay very serious attention to the issue, and it is right that the Forum set up a Committee to concentrate on it because if we ever get slack with regard to agriculture we will be in serious trouble. I look forward to seeing this Committee and, indeed, the others concentrating their attention on the creation of a viable and competitive agri-food industry.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I want to join with others in congratulating David Campbell and his hard-working support team on this report. It is not the first time this Committee has brought us a good report. It was largely through its members' work and that of our MEPs that we got the result that we did get from Europe for farmers. The farming community owes a great deal to the Committee, and perhaps those who have left the Forum will now realize just how important a role it can play. Think of the vital support it got from the MEPs.

This is a very good report, but with regard to putting faith in the supermarkets, I for one will not be holding my breath. I have seen the devastating effect that supermarkets have had on the bakery industry. O'Hara's closed last week with the loss of 160 jobs. I put the blame squarely on the latest batch of supermarkets to arrive here. They stayed out when we had bombings, shootings and intimidation, but once we got a bit of peace they were knocking each other down. They came to planning committees with promises of hundreds and hundreds of jobs. I suggest that Members go back to their cities and towns and look for these new jobs. They will find when they do their sums that the supermarkets have created massive unemployment.

Let us look at the people who took over Stewarts. Stewarts bought many of their products from locally based companies, but these massive superstores are not doing that. They are importing everything, with the result that small shops are losing out, including small bakeries and butchers. And those who depended on orders from the supermarkets are also losing out. If a wee bakery closes down with the loss of one or two jobs, it does not get a headline. If a butcher pays off two or three staff, that does not get a headline. If a one- or two-man business closes, nobody worries. But when you add those jobs up and multiply them across the six counties, the true figures come out.

As chairman of Belfast City Council's planning committee I make no apology for saying that I will be examining closely any further applications that come in front of my committee with great promises of jobs that are likely to come to nothing.

I hope that I am wrong. I hope that the supermarkets will listen and push locally produced goods. But, as I said, I will not be holding my breath.

Mrs Steele: I have a lot of sympathy for what Mr Hugh Smyth has said about the loss of real jobs and small businesses.

I apologize on behalf of Mr McAlister, the Chairman of the Economy Committee, who had hoped to be here to speak. He has asked me to speak on his behalf and on behalf of the Economy Committee in supporting the Agriculture Committee's important report. Mr David Campbell and others have explained the situation very well, and the Economy Committee is very interested in the conclusions they have reached.

The agriculture industry is vital to the economy of Northern Ireland, and when it is in difficulty, the whole economy suffers greatly at all levels. These levels are found throughout the food chain — in production on the farm, in processing, in marketing, in transport and in retailing. We agree with the report's conclusions, and if everyone — shops, supermarkets,

catering establishments and consumers — were to demand that local produce be used at all possible times, that would help the industry at every level.

The supermarkets, though giving the consumer a greater choice, have put many locally owned businesses out of action by some of their retailing methods. O'Hara's and Kennedy's are glaring examples of this, and it is very unfortunate for the people concerned — and a loss of real jobs is a matter that we should all be very concerned about. Indeed, the Economy Committee has been particularly concerned about it in recent months. The report highlights these problems.

We strongly support the report's recommendations, which can help us all to give a much-needed boost to the agriculture industry. The Economy Committee commends the report to the Forum and commends the work done by the Agriculture Committee.

Mr Stewart: First, I want to congratulate Mr David Campbell, the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee, as well as members of my own party. Sadly, some of the people elected to serve on this Committee made no input. They did not even take the time to come to some of the Committee's meetings, yet some of them spoke this morning.

In recent months we have seen an increase in the number of supermarkets coming to our boroughs. That is to be welcomed, but, sadly, the small shop on the corner is disappearing.

However, farmers will have to be given time to change — there is no question about that. A few weeks ago we visited Mr Taylor's farm in Coleraine. He showed us what facilities he had, but he also told us what facilities he needed, such as cold storage for potatoes.

I want to congratulate Dr Paisley on his work in Brussels on behalf of the party.

The Committee has worked very well to bring this report to the Forum. I want to thank Mr Murray Barnes and his staff, as well as the Committee Chairman (Mr David Campbell) and the members of my party.

I support the report.

The Chairman: I too am concerned about the non-attendance of Committee members. Perhaps Chairmen would let me know if this is something we should attend to.

Mr John Junkin will speak next. I am sure he turned up all the time.

Mr Junkin: I attended as my business allowed, which was most of the time.

The subject of this report is near to everyone's heart, and that is especially true of men as the way to their hearts is supposed to be through their stomachs.

Since man first existed we have had hunters and gatherers. In the caves there were processors, consumers and critical analysts, although they did not have those job titles. To

cope with over-supply and under-supply, bartering evolved and storage developed. Chemical pickling and further types of processing were invented, and all this has developed into the modern food chain that we have in Northern Ireland today. We have well-managed, well-watered Ulster grass at one end and well-lit food halls at the other.

11.00 am

While the Committee was taking evidence I was aware that we were talking to some very clever people — people who know how to read statistics and trends, people who can manage the logistics involved in sourcing and selling thousands of products, and people who have to be mindful of the laws of the land and the regulations on food safety. To do all that, they need to be clever, but they were facing people who are also clever. They all seemed to want to source Northern Ireland produce that is available — we do not produce alligators, so products cannot be sourced here, though they are to be found on the shelves — and they all seemed to respect the quality culture of Northern Ireland farms and processors. But there is a long way to go in terms of using more food produced in Northern Ireland, which is still the safest in the world.

The report points out our disappointment at the Government's attitude. They seem to care little about agriculture and have done even less to help the Northern Ireland farmer to become a link in this evolving food chain. We know about the terrible plight of the beef and potato producers — and the Government are doing virtually nothing to help them survive in a declining market — but the pig and poultry sectors are also declining rapidly, and not only because of the strength of the pound. Pig and poultry products are sourced from all over the world, and according to the recent National Farmers' Union's 'Broiler Bulletin', chicken breast fillets with a 40% water injection can be delivered here from the Far East for 80p a pound. The home-grown product can only be produced at £1.70 a pound, so how can we hope to compete?

Supermarkets have a moral responsibility to declare where their products were sourced. They have a responsibility to declare the antibiotic regime, the hormone procedure and the testing characteristics of the source country.

The food industry is a means of survival for Northern Ireland farmers, who, as I have said before, are the best in the world. But the farmer should not be at the bottom of the heap; he should be the foundation-stone of a well-structured, financially stable industry, and I believe that Marks and Spencer, in its 30 years here, has gone a long way towards making that happen.

The farmer needs to be respected as part of the food team. He needs to know changes of direction well in advance, and he needs stable prices. Wild fluctuation makes life difficult. I read in the 'Farm Trader' that pig industry experts are assessing whether new outbreaks of swine fever in Germany this week will ease Northern Ireland's pig-price crisis. No farmer wants to prosper just because the Germans are having problems; no farmer wants good prices for his potatoes just because of floods on farms in Belgium or Holland. Farmers want loyalty from their own food chain, as well as reasonable security.

The supermarkets are big enough to ensure this by using their influence, and we should demand that they build on the good work they already do. We must urge them to treat Northern Ireland meat products with more respect. Using chickens and turkeys as loss-leaders is grossly insulting to the stockmen in Northern Ireland, who rear them in environments that are free from antibiotics, hormones and imported cereals of dubious repute. Supermarkets must tell the Northern Ireland housewife, who by and large wants to buy home-produced goods, whether pork products come from pigs reared in Northern Ireland and whether chicken is home-grown and not just packed here having been shipped from Brazil, Taiwan or somewhere else. Our prices need to be stabilized, and the welfare, efficiency, safety and innovation in Northern Ireland's agriculture must be developed. The cost of housing, machinery, wages and systems dictates that farm stability must be urgently improved.

I commend the report to the Forum, and in doing so I want to pay tribute to Mr Barnes and his staff. I also want to pay tribute to the Committee Chairman, Mr Campbell. He and the Clerk have done sterling work. It is a shame that such a team will cease to exist at the end of May.

The Chairman: That remark is perhaps a little pessimistic.

I have a feeling that the work being done by the Standing Committees will be the foundation of whatever governance Northern Ireland has after May.

Mr Shannon: I want to support the recommendations, and I hope that other Members will do so.

Northern Ireland has been blasted by the cold wind of change. The large supermarket chains are here, and as a result many small shops are being forced out of business. Many would say that this has created problems. It has, but it has also created challenges and opportunities.

The last 12 months have brought unprecedented changes throughout the supply chain. I want to talk about the impact on the potato industry. I will also be referring to the money that is needed to upgrade other sectors of the farming industry.

The Committee recommends that the Northern Ireland Ministers for Economic Development and Agriculture should be seen to be pressing supermarkets and retailers about sourcing produce in Northern Ireland. Local farmers have not been supplying all of the produce sold in the large supermarket chains, a fact which they and the Committee find extremely frustrating. Where is the produce coming from? Beef, for example, is coming from all over Europe as well as from Argentina, South Africa and Russia, yet the beef does not always meet the standards that ours has to. Is that fair? I believe that it is not, and many Members will agree.

Our vegetable industry, which is under serious pressure, has found that some of its produce has been turned away at central depots. We have all heard stories about the rhubarb that was the wrong colour (too red), or the cauliflower that was too big (they wanted eight to a box instead of six). Is that fair? Yet if that is what the supermarkets want, that is what they

will get, although during what I would call this probation period the supermarkets could be being more sympathetic to those suppliers who need more time to adjust and bring their products up to the required standard.

I said that I would be talking about the potato industry. The potato industry in Northern Ireland is in dire need of a motivator — someone to grasp it by the scruff of the neck and push it towards the new challenge and the new opportunities that are being presented.

Many people would, perhaps, like to do their own thing as they have done in the past. There is nothing wrong with being independent, but if the potato industry wants to move forward, it must have somebody to push it.

I would call the area that I represent the potato basket of Northern Ireland. The potatoes that come from the Ards and Comber areas are renowned for their taste and quality, and they sell well in shops all over the province and, indeed, further afield. Others will say that the potatoes in Coleraine, north Antrim or south Down are just as good, but I still think that the humble Comber spud is far ahead of the opposition.

The humble potato is one of our staple farming sectors, and it makes a very large contribution to the farming industry. It creates many jobs in both the growing and the processing sectors. There are lots of opportunities for further processing, but we need a strong industry to start with, someone to galvanize it and make the strategic decisions necessary to move it forward.

We need to consider the establishment of three or four large cold stores throughout the province. Farmers could then harvest their potatoes, keep them in the cold storage and release them on to the market throughout the year.

We are also recommending the creation of co-operatives. There is a need for more irrigation and machinery. For one farmer to provide all this would be cost-prohibitive, but if a group of farmers joined forces to do so, that would spread the financial burden.

Another positive step the industry might take is to go into the contract growing of potatoes. Companies such as Tayto have contract growers, and the ready-made chip industry is supplied primarily from outside the province. We could do that here; we have the people and the know-how. Why not look at that?

We also need a governing body to promote the potato industry as positively and, dare I say it, as aggressively as possible — we have to go out there and grasp the market, and we need somebody with enough motivation and physical energy to do that. In our recommendations we suggest that the Department of Agriculture, the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association should together identify a suitable person or agency to do this.

The supermarket chains and retailers are providing opportunities for the farming industry, and the potato sector should be alive to the advantages of quality-assured schemes. Such schemes are the way forward, and the potato sector should be encouraged to join them.

11.15 am

It is said that farmers are always looking for grant-aid but in this case we have to look at reality. There is a short-term change here. The supermarkets have come in, and people have got to adjust. They do not have five, six or ten years to do this; they have maybe one or two years. The Government have not provided the grant-aid assistance to facilitate those changes. Many farmers have been prepared to borrow and have made changes. They have spent a lot of money, but to move forward even further they need grant-aid now, and not the £6 million or £8 million that the Government are talking about. A substantial amount of money, somewhere in the region of between £20 million and £30 million, is needed so that people can change now before the opportunity is lost.

The Government have to grasp the opportunities that are here. By investing in the farming industry they can create jobs. However, they have to look beyond the farmer or their attitude will be very short-sighted. The opportunities are there now to invest in other areas of the industry and to create jobs, which will be to everybody's advantage.

As a result of our meetings with them, the supermarket chains are now showing a real commitment to local producers. When the deputation from Marks and Spencer came to the Committee we discussed their commitment to sourcing beef in Northern Ireland and in particular their dealings with Milltown Meats. This company has adjusted to the new changes. It has committed itself to Marks and Spencer and has established a business relationship for the purpose of selling beef. One of the advantages of Marks and Spencer is that they take a long-term view. I asked Mr McCracken about this as I thought it was important to put a marker down. He said

"That is the only basis on which we do so. It is not fair to a supplier to go along and ask him either to invest or to make changes if he is not confident that you will be there next week, next year or the year after that; so we only ever go into it on a long-term basis."

The point I am making is that the Committee contributed — I am not saying that we should take all the accolades — to the fact that Milltown Meats was able to establish a relationship with Marks and Spencer and, indeed, with Safeway as well.

This has come about because, first of all, Milltown saw an opportunity, went for it, grasped it and won it, and now they are holding on to it. But they had to do it with the help of Ards Borough Council who made changes at Ards Abattoir. Ards Abattoir now has EFSIS accreditation. That is the first time in Northern Ireland that any abattoir has had that accreditation. Farmers, businesses and the council saw the opportunities and worked together to secure a market for local producers. We can do it. We just need a little time and some financial assistance for the farming industry to go forward.

The report's recommendations on the sourcing of products in Northern Ireland are very worthwhile and positive — we can win it; we can do it.

The Chairman: On reading the report I was struck by recommendation 4(7), in which you indicated that the potato industry had been "appallingly slow" to take advantage of

those new opportunities. This is disappointing for a country which probably grows the best potatoes in the world. I might be able to help by singling recommendation 4(7) out for special mention in the letter to Lord Dubs which, if this motion is passed, you will wish me to write.

Mr Speers: First of all, may I take this opportunity to say a very sincere word of thanks to our Secretary who, under increasing demands from Committee members for information or whatever, never ceased to amaze us with his ability to produce it quickly and efficiently. Indeed, working with him on the Committee has been a pleasure.

The report has given the Committee an opportunity to look at certain aspects of the farming industry such as the sourcing of farm produce in Northern Ireland. The challenge that the arrival of the national supermarkets has presented and the dramatic change that it has brought to life in general here have already been mentioned. I refer specifically to social change and to the demise of some family businesses — in some cases there has been a demise of much more, the social structures in villages or on the periphery of cities and towns. Jobs have no doubt been lost in those communities. As elected representatives we must face up to the challenge and see that appropriate action is taken to sustain jobs, albeit different jobs in the production, processing and selling of food, and that is what we have been tending to do when preparing this report.

It has been customary for farmers and food processors to obtain grants to upgrade or build factories for processing foodstuffs from FEOGA and the Department of Agriculture. The report points out that as this is a major area for job creation, consideration should be given to whether this is the best mechanism. I am not sure that IDB and LEDU are doing enough. At the time the report was being prepared we were not aware that those agencies were being reviewed. Such a review is appropriate because if there is one criticism to be made, it is that the food processing industry found it difficult to get money for job creation from those bodies — a point that was made by some people who gave evidence.

I now want to refer to the new Food Standards Agency. This is a topical issue. The creation of such a body presents us with a wonderful opportunity to try to direct the Government's path so that it can be of benefit to the agri-food industry. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that the national supermarkets are quite happy to give the impression that their food is of the standard that is expected in Northern Ireland. Local farmers can produce the food, and processors can process it to the standard the housewife now demands. I do not see any problem with that. However, I do see a problem if, although we are meeting the standards, cheaper food from elsewhere is on the same shelf. The housewife is being deceived and is likely to buy something, possibly at a cheaper price, unaware of its origin.

A meat wholesaler here complained bitterly. He was selling to a London wholesaler, and while he had the quality controls and traceability, it all came down to money. He was competing with organizations from other parts of the world, but not on a level playing-field. The setting up of the Food Standards Agency will afford the opportunity to introduce legislation to ensure that food is clearly identified, and the consumer will be able to tell whether it is wholesome or potentially inferior.

Another sore point with the Committee is the fact that the General Consumer Council, while it has been vociferous in some areas — I have no doubt that it has a role to play — has not been proactive on behalf of the housewife, the agri-food industry or the farmer. One has only to look at the farming press to see many examples of the decrease in farm prices. Meat prices have dropped by about a third in the last two years, but in spite of that, its price in the supermarkets has dramatically increased. I noted one example where meat was selling at £2 per kilo, or less, on the farm, but there was an 800% mark-up to the housewife, and that is true of many areas of agriculture in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Consumer Council should have investigated these exorbitant mark-up prices, which give the false impression that farmers are much better off than we know them to be. They are in dire straits, but the consumer does not necessarily realize that because he sees the price of produce steadily increasing. The Government have a responsibility to set up the mechanisms necessary to implement the recommendations for the benefit of both farmers and consumers here.

11.30 am

It is a privilege to support this report.

Mr Gibson: The report's emphasis on the importance of food standards reminds me of a meeting I had with the President of the Basque Farmers' Union — a petite but sturdy spinster of indeterminate age. In a discussion over lunch she described how they disposed of their meat, and it did not do anything for my appetite. She described how, on her 20-hectare farm, the cattle were butchered in the farmyard, put on the meat cart and then hawked round to the local butcher's shop. And if they failed to strike a sale that day, the carcasses would be taken to a shed for eventual export to other parts of the European Community. So much for the standards of hygiene in other member states!

To return to this morning's debate on sourcing and labelling, I am aware that most Friday mornings — and this morning was no different because I met them at 6.35 am — five cattle lorries make their way from Monaghan to a meat plant in County Tyrone. While everyone is aware of the current favourable purchasing power of sterling against the punt, it is very important for credibility that produce advertised as Northern Ireland meat should be sourced here. We must ensure that commercial greed does not destroy the endeavours of those in our farming industry who have suffered immensely over the last two years. They have had to manage the financial crisis and cope with a complete revolution in their industry brought about by the arrival of the supermarkets — and all in the space of a year. It is therefore vital that the industry takes responsibility for policing both the sourcing and marketing of Northern Ireland produce.

But if we are to have credible marketing and quality-assurance schemes, we need an honest commitment from everyone involved. Everyone in County Tyrone can remember the Cook Report, in which forensic tests exposed the very person who was advocating so strongly the merits of quality assurance, but whose own product was of an inferior standard. That seriously damaged the credibility of the farming community, and the blame lay not with the farmers or retailers but with those in between.

I share Mr Shannon's concerns about the plight of the potato industry. Can any Member honestly say that his lunch or dinner is complete without the humble spud? This is something that Northern Ireland has always been proud of, and it needs our support. I also support Mr Curran's sentiments about the village grocery shops, which were perhaps the original community centres.

But there is another credibility problem. Last December, in the lead-up to Christmas, when strenuous efforts ought to have been made to promote meat, farmers were receiving rock-bottom prices for their beef, while the butchers' prices were never higher. There was a tremendous gap, and someone in between must have been profiting. It was certainly not the farmers. And it was certainly not the butchers, who are more hard pressed than ever; indeed, 19 have gone out of business in the past year. Someone is getting more than his fair share of profit as the meat is processed from the hoof to the butcher. Producers must therefore exercise much greater control over their industry.

I am reminded of W F Marshall's story about a very ardent young minister who discovered that, during the summer months, his congregation always drifted off to sleep during his Sunday afternoon sermon. By the time he reached points two or three they were normally past the state of somnolence. So he sought advice, and the next Sunday, when he came to the end of his second point, he announced "God, grant it." And suddenly the congregation woke up.

We should be encouraging the agriculture industry to maximize its marketing potential and ensure quality standards.

Finally, one point which the report failed to highlight is the funding crisis in agricultural research, particularly in the food industry. Loughgall Research Station, for example, has been diminished in stature, almost to the point of closure. There must be proper research funding for the agriculture industry.

The Chairman: Thank you, Mr Gibson. I now call that ardent young minister you referred to — Rev Trevor Kirkland.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: I am not sure that I could agree with Mr Marshall's ideology.

First, Ms McWilliams inadvertently referred to the IDB as the Industrial Development Authority. We are not in a united Ireland yet.

I commend the Committee on an excellent report and suggest that it should select issues raised by the report for a weekly press release in order to continue to highlight the industry's problems. Its consumer perspective should help focus the public's attention. My only criticism is reserved for the Secretary of State and her Minister for their appalling and total disregard of this matter in their pursuit of their poppycock notion called "peace". The Committee should remind the Secretary of State of her responsibilities.

I am delighted that the report has highlighted the issue of the control of the beef industry. It would be a shame and a disgrace if two retail companies ultimately gained control of the beef industry. The big retail companies want a monopoly-type situation. They

do not like auctions or anything that might interfere with their having control of the whole process.

It is equally important that producers are given a fair price. While I do not agree that the problem lies entirely with the fact that his profits are being made by the buyers, they do have a moral obligation to pay an equitable price to producers. I agree with the pursuit of profit, but a balance must be struck which is fair to both retailer and producer.

The advent of the big retailers has not meant massive price reductions for consumers, if my own local survey is anything to go by. In spite of all the great promises on the ground, it is wrong to suggest that consumers are getting a better deal. Nor, as the report highlights, are they getting a better product, in spite of the propaganda. Tesco's demands a four-inch cauliflower, which means that cauliflowers must be planted closer together and sprayed more often.

Nor do I believe that the issue of ethical farming is within the remit of the supermarkets. The report highlights the effect of some of Tesco's crazy notions on ethical farming.

Finally, I am delighted to support the recommendation at paragraph 4.17. We should adopt the slogan, "Buy local and protect local jobs."

11.45 am

I know of a local butcher who supplied hams to Supermac. After it was sold, the new owners came to him and said "We want you to spend £30,000 to £50,000 on improving your premises. If you do this we will continue to give you orders." But they did not tell him that they were reducing his order by about three quarters, which was not enough to pay even the interest on the money that he had borrowed to upgrade his premises in the first place, and all because of some standards they alleged they required. When talking to the press the Committee should encourage consumers to buy local produce. Consumers are being fooled by the retail companies' propaganda: something from Scotland or England is of better quality.

I hope that Members will read all of this report and not just some of the snippets. I agree with the report's recommendations and support them.

Mr Calvert: First, I am very sorry to hear that some members of the Agriculture Committee have not been attending its meetings — that is disgraceful. This is a very important Committee, and it is sitting at a time when the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland is facing its greatest crisis. Members should give the Committee their full support. As with the other Committees, we do not have the SDLP present, and that is an absolute shame. Agricultural issues, like health ones, are important to everyone, yet still they will not attend, and that is absolutely disgraceful.

I congratulate Mr David Campbell on his excellent leadership of the Agriculture Committee. Of course, he comes from the Lagan Valley, so that is to be expected. Mind you, I do not agree with his going to London, but that is another matter. I listened to him on

the farming programme last night, and he spoke very well. We are all very pleased that the beef crisis is being kept to the fore and that we have someone like Mr Campbell to chair the very important Agriculture Committee. I would also like to congratulate the Committee for the excellent work they have done. Indeed, in spite of the SDLP's absence, all of the Forum's Committees have done excellent work. It shows what can be achieved by those who are prepared to put their backs into it.

I welcome this report. Some years ago a deputation met with the Produce of Northern Ireland's council — everyone can support that organization. It is important to have the PRONI label on Northern Ireland's goods.

I welcome the support given by national supermarkets and retailers by sourcing products in Northern Ireland. I expressed concern last November that the supermarkets were not buying produce from Northern Ireland but were bringing it in from Great Britain. I am very pleased that the Agriculture Committee has taken this important point on board. There is absolutely no use in large supermarkets coming into Northern Ireland and importing their produce. That is not good enough. We demand that Northern Ireland produce be sourced by these supermarkets to prove that we can do the job.

I want to say something about the quality-assurance scheme. I completed an application form some months ago, but I have still not received a reply from the Department of Agriculture. Beef producers ought to be able to take part in this scheme, and there should be no delay in processing their applications.

We are proud of the beef that is produced in Northern Ireland. We have confidence in it, and it is up to the people of Northern Ireland to support us by buying it. It is important that all our produce be clearly marked "Produced in Northern Ireland". I was in Turkey some months ago, and I saw a large carcass — head and all — lying on the bare floor of a small shop. I presumed it was dead — a man was sawing away at it. I said to myself "We are producing the best beef in the world, yet other countries which do not have the same high standards, survive." Sometimes we can be too careful.

Paragraph 4.3 of the report says

"Northern Ireland consumers have also benefited from the arrival of the new national supermarkets",

but it also says

"it is clear that there are conflicting views regarding the responsibility for price increases applied to agricultural produce"

I welcome the Committee's recommendation

"that the General Consumer Council should be tasked with an examination of the prices set and obtained for agricultural produce by producers, processors and retailers to ascertain where unreasonable profit (if any) is being made and to ensure that consumers are obtaining value for money, and that producers are not being disadvantaged."

That is very important. In spite of the crisis in the beef industry there are very few supermarkets or butchers' shops — and the butchers have suffered terribly too — where the price of beef has been reduced, yet the farmers are getting paid less for their produce. The profits are still going into the pockets of the supermarkets; they are certainly not going into the farmers' pockets. They are facing a crisis.

I also welcome the recommendation

“that the newly arrived supermarkets should take active and overt steps to demonstrate their commitment to Northern Ireland.”

It is important that they source producers in Northern Ireland. Producers here will rise to the challenge and provide high-quality produce for the supermarkets.

Also welcome is the recommendation

“that supermarkets and retailers, where they do not do so already, should implement a sourcing policy which ensures that all suppliers in a sector are given equal treatment.”

As a boy I used to help to harvest 18 acres of rhubarb. The stalks were pulled, tied together, put into boxes and taken to the shops or markets. But producers have had to change to meet the demands of the supermarkets. The stalks now have to be straight, the leaves have to be taken off and the rhubarb has to be of the right colour, thickness and length. Then it has to be taken from the field to a special packing room where it is sorted, packed and distributed to the supermarkets. How things have changed. But the producers are rising to the quality-control challenge set by the supermarkets.

Paragraph 5.16 of the report says

“that producers everywhere in Northern Ireland should support the agriculture industry by demanding Northern Ireland produce and not being satisfied until they get it.”

It is important that people say “I want the produce to be from Northern Ireland.”

May I conclude by saying how much we appreciate the work that Dr Paisley and the other Northern Ireland MEPs have done during the BSE crisis. This has been a long and tiring job, but there is some light at the end of the tunnel. This Committee and our MEPs have done a lot to show that Northern Ireland beef is the best in the world.

Mr David Campbell: I thank all Members for their contributions and kind comments. The report was very much the result of a team effort. I was slightly surprised that the Vice-Chairman did not mention the important part that he has played in respect of Northern Ireland lobster. Perhaps modesty prevented him from doing so. However, the Committee is still waiting to taste the lobsters.

Members' comments have demonstrated the importance of this report, and I am grateful to Mrs Steele for her comments on behalf of the Economy Committee. I have spoken to that Committee's Chairman, and while Committee D took a very agricultural prospective

when preparing this report, there are obviously serious issues that relate to the economy as a whole which I know the Economy Committee would like to pursue.

The efforts required from the Government to maintain the pressure on retailers cannot be underestimated, and I ask the Forum to agree to a slight amendment of the motion. In the past, the economy and agriculture portfolios were held by the same Minister, but that is not the case now. Therefore under recommendation 4.5 we are asking the Secretary of State to task one Minister clearly with responsibility for monitoring the recommendations in this important report. If Members agree I want to amend the motion to that effect.

Amendment, by leave, made: Before "Minister" insert

"Secretary of State and to the". — [Mr David Campbell]

12.00

Mr David Campbell: There is little else to be said. Members have heard the evidence that enabled us to produce this report. It is now up to all of us to ensure that its recommendations are carried out. The Committee will be monitoring it, and we hope that the Economy Committee will do so as well, and I ask Members who sit on district councils that are affected by the new retailers to take the report back to those councils.

There are advantages and opportunities here. There are opportunities for producers to provide for the United Kingdom as a whole, and we should be alert to the potential that exists. But much help and encouragement is required, and a start can be made by bringing the matter to public attention.

Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Forum adopts the report 'The Sourcing in Northern Ireland of Agricultural Produce by National Supermarkets and Retailers' prepared by Standing Committee D (Agriculture and Fisheries Issues) and asks the Chairman to forward the report to the Secretary of State and to the Minister responsible for agriculture and fisheries, Lord Dubs, with a request that he give serious consideration to the recommendations contained in it.

The meeting was suspended at 12.02 pm and resumed at 12.15 pm.

POLICE (NORTHERN IRELAND) BILL

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum takes note of the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill.

The Government have cobbled together this Police Bill to try to mask political changes to the police behind the reform of the police complaints system. No one should be in any doubt whatsoever about this highly charged political Bill. It is the first blow in the destruction of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. A press release announcing the introduction of the Police Bill was issued on 2 December 1997, and in it the Secretary of State said

“The police must do still more to be seen as a police service for everyone.”

That is the policy she is advocating.

The rank and file of the Royal Ulster Constabulary will resent that slight. The RUC has had to operate in the midst of the most difficult civil disturbance and conflict this side of Bosnia. It has faced murder and mayhem; it has been intimidated and abused by those who are opposed to the upholding of law and order; it has been abused and charged in various ways by the Dublin Government and Government Ministers, and it has even been denied the use of weapons in its fight against terrorism by the United States Government. Yet it has persevered, and in doing so, it has seen 200 of its members cut down in the line of duty. It serves the entire community, and every officer on the beat is pledged so to do. The RUC has done more than any other force in Europe to be open and accountable and yet, we are told, it must do even more.

We have a Secretary of State who is prepared to pander to the insatiable appetites of Republicans and Nationalists on this matter, for it is the political leadership of the Nationalist community which has endeavoured to drive a wedge between the Nationalist community and the police. First of all, they objected to the insignia worn in loyalty by the Royal Ulster Constabulary; they objected to the name “Royal Ulster Constabulary”; they objected to the crown on the cap badges of the police; and they have intimidated members of their own community to fan the flames of opposition to those Roman Catholics who joined the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

There are Roman Catholic members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary in my constituency and they cannot return to their homes. Their parents have to meet them miles away from where they were brought up, and all because of this charging of the atmosphere by the political representatives of the Nationalist community. These community-elected representatives do not support the Police Authority for Northern Ireland; they objected to the councils’ having police liaison committees and withdrew from them; and they want the RUC disbanded in order to satisfy the deep-seated, sectarian hatred that they have against that force.

This Bill has three aims, the first of which is to reform the complaints mechanism. This is something that has widespread support. No one would object to an open and truly independent complaints mechanism — I agree with that entirely, and so does my party — but

the Government have taken the goodwill and used it as an opportunity to get away with highly political changes to other police structures. In other words, having got support for a police complaints system from all parts of society, they are starting to dislodge the Royal Ulster Constabulary's foundations.

The RUC's structure, its management and its system of accountability are also to be changed. Claims that the Bill will increase accountability are false. The role of the Police Authority is to be diminished while that of the Secretary of State is to be increased. It was amazing how touchy Mr Ingram was about that in the House of Commons. When I asked him if this was a way of putting the Secretary of State in the same position as the Minister of Justice is in the South of Ireland so that there could be greater harmonization between the two forces, he had nothing to say. But this is what it boils down to: they want the police in Northern Ireland to be so structured in accordance with the programme in the framework document that they can be harmonized with their counterparts in the Irish Republic.

It is interesting to note that the Secretary of State met the Police Authority for the first time only this week — and then for only one hour. She can meet every Republican cabal across the province and talk to them for hours, but she could not meet the Police Authority. Why? I understand that she has not as yet gone to RUC Headquarters and that she has visited only three police stations during her time here.

This Bill contains a number of political concessions or sweeteners to the Republican community. The name will be altered and the oath of loyalty scrapped. All of these changes to the structure and style of the Royal Ulster Constabulary will be carried out in a devious, underhand way, but they are going to be carried out nevertheless. And all of them will be concessions or as they are called now, confidence-building measures. Every confidence-building measure is a concession to Republicans.

This Government, like previous ones, has failed to learn that the Republican community is not going to be appeased. We had an illustration of that today when the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic spoke to people in the Bogside and said that he could assure them that the Council for Ireland which had been mentioned would give Nationalists their say on the future of this island; he also said that it would have powers and that it would exercise those powers over the whole of the island. So here we have Mr Ahern laying down the law on what will happen in the future and saying that there can be no internal settlement. But the settlement in Northern Ireland must be an internal one; this part of this island happens to belong to the United Kingdom, and we must have an internal settlement here. All this talk about an internal settlement being something that will destroy the civil and religious liberties of Nationalists and Republicans is a lie. If they are living in a Northern Ireland that is firmly within the United Kingdom, they can have all the freedom they seek. The only thing they cannot do is destroy the constitutional position of our province within the Union.

The Secretary of State has said that any agreement reached in the talks on the issues covered in this Bill will be taken on board during the passage of the Bill if that is possible. So as this Bill passes through Parliament, her eye will be on what is happening at the talks, and if there is any possibility of including anything more, she has promised that that is what will happen. No other Bill passing through the House of Commons has ever been treated like

that. The Government are introducing a Bill but saying that even when it has had its second reading, it will not be in its final form. Why the undue haste?

This Bill is a staging-post on the road to more radical changes, changes that will, effectively, disband the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The present Chief Constable could, in my view, be the last one to head that force as we have known it. Far from taking politics out of policing, this Bill is putting politics at the heart of policing by enabling the Government to control the RUC's operations.

I am very pleased that the Chief Constable has, at last, spoken out on the security situation. When we met him, we put forward firm evidence that some of those sitting at the table are speaking for people who have had involvement in recent terrorist activity. We asked why the evidence of the history of the guns that were used for murders had been withheld for so long. Why was that? The forensic evidence, when it is published, will be very interesting.

Those who claim that the structural changes are only going to bring us into line with the structure of policing in the rest of the United Kingdom miss the whole point of the legislation. The scenario envisaged in this Police Bill could not be more different to that in the rest of the United Kingdom. Why is there an attempt to put blinkers on people? The name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary is to be altered. According to the Bill, it will be renamed The Northern Ireland Police Service, supposedly to give definition to those civilian members of the public who now work directly or indirectly for the RUC. There were always civilians working for the RUC, both directly and indirectly as you, Mr Chairman, are well aware. You learned that when you were policing a very important constituency known as Antrim North.

The Chairman: I also policed Armagh. It, too, is important. I do not want Mr Speers to think that I thought otherwise.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I am very pleased to say that I was born in Armagh.

The change of title to the Northern Ireland Police Service is just a Jesuitical way of dropping the name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. This is not only a sop to Republicans, it will also have a detrimental effect on RUC morale. The Police Authority has employed civilian staff in the police service for quite a considerable time. Why is the name suddenly to be changed? Such tampering with the RUC will not please the malicious and ambivalent demands of the Republican community; they will still be opposed to the police. No matter what is done, they will still be saying "The RUC must go."

12.30 pm

I understand that the Secretary of State requested weekly de-escalation of security measures up to 10 May. When told that that could not happen she said "Well, I would settle for one every two weeks, but we must have this programme so that confidence-building measures will be seen in the community."

This Bill will drastically affect the employment of civilians who work for the Police Authority. They will lose their Civil Service status, and the structural changes will result in

job losses. The Bill says as much in clauses 1 to 6. There will be a reduction in the number of staff providing support services. The provisions on Civil Service status should not be underestimated as a blow to independence and service.

The relationships between the Chief Constable, the Secretary of State and the Police Authority are to be altered radically. One might have expected the Secretary of State to make it her business to consult the Authority before embarking on major structural change. Anybody who reads Hansard will see how Mr Ingram's staff tried to cover by saying that they had consulted the Police Authority and that its members had agreed to what was being done. This is not so. At the time of the Second Reading debate the Secretary of State had not seen the Authority. Only shortly before the Committee stage did she have a meeting.

The Police Authority is not happy about the Bill. The Secretary of State's treatment of the RUC and the Authority in respect of this matter is despicable. Since May she has been able to visit only three police stations, yet she has made herself available to all sorts of so-called community groups that are fronts for IRA/Sinn Féin. Two weeks ago she was willing to meet a South Armagh cabal whose sole aim is the destruction of bases designed to protect the lives of soldiers and civilians. The Bill gives the Secretary of State vast direct powers in respect of policing.

At present the Police Authority supposedly provides local accountability through the appointment of elected representatives. That is to cease. One of the Secretary of State's first actions was to remove all members of my party from the Authority. Then a Mr Steele wrote to us to say that the Secretary of State did not appoint the members. When Mr Robinson called him a liar his mouth was shut for the rest of the conversation. We produced a letter in which he said that the Secretary of State did make the appointments. This was deliberate discrimination. DUP members of the Authority were former members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and she did not want people who knew what was really happening on the ground.

The role of the Secretary of State in deciding police activity is to be enhanced. Those concerned with policy will be directly accountable to the Secretary of State rather than to the Police Authority. In effect she will be the commissioner. She will determine policy, will direct action and will demand reports. The Northern Ireland Office will be a junta making decisions on political, not security, grounds. We have seen the *faux pas* in the Prison Service. The RUC has stood between us and those who would destroy us, but that is now to go, at the whim of the Secretary of State.

These changes will be expensive in political terms, and the Northern Ireland Office has been unable to tell us what the financial cost will be. Nor has there been a single line from the Secretary of State.

When Mr Ingram was asked how much money would be saved as a result of the structural and managerial changes and whether he could confirm that the measure had not been properly costed his response was complete silence. At no point does the Bill indicate how much will be saved. In fact, there is only a guess that savings may be possible.

The Bill proposes major reform of police disciplinary measures. The Independent Commission for Police Complaints failed both the public and the police. A truly independent complaints mechanism is a benefit to the whole of society. How will the ombudsman be appointed? Will he be an unfettered figure who can do his job properly, or are we to have another Government nominee, a yes-man for the policy envisaged in the Bill?

Mr Ken Maginnis: The Police (Northern Ireland) Bill has 77 clauses and six schedules. It is a massive document, not so much hastily cobbled together as very carefully and assiduously drafted over a considerable period by people who are not interested in the future of policing in Northern Ireland. It was hastily introduced with the intention of rushing through Parliament provisions that I hope to be able to indicate are full of errors and weaknesses.

I lay the blame for the inadequacies of the Bill not just at the feet of the present Government but also at the feet of their predecessors and in particular at the feet of John Steele, the director of security, whom the Member for North Antrim (Rev Dr Ian Paisley) has just mentioned, and Ms Christine Collins, among others. On occasion I have had to describe these people's approach to the interests of Northern Ireland society as verging on treachery, and nothing in this Bill suggests that my assessment is wrong. The Secretary of State constantly implores me not to attack civil servants. I believe that one of the great weaknesses of which we have all been guilty over the past 25 years is our failure to take to task the civil servants who have dictated everything concerning our very existence. I am beyond the stage where normal protocol and courtesy preclude the naming of those who would undermine the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which has stood between us — the law-abiding people who believe in the democratic process — and those who would bring us to grief through violence and the threat of violence.

It must be a couple of years since I, having expressed concern at a particular element of the Bill as it was being prepared, was asked to go to the Northern Ireland Office for a presentation. What I was subjected to was little short of discourtesy. The people there thought that I would accept the generalities in which they spoke as being based on fact and on truth. I asked about costs but was given no figures. I went to Sir John Wheeler, asked again and was told that I would get figures, but again I was given nothing. Recently I confronted Mr Steele and Ms Collins. Off the top of her head Ms Collins gave £10 million as the amount that would be saved — not £9.13 million or £11.27 million but the nice round figure of £10 million.

Most Members will remember how the police were criticized for being subject to political interference — there may have been some justification for the claim — and how the Police Authority was established to be the buffer, the accountable body. Of the more than £600 million that is allocated to the Authority, about 87% immediately goes to the Chief Constable to pay for officers on the beat. The remaining 13% — an amount approaching £80 million — remains under the control of the Authority, which is responsible for structural resources. That £80 million — a large amount, but in terms of the whole budget comparatively small — keeps the Authority engaged on a day-to-day basis with the Chief Constable and with rank-and-file policing. It is what brings the Authority up against the coal-face. The Authority needs to be engaged in order to get the best value.

If that money were taken away the Authority would be left in limbo. The Chief Constable must account to the Authority. He must put his proposals before it. Otherwise how will it make a judgment, given the lack of day-to-day involvement at the coal-face? A body with little real authority will attract only people of little real ability and with little real dedication to the interests of the police and, hence, of society. The extension of this will be a situation in which we have a Chief Constable who is responsible for the entire budget and on whom the Secretary of State, whoever that might be, can lean directly. It is happening at the moment. While the cost of policing is rising, the budget is standing still, and there is now to be no flexibility.

12.45 pm

We have had seven or eight murders over the last two or three weeks. I wonder how many people have seen check-points on the roads or have been aware of extra policing. I am around the country as much as most, and I have seen very little. When I ask policemen locally they say that they do not have the money. Where is the money going?

Mr Steele and his little cabal took a number of policemen off to Harlem to see how community policing should be carried out. I wonder whom they were responding to. I certainly would not send RUC representatives to a place like Harlem, where gun law operates on both sides. We saw an example on television. An indigent, disturbed man wielding a knife in front of the White House was surrounded by enough policemen to overcome him with their long-handled batons. But what did they do? They shot him dead. To send our police to Harlem is to prepare them for what is called self-regulatory policing, which in this country means allowing people to put on armbands and virtually assume policing responsibilities in their districts. We cannot have self-regulatory policing. Nor can we have two-tier policing, which I suppose is the respectable side of a self-regulatory system. Mr Steele, Ms Collins and Mr Daniell were at Galgorm a couple of weeks ago discussing two-tier policing. It is such things that we oppose because we know that they are not in the interests of society or, specifically, of the police.

I regret that I have limited time to speak about the enormity of what is occurring under this Bill. I wanted to talk a little about the ombudsman. My party too is in favour of such an appointment.

The Chairman: I am pleased to hear this, and I shall let Dr Maurice Hayes know that he is getting support.

Mr Ken Maginnis: I am very disturbed, however, to find that under Clause 55(6)(a)(ii), matters that he is investigating will not have to be brought to the Secretary of State

“by reason of their gravity or other exceptional circumstances” —

the words used in the draft. He will act “in the public interest”. In other words, he will have *carte blanche* to reflect political opinion in any district he chooses to look at. In addition, he was to have responsibility with regard to matters likely to give rise to criminal charges against police personnel. That has been watered down to “disciplinary matters”, which

means that he will be able to interfere in the day-to-day running of the police and thereby usurp the position of the Chief Constable. That is not in the interests of the police or of society.

There is so much in this Bill that it is impossible to deal with it in 10 minutes.

Mr McBride: This is a long, complex and important Bill, and it is essential, before dealing with it in detail, to look at the place of the RUC in society. We ought to pay tribute to the police for the work they are doing in these very dark and difficult days. The RUC is the thin dark green line between society and madness. The police are doing a very important job in protecting the entire community from great danger on all sides, and their efforts to put an end to these terrible things deserve the support of politicians of all shades of opinion. The whole community has a right to expect political leaders of all hues to speak out unequivocally in condemnation of violence, from whatever source.

We welcome very much the very important part of the Bill that provides for a complaints mechanism, though we do not want to go into detail at this stage. There has been widespread support among the parties for such a system, and it is good that the matter is now being taken forward with some urgency. After Dr Maurice Hayes issued his report we spoke to representatives of the last Government. It seemed that they would certainly move, but perhaps not for two or three years. I hope that we shall see implementation in the near future.

However, this is the wrong time for the rest of the Bill. Such matters should not be under discussion at a time when the whole question of political accountability in Northern Ireland is being considered at the talks. Let us take a broad look at what is proposed, for there would be no point in going into the detail of 77 clauses.

We were not always happy with the Police Authority. It was by no means perfect, but it was all we had. I agree largely with Dr Paisley that the Authority is to have a diminished role, whereas the Secretary of State will have greater powers. We regret that drift. What is needed is clearer accountability which takes on board the views of local folk and of the people in general. We have made clear our view that, in the long term, this will have to be achieved through a system with a political dimension, such as a Ministry of Justice or an Assembly Justice Committee. We appreciate that that would be a very difficult step. It would be a challenge, but Northern Irish people and their elected representatives must have a measure of responsibility for what goes on here. There must be true accountability, and that means responsibility. People will have to take responsibility for very tough decisions. The objectives and plans are quite good, and it should be our aim to make use of them in various situations. But we must find a means of ensuring real local accountability and real engagement of the people in shaping the priorities and goals. That is where there is a gap at the moment.

This is inevitably, in some way, a part of the agenda of the talks in which we are engaged. There will be very different views, but nobody disputes that policing, in the broad sense, is on the agenda. It was a mistake to introduce the Bill at this time, especially as it seems to diminish the role of local people in deciding the direction of policing. I urge the Government to take back that part but to proceed vigorously with the complaints measures.

The meeting was suspended at 12.56 pm and resumed at 2.04 pm.

Mr Casey: At the outset I have to declare an interest in that I am a member of the Police Authority. However, I would like to make it clear that, although I share some of their concerns, I am speaking here as a member of Labour and not as a representative of the Authority.

Labour acknowledges that reform of the tripartite structure is long overdue and that the pressures on parliamentary time are great. However, we believe that there is a very real danger that the reasons for introducing legislative change at this time will be misunderstood and, indeed, misrepresented, and that has already happened here this morning. There is a good deal of evidence, not least from the Second-Reading debate, to support the view that the proposals have created a degree of alarm in one section of the community and, at the same time, given rise to what may be unrealistic, and even unreasonable, expectations in other quarters. Perhaps this was always going to be unavoidable, but the potential for misunderstanding seems particularly acute given the intensity of the debate about policing and the close proximity of the Bill's passage through Parliament to the talks process.

Now that parliamentary time has been secured it is too late to pursue this argument, but I am sure Members will agree that we must do all we can to ensure that the purpose of the changes is clearly spelt out and that nothing is done to exaggerate the importance of the package of reforms as a political expedient. The Bill must be presented as a genuine attempt to improve the governance of policing in Northern Ireland.

Before highlighting what we feel are some of the inadequacies of the Bill we must register our concern about the envisaged timetable for implementing the change. Given the complexity of the proposed transfer of functions and the importance of getting it right, we believe that an implementation date of April 1999 is entirely unrealistic. It is also disappointing that there has been no consultation on the designated implementation date or any reason given for its selection.

At a time when re-organization of the RUC and downsizing are topical and contentious issues it is essential that, as representatives of the community, members of the Authority are able to play a pivotal role in any discussions about the future size of the police service. Like the police themselves the Authority comes under quite a lot of criticism from some quarters, but at the moment it is the only representation the community has as far as policing is concerned. To remove this vital power from the Authority at this time will remove the community's voice from the deliberations on the crucial issue of the size of the police service and could be perceived as an attempt to weaken the Authority's influence in this matter. We therefore strongly recommend its retaining the power it currently holds under section 6(1) of the Police Act (Northern Ireland) 1970.

Given the sensitivities surrounding the civilian staff in Northern Ireland and the very real fears that they have about their future career prospects — their potential loss of Civil Service status and the perception that they will be subject to a heightened security threat if they are more clearly seen to be police employees — we agree with the Authority that the *status quo* should be retained for the present. This is not to suggest that the Authority

believes that the present arrangements are adequate — they are not. We propose that there should be no change to the primary legislation; rather there should be an increased effort by all concerned to develop a cohesive police/civilian staff-management structure which is properly co-ordinated with the personnel-management arrangements for the uniformed service.

We do not believe that the Chief Constable should have power to appoint all civilian staff at ranks equivalent to those of RUC senior officers. The Bill should be amended accordingly. The power to make such appointments should lie with the Police Authority.

Community safety is another aspect that needs to be taken into consideration, and it is the Police Authority's opinion that it should be allowed to promote the development of local crime-prevention and community-safety strategies after consultation with the RUC. In all things prevention is always better than cure.

The funding of the Police Authority, as set out in clause 10(2), places a duty on the Chief Constable to submit draft estimates simultaneously to the Police Authority and the Secretary of State. As the body responsible for securing funding for the police service the Police Authority's public credibility would be seriously undermined if the Chief Constable had to submit a draft directly to the Secretary of State before bringing it to the Authority. Such a direct link between the Chief Constable and the Secretary of State could also be portrayed as a form of political influence over policing through the public-expenditure mechanism, and we have to guard against anything that would lead to or smack of that.

While recognizing that the word "force" has a particular legislative meaning, we wish to encourage the use of the words "police service" rather than "police force". This is being incorporated into the proposed name — the Northern Ireland Police Service. We would urge the Government to look again at the possibility of substituting the word "service" for "force" in the legislation. We recommend also that an additional general duty should require a police officer to be impartial when discharging his duties.

The functions of the Secretary of State are outlined in clauses 37, 38 and 39. These would give the Secretary of State considerable power and scope, through the promulgation of policing principles, codes of practice and guidance, to influence the delivery of the police service and to direct the way in which the Authority discharges its functions. Given that the Police Authority's statutory duty will be to secure the maintenance of impartial, effective and efficient policing, it is essential that it be consulted before any of these codes, statements or guidance documents are issued.

The Bill proposes introducing an independent police ombudsman. With regard to this the Bill fails to meet the criteria in several important areas, one of which is the tenure of the ombudsman. The holder of the office should not have to worry about having to please the Secretary of State in order to secure an extension of his or her first term. The Bill proposes a five-year term with a possible extension of five years. We think that it should be a permanent appointment, similar to that of a High Court judge. This is not a run-of-the-mill appointment to some board, trust or quango. The police ombudsman will have a very difficult job to do and may face considerable opposition from powerful groups and individuals. She or he will need full security of tenure.

The most serious shortcoming in this Bill is this bold statement contained in paragraph 5(1) of schedule 3:

"The Ombudsman and the Chief Constable shall enter into arrangements for members of the police force to be engaged for a period of temporary service with the Ombudsman."

A major objective in legislation such as this should surely be the enhancement of public confidence in policing in Northern Ireland, and the police ombudsman should spell the end of the practice of police investigating police.

The Chairman: Mr Casey, you have reached your 10 minutes.

Mr Casey: I have nearly finished.

The Independent Commission for Police Complaints is criticized for not being sufficiently independent, although, by statute, serving or former police officers are prohibited from being members of it, yet this Bill, while claiming to be making improvements, commands the supposedly independent ombudsman to take into his staff serving RUC officers.

A very important aspect of police complaints is the standard of proof required in disciplinary proceedings. At present police complaints are subject to the criminal standard of proof. The criterion "beyond reasonable doubt" is inappropriately high and places police officers in a more privileged position than any other public servant not in the armed forces. The standard of proof in police disciplinary matters must change to the civil standard of proof — the balance of probabilities. This Bill presents the Government with the opportunity to legislate for this most important provision, which is integral to the success of the police ombudsman.

Finally, we feel that the ombudsman should be able to consider the matter of compensation for a complainant if he deems that the circumstances warrant it. He should be able to direct that the Police Authority or the Chief Constable make such compensatory payments to the complainant as he considers appropriate in the circumstances. And if the complainant was dissatisfied with the level of the award, he could appeal the matter in court. If the Police Authority or the Chief Constable objected to the level of the award, they could appeal the matter also. There are numerous claims for damages in respect of alleged police misconduct, and current arrangements make such legal action more attractive to aggrieved parties.

2.15 pm

The Chairman: You are going over your time, Mr Casey.

Mr Casey: I have only five more lines.

Sometimes large amounts of compensation are awarded without any sanctions against the police officers responsible. This proposal would confirm that the ombudsman was not

only independent but had teeth. One of the problems with the Independent Commission for Police Complaints is that it does not have any teeth.

The Chairman: You have had your five lines.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Anyone who has studied the provisions in the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill will be alarmed at the devious way in which political changes are to be made to policing in Northern Ireland. We are all concerned that, from a security perspective, our country is in a downward spiral. We have seen an increase in death and destruction across the province. Nine people have lost their lives in seven weeks — an atrocious reflection on political circumstances.

Just when we should be supporting the men and women who guard installations and provide security for all the people of Northern Ireland, we have a Government introducing a Bill which undermines them. It undermines the security forces, and it undermines the men and women on the beat who protect everyone in Northern Ireland, both criminals and law-abiding citizens. The police are there to protect us all.

However, those who are alarmed at these developments will have an opportunity within the next few days to challenge the Government and to support the comments that the Chief Constable has made. The Chief Constable has issued a statement within the last 24 hours saying that the UFF, which is represented by one of the parties at the talks, has been responsible for a number of the recent deaths and shootings. He has also said that the Provisional IRA was involved in an incident on the Boucher Road, and in an earlier statement he said that every component part of the Combined Loyalist Military Command had breached its cease-fire. That being so, I hope that those parties who regard themselves as democratic and constitutional will be the first to issue indictments on Monday against the political representatives of those organizations. If, in other circumstances, it would be fair for Unionists to indict members of the Provisional IRA and Sinn Féin, I hope that on Monday they will not shrink from their responsibility to issue indictments against parties with which they seem to have been in coalition.

I am reminded of comments that Mr Trimble made in the House of Commons on 15 December:

“Will the Secretary of State take cognizance of the facts, or will she bury her head further in the sand? Is there any circumstance in which she will recognize that it is as plain as a pikestaff to everyone else that there is no genuine acceptance of the Mitchell principles by the persons concerned?”

He was referring to an incident that he believed Sinn Féin had been involved in. I hope that Mr Trimble will not bury his head in the sand on Monday and that he will issue indictments against those parties which have quite clearly breached the Mitchell principles or are said by the Chief Constable to have breached them.

It is important for Members to debate policing. I do not welcome the Bill we are discussing, but I welcome this debate.

Mr Maginnis said that this Bill is treacherous. We agree. The Forum asked Maurice Hayes about it. We cross-examined him about the issue of a police ombudsman. We were

largely content with the answers that he gave, and we were satisfied that it would be good for policing and good for justice. Justice would be seen to be done if we had an independent ombudsman examining complaints against the RUC.

But the Government have used that agreement to mask proposals that will fundamentally wreck the Royal Ulster Constabulary — a low act of deceit on their part. They have tried to hide devious proposals behind proposals for which there is widespread acceptance. By doing that — and they were found out doing that — they have wrecked any prospect of the ombudsman's being seen as someone who will deliver good, honest and open judgements against those who have been seen in some way to have engaged in conduct unbecoming a police officer.

This Government, like previous Governments, has failed to learn that it cannot appease the Nationalist community. We will see nothing but a flow of concessions — and this Bill is part and parcel of that — to the Provisional IRA. It has three main features: the reform of the police complaints mechanism; the reform of the RUC's structure; and a number of political concessions to terrorists.

Let us look at the reform of the police complaints mechanism. There is wide acceptance — and this has already been said here — that the Independent Commission for Police Complaints is fundamentally flawed. It is not independent, and it does not deliver sound judgements when serious complaints are brought to it. Those complaints seem to be swept under the carpet. There is acceptance that there has to be an independent ombudsman, both for the sake of police officers who may be on the receiving end of malicious complaints and for the sake of members of the public who have genuine complaints which they feel are not being independently examined. Such an ombudsman must be truly independent and answerable only to Parliament, not to other police officers, and he must have the authority to investigate the conduct of officers.

Questions need to be asked of the Government about the appointment and role of the ombudsman. Does the Secretary of State think that the Government can provide an ombudsman service on the cheap? It is very clear from this Bill that the Government intend to do exactly that. Indeed, the clauses which relate directly to the ombudsman say that both the staff and the budget of the Independent Commission for Police Complaints will be cut. So an organization will be established and will be trumpeted as being truly independent; people will place their confidence in that body; and that body may investigate a significant number of complaints. However, that body will be handicapped because its budget and manpower will be reduced from day one. That is a significant flaw in the Government's plans.

And the Government have more questions to answer. Part 7 of the Bill makes provision for the ombudsman to take on the role of the Independent Commission and increases the powers available to him. They claim to be able to increase the ombudsman's effectiveness in spite of a significant reduction in the staffing complement. The Government must explain how they are going to provide this service on the cheap. No one believes that we can have a fully independent ombudsman investigating police complaints on the cheap. He has to have adequate resources to do an effective job.

Let us look at the more devious parts of the Government's proposals. This Bill has to be challenged because the Secretary of State has already undermined both the role that Parliament is going to play and the Bill itself. Indeed, my party Leader has said that the Secretary of State is committed to doing much more. The Secretary of State is on record as saying that if the parties who are attending the flawed talks process at Stormont want to add to this Bill after it has become law, she will seek to implement those changes, thus diminishing the Bill further. She clearly has no real commitment to the Bill that she has put forward. If the Provos are not getting enough in the Police Bill, and if other elements in society are not getting enough, she will change the legislation at a later stage. So this legislation is not significant, because the Secretary of State intends to change it.

Members have raised many other issues such as the removal of the name "Royal Ulster Constabulary". It is very clear that clause 2 establishes a Northern Ireland Police Service. I challenge anyone to read this Bill and count how many times "Royal Ulster Constabulary" appears in it. I found the name on a single occasion. I do not think it appears anywhere else. This Bill effectively creates a Northern Ireland Police Service — NIPS. It does not embellish the RUC; it undermines it. That is extremely worrying because it will lead to a loss of morale and a loss of employment, not only for police officers but also for police support staff as well. Thus it will significantly undermine the role of policing.

Many people, including the Government, have argued that this legislation should be accepted because it brings the Royal Ulster Constabulary into line with other forces in England and Wales. That is absolutely untrue. Last week I decided to look at the police legislation for England and Wales — the Police Act, 1996. I compared the legislation for England and Wales with this Bill to see how many provisions are there to bring the RUC into line with police forces in the rest of the United Kingdom. In more than 30 pages the overwhelming majority of the Bill's clauses are significantly different from clauses in the legislation that governs the police in the rest of the United Kingdom. So the argument that this legislation will bring the RUC into line with police forces in the rest of the United Kingdom is false.

Let me return to the issue of the change of name for the RUC. The Security Minister told us that he had to bring traffic wardens and Civil Service staff into the new organization and call it the Police Service. He said that that is what is happening in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, on this issue the legislation governing the rest of the United Kingdom is significantly different from this Bill. The relevant clauses were deliberately drafted by Northern Ireland Office civil servants — people who have already been named here — with the intention of destroying the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

This Bill is dynamite for the RUC because it blows them out of the water. The RUC will cease to exist both in name and in effect if this Bill becomes an Act of Parliament.

Mr Empey: I want to return to the genesis of the Bill. As my Colleague Mr Maginnis has said, this is not something that has come about since the current Government took office. This Bill started its journey about four years ago. I recall attending a briefing with civil servants at that time who were concentrating primarily and ostensibly on the financial aspects of the proposals.

It is ironic that information on the alleged financial savings has been so sparse. If finance were such a major issue would a Department and a Minister not want to trumpet the amount of money that was going to be saved. But they have been silent. In fact, I was with the current security Minister a couple of months ago when he was unable to quote any figure, but now I gather that a global figure has materialized. It strikes me as being rather like the global figure that materialized when the Government were talking about cutting back the education and library boards. Closing down the education boards would save a certain amount of money, they said, but when the first plan came out and the second plan came out, the amount of money mentioned in both was actually the same.

2.30 pm

The genesis of this has much more to do with the control of the RUC. About three years ago, I recall a senior civil servant being questioned about taking financial control away from the Police Authority and placing it in the hands of the Chief Constable who, incidentally, has no capacity, training or personnel actually to manage it. That is the peculiar thing, and apart from anything else, I think that the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary has more than enough on his plate at the moment without having to run around and be personally accountable for money; he has plenty to do. But in response to this line of questioning, the civil servant said "The Secretary of State gets very little influence for his £600 million a year." That was the answer — from a senior civil servant. If that does not smack of political control, I do not know what does.

The timing of this Bill is bizarre, to say the least. As Dr Paisley has pointed out, the Secretary of State has said, has openly said that further provisions can be introduced as the Bill makes its way through the House. I understand that the technical way of doing that is to bring amendments to the Committee stage, but it could be any amendment. In other words the principal reading — the Second Reading — could be short-circuited and an amendment made then. And the Secretary of State does not have to have any direction, guidance or even encouragement from anybody in the talks in order to do that; she can do that herself, without anybody prompting her. It is most peculiar to force through a Bill at a time when the Secretary of State is openly admitting that there could be further changes. Surely it would be more sensible to wait until the total picture emerges instead of introducing it in such a piecemeal fashion.

I recall very vividly — this comes back to comments that have been made by other Members — accusations that were levelled at the RUC in its pre-Authority days when it was said that the Minister in the Stormont Parliament had political influence and control. That may or may not have been used, but the fact is that the 1970 legislation established the Police Authority as a representative of the community — an intermediary between the Chief Constable and the public.

Leaving aside the composition of that Authority — and it is far from representative at the present time — the fact remains that the effect of this Bill will be to castrate the Police Authority. It will lose its financial control and will not have access to the day-to-day running of a whole range of things. It will be reduced to a community-relations-type body.

Currently, claims against the Chief Constable and the Police Authority come to an Authority committee which has to approve the financial payments that are made. It has been proposed to abolish that process, with the result that the Authority will not even be able to see what claims are being submitted or to consider whether they should be met. On occasions the Authority has refused to pay, in the belief that the claims had been made on the basis of activities that were entirely inappropriate, and the Northern Ireland Office had to find the money elsewhere. So the Chief Constable's scrutiny function will be removed, and the police service will begin to be less and less accountable. Power will be concentrated more and more. It is right that a Chief Constable should have operational independence, but what will happen if he takes a particular line? What if he does not wish to co-operate with other people?

We had such cases not long ago. It was sometimes extremely difficult to get on with the last Chief Constable. He did not consider himself accountable to anybody. He said he was accountable only to the law, and he regarded the Authority with contempt. At times he did deign to appear, but on a number of occasions we had to complain about his absence.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Does the Member agree that another fundamental flaw in this Bill, in terms of the issue of accountability, is that the Government have openly admitted that they have not actually costed the proposals for the introduction of many of these structural changes that he is talking about?

Mr Empey: I agree entirely. If this were a cost-saving measure, surely the Department would be making an issue of it by saying how much they are going to save, but they cannot do that. The Member is perfectly correct.

In the event of there being an unco-operative chief constable, this Bill will create a trap whereby the community will be isolated from any significant influence. We may well have an input into the policing plan for the province, but those are very broad-brush arrangements. It is only when you get down to the detail of how the plans are to be implemented that there is any real influence. Once you agree a policing plan, it is 12 months before you do another one, and then you get a police report. So you would be very much at arm's length, and the Authority would be cut off from the day-to-day operational activities.

In the past you were able to learn a lot. You were able to see how the funds were flowing. But that might all change and your only role might be an input into a policing plan. You could monitor or ask questions, but the crux of the matter is that the current relationship — what we call the tripartite relationship — between the Secretary of State, the Chief Constable and the Authority has not really been working. It certainly did not work with the last chief constable, and this Bill does nothing to address the fundamental flaws in that relationship. I claim that it will exaggerate them. The Northern Ireland Office will be negotiating with the Chief Constable about the budget, and it will control that budget. Is anybody really saying that they will not be able to influence how that money is spent? Will they have no influence whatsoever over the Chief Constable? Under the current situation, at least some representatives of the community monitor spending and are aware of the pressures — and all of us in the public service know about the pressures that Government Departments can apply. Were all of this to be shouldered by the Chief Constable of the day, it would be far too much for that person, whoever he might be.

The timing is suspicious and the motivation is entirely inappropriate, and the fact that the Government are openly saying at this stage that this is only the first instalment does not, I believe, bode well for the future.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I will try to be brief; I will also try to stick to the script unlike Mr Ian Paisley Jnr who spent what seemed like five minutes emphasizing his hatred for the small Unionist parties and urging that those very people who are trying to turn people away from violence be dismissed from the talks.

It is good to know that the Member supports the RUC. Those of us with long memories will remember what his father, Ian Paisley, thought of the RUC. Let nobody be in any doubt about what he said about them. He said that he would rather have the devil than the RUC. Those are not my words. *[Interruption]* I am not giving way.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Mr Chairman, on a point of order. According to our Rules, a person making a speech has to do so within the confines of those Rules. What a Member quotes must be accurate. I totally repudiate what the Member has said, and were he to read the old Stormont Hansard, he would find that that accusation was nailed by me in another place.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I can only repeat what this wee, simple mind of mine saw and heard on television when the Member was getting out of jail.

[Interruption]

I will repeat his words in case anyone missed them "I would rather have the devil than the RUC." The same man, of course, also said to RUC officers during disturbances in Portadown "Don't come running to me when your houses are being burned down."

The Chairman: Mr Smyth, is this relevant to the motion?

[Interruption]

Mr Hugh Smyth: The Member was not thinking too much of the brave RUC then. However, let me move on. *[Interruption]* Maybe the Member would know that. The Member, especially, would know that.

This Bill does pose problems — great problems for a force which throughout its entire history has proved itself to be the finest not only in the United Kingdom but in the whole of Europe. If one looks back just prior to the troubles, British police forces were actually sending policemen over here to see how the job should be done. We had, and still have, the lowest crime rate in the whole of Western Europe, and credit for that is due to the RUC. Even with all the violence, the crime rate in Northern Ireland is still lower than that in many parts of the United Kingdom, and that is a terrific achievement for a police force that has continuously come under attack.

One of my concerns about this Bill is that I get the impression it is being introduced for political reasons, and that is wrong — very wrong. If changes need to be made, by all means make them, but you do not fix something that is not broken. I believe, for instance, that the RUC would welcome a change in the police complaints system — that is something we could all live with — but it is a different matter when there is talk about a change of name. Some people may say “Well, what is in a name? It is nothing great.” But it is; and I think it was Dr Paisley who mentioned that the Government are now talking about these things as being confidence-building measures. But what the Government will have to remember is that building up the confidence of one side of the community, could destroy the confidence of the other.

I believe that any changes within the RUC that are seen as political will wreck the confidence of the Unionist community. The Government say that this is being done to try to make the police force more acceptable to both sections of the community, and we all want that, but they are going about it in the wrong way. We all know in our hearts that there are only one or two reasons for the minority community's not joining the RUC. They do not join the RUC because of the threats they get from Sinn Féin. Perhaps the SDLP and the Catholic church should be doing more. They never fully support the RUC. When it is put to them they always hesitate to come out and say “Yes, we support the RUC. We will encourage the minority community to join.” That is what is needed more than anything.

2.45 pm

There was no consultation whatsoever about this Bill. Ordinarily, we would have been sent all sorts of leaflets and invited to make statements and give evidence. Nothing of that nature has happened in this instance. That is wrong. Maybe what we should be doing is pushing harder for a Northern Ireland Assembly and for that Assembly to take on the responsibilities which at present rest with the Police Authority. The vast majority of councils in the United Kingdom have control of policing. It could be difficult here at the moment, but I would hope that eventually responsibility for policing can and will be given to a Northern Ireland Assembly.

I have many concerns about the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill, and I intend to make my views known to the appropriate people.

Mr Neeson: The RUC has policed Northern Ireland's divided society in very difficult circumstances over many years. I pay tribute to the men and women of the RUC for their courage and integrity, particularly in public-order situations where so often they have been piggy in the middle. We have only to look at the events of recent times to see the sort of callous, evil people who are trying to destroy society and the process in which we are all engaged to some extent. The RUC deserves our support for the work it has done over the years and is continuing to do.

I had the privilege of serving on the Police Authority for six years up until last June. That gave me a good insight into what was happening. I agree with Members who have said that this Bill is not new. This is the Bill of Sir John Wheeler and the civil servants who worked under him. It is my belief that if he had had his way this Bill would have been introduced before the last election. It was his intention, and the intention of others, to push

this through without consulting the people with a direct interest in it, including the Police Authority and the RUC.

It has been said that this is an attempt to clarify the tripartite roles of the Police Authority, the Chief Constable and the Secretary of State. There is no doubt that the individual responsibilities need to be clarified as the present arrangement has created problems. But while these proposals may mean a greater clarification of that arrangement, the truth of the matter is that the Secretary of State's powers will be greatly enhanced and the Police Authority reduced almost to being a purely consultative forum. I see great dangers in that because there will be less accountability. In a sensitive public service such as the police, accountability is very important.

The courage of those who have served in the RUC over the years has been mentioned. We should also remember those who have served on the Police Authority. Some people paid the ultimate price because they were members of that body. The Police Authority has played a very effective part in the management of the RUC over the years, providing an efficient and effective police service, which is what it was asked to do. It is the link between the community and the RUC, and it is a very important link. I well remember Sir Hugh Annesley, when he was Chief Constable, saying that one of the main objectives of the RUC was to develop a meaningful partnership between the police and the community. That can be achieved through the community police liaison committees which have been established throughout Northern Ireland, although sadly not in all areas. They have been established in fairly sensitive areas in Belfast, for example, where one would not expect to see such co-operation between the local community and the police, and that is a positive thing.

There are positive elements in this Bill. There are those who will argue that its implementation will bring the police service in Northern Ireland into line with police services in other parts of the United Kingdom. I believe that it is attempting to do that. I welcome very much the development of policing plans — it mentions the strategic policy plan and the annual policing plan. Last year I visited the constabularies of Greater Merseyside and Greater Manchester where they have been operating policing plans. The evidence is that establishing targets means that the police have worthwhile goals to work towards. I welcome the development of such plans in Northern Ireland. They would bring about greater discussion between the police on the ground and the community police liaison committees which would be incorporated in the Chief Constable's annual policing plan to be published by the Police Authority, and that is an important factor. In the circumstances the operational independence of the Chief Constable is important and should be retained. From the Police Authority's perspective that was always something that was respected.

I welcome the provision for an independent ombudsman. There is no doubt that the Independent Commission for Police Complaints has very limited powers. That the ombudsman could initiate an investigation without having to be called upon by the Chief Constable would be an important development. I well remember that about three or four years ago a young lad from Carrickfergus, Aaron Love, was knocked down and killed by a police Land Rover outside Queen's University one Saturday night. In circumstances such as those an independent commissioner should have been involved. Too often by the time an independent commissioner is called in to investigate, the evidence has disappeared. So that is a very important aspect of the Bill.

We are living in a time of change, and we should not be afraid of change. I have a great deal of confidence in Ronnie Flanagan as Chief Constable — he is the very man to bring forward the change that is necessary. I agree with other Members that this is not the final Bill, there will be amendments. Whether we like it or not, this is an issue that is going to be raised at the talks so the timing of the legislation is very appropriate indeed.

Ms McWilliams: We are pleased to note the Police Bill and the various issues that it raises, in particular the four strands: first of all, the responsibilities of the Chief Constable, the Police Authority and the Secretary of State; secondly, an independent complaints process through the new office of ombudsman, though I would like to see that title changed.

The Chairman: Ombudsperson.

Ms McWilliams: Indeed. Let us scrap the name and start again, preferably with something entirely new.

Thirdly, the RUC and the Police Authority are to be made more accountable; and finally this Bill will consolidate existing police legislation.

It has often been said that justice should not only be done but should be seen to be done, and it is probably in that spirit that the Bill has been introduced. I am also sure the police would agree with that too.

We note that a great deal of disquiet exists about the recruitment of the ombudsman, particularly with regard to the Secretary of State's powers of appointment. The issue here is one of accountability — no doubt Maurice Hayes has raised that and has reiterated it on a number of occasions. Accountability is the key issue. We must not only have an accountable Police Authority and police force, but the process for that accountability has to be transparent and must allow for open and genuine inquiry.

Of all the institutions in Northern Ireland, probably the most difficult to talk about openly and honestly, while acknowledging the differences that exist, is policing. If we were ever to resolve the issue of policing in Northern Ireland, we would also be getting towards some kind of resolution of our problems. The police acknowledge that there are major problems to be addressed not only in terms of people's perceptions and community relations but also in terms of the make-up of the police. I recall Mr Peter Robinson referring to that on the Select Committee, and it is a point that I will come to later in relation to gender and religion.

If everyone felt that there was a fair and balanced police service or police force — indeed, there have been arguments here this morning about the use of those terms — we would not have had a problem in the first place, and disquiet does not come from just one side of the community. In recent times we have seen attacks on and intimidation of the police from certain sections of the Loyalist community. The rhetoric attached to those actions seems to suggest that the police are not looking after us in the way that we expect them to. Both communities have made that point, so the question of balance has raised its head many times on both sides of the sectarian divide.

3.00 pm

I get rather tired of this debate which on the one hand talks about disbanding the RUC and on the other hand says that the police force is above reproach. Between the extremes of that continuum there is much room for discussion. Labelling, stigmatizing and suggesting that they are in some way subversive does a disservice to those who attempt to ask questions about institutions in our society. Large sections of institutions such as the Civil Service, the Industrial Development Board and the police service have a great deal of room for reform, and the police have acknowledged that.

We have a serious problem with the relationships between our divided communities. The police have focused recently on the difficulties that they have with community relations. The way to tackle that is not just through police reform, but through training as well.

I can recall some 20 years ago, when, as a social-policy lecturer, I was teaching a university class that included two members of the RUC on the subject of criminology. This was at a time when the issues of child abuse, domestic violence and community policing were only coming to the fore. And yet, sadly, there were those in the university who thought it was inappropriate to do that kind of teaching. I absolutely disagree with that viewpoint. Anyone who thinks that we should not get involved in training those — and this goes right across the spectrum of criminology — who are tasked with servicing the community on these issues is seriously mistaken. Who else will provide the training? I do not want to leave it to those people who have been so critical of the police service but yet are not prepared to put forward their own proposals for change. Though we have a long way to go in relation to change, I am heartened by the very proactive role that the police now play in issues such as domestic violence, which they previously considered very boring, akin to issuing dog licences.

It is claimed that Northern Ireland has lower crime rates than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. But one of the reasons for this is that we have been unable to report crimes in the way that we would have done had we lived in a peaceful society — our resources have been diverted elsewhere. The word “terrorism” has taken on all kinds of connotations in this society and has been attached to politics. Much domestic terrorism has also gone on with the abuse of women, children and, indeed, some men.

The fact that the Chief Constable has acknowledged that problems do exist within the institution itself is very helpful. In relation to the issues of gender and religion we have a long way to go, but at least they are being acknowledged. You cannot do much about a problem if you do not name it, get it out there and provide information about it. Only then can there be change. It used to be said that you “educate and agitate”. Education must be a priority for dealing with policing here, and it is not simply a matter of recruiting more Catholics or women and shouldering them with the burden of responsibility. That responsibility must lie with the entire police service. Indeed, everyone has a part to play.

Human rights are minimum standards, which we have failed to live up to over the years. Human rights are concessions to no one, and we need to know that. The police need to know that, and, given the current climate, the paramilitaries need to know that.

We should expect a very proactive approach now from the Secretary of State in setting the objectives, performance targets and plans that the Police Bill seems to be pointing to, and that will bring about the much needed change which we should look forward to.

Mr Gibson: We are not talking about a Department of Health and Social Service's Draft Order or about some form of popularity force. A police force must ensure that the laws of the land are adhered to; that is their duty. But, surprisingly, if this Bill goes through, the Police Authority will be reduced to the level of a local police liaison committee; they will have the right to be consulted, but not much more. The Police Authority's accountability will be severely diminished.

This document has been saturated by the Northern Ireland Office with fashionable expressions such as "clarification", "decommissioning", "level playing-fields", "parity of esteem", "equity of treatment" and "confidence-building measures". The Bill was originally meant to establish an open, transparent, independent and freely available complaints system, free from political interference. Everyone would welcome that.

But the Bill has been used for political purposes, to help along the talks process. It will be rubber-stamped through Parliament in support of a talks process which is well on the way to falling over the cliff edge. I am not sure what Mr Hugh Smyth, whom we heard make jibing remarks, is doing about his own little force and other people's forces, which seem to be out of control.

The tragedy is that tackling one institution after another and trying to placate the insatiable terrorism of the IRA is not going to do anything to ensure the good governance of this country. The vast majority of people, irrespective of their tradition, will first contact the police in an emergency or a crisis. The police are part of the emergency services, and they do an excellent job. And they have held the front line against terrorism, a task that no other police force in the western world has been asked to do.

They have withstood these pressures most admirably, but now we suddenly discover from Mr Worthington that the whole thrust of this document, which has been three years in gestation, is not to enhance the workings of the police force but to give control of it to the Northern Ireland Office, via the Secretary of State.

We have had 10 different Secretaries of State since direct rule — and we are still counting — yet the people of Northern Ireland and the RUC have had to withstand the onslaught of terrorism all that time. They have held the line and ensured that people generally obeyed the laws of the land. This is what a police force is about: ensuring that when we overstep the rules of society, we are brought back on the right side again. It would be remiss to see this as some sort of popularity poll and attempt to transfer a very distinctive force, with a definite line of work, into a similar arena to that of the Spice Girls. The arguments made by one or two Members today have been degrading. We must look at how the police force delivers the service. They have a job to do and the training to do it. And I am sure that if Ms McWilliams cannot bring herself to train the officers on a particular issue, some other lecturer will feel up to the job.

Ms McWilliams: I said I was one of the people who strongly advocated such teaching.

Mr Gibson: I do apologize.

Mr Neeson: A bunch of flowers.

Mr Gibson: I am glad to see that the Alliance Party is awake. Dinner for one.

Coming from the west of the province, I have a great admiration for the RUC, especially in West Tyrone where they have served with distinction. They have helped us in our great losses, and we have prayed with them in theirs.

Mr Weir: The least appropriate reaction to the Police Bill should be one of surprise. Mr Empey has already outlined the background to this Bill which lay with the Civil Service and the last Government. In the debate on the Queen's Speech, Mo Mowlam highlighted three areas in which confidence should be built, and, quite clearly, these confidence-building measures were designed purely for the Nationalist community. The three areas were fair employment, parades and policing. We have already seen some of the disastrous effects of the Government's attempts to tackle the parades question. That should stand as a lesson to us. The reason the Government are introducing legislation on policing is not to create more effective policing. That would be worthy and, at least, acceptable. It might even increase confidence in the whole community. But the Government are only concerned, in the long term, with increasing the Nationalist community's confidence in the police service. And that is a recipe for disaster.

3.15 pm

Many of the clauses in this Bill have already been highlighted. Its central thrust is to deprive the Police Authority of much of its power while increasing the Secretary of State's. Valid criticisms have been made about the Police Authority's make-up — most pertinently, the exclusion of DUP members, which is disgraceful — but it does, at least, offer some degree of accountability to the people of Northern Ireland. It also provides a buffer, ensuring that the RUC is kept free from political pressure, but these measures will have the opposite effect. For instance, the Police Authority has been able to allocate finances to certain areas, but that responsibility is to be taken away from it.

The Police Authority will become a consultative body, and we know how little consultation there is between central Government and local government. We have seen the Government bring proposals forward time and time again, which they merely rubber-stamp. I worry that the Police Authority will become a lap-dog rather than a watch-dog, and that is something we should guard against.

We should also be very wary of an increased role for the Secretary of State because that would lead to greater politicization of the police force — it should maintain its independence, and we have already seen how susceptible it is to pressure from the Secretary of State, particularly on parades.

The police service's structure and political control are in danger of becoming much more akin to the system which operates in the Republic of Ireland, where the *gárdai* are under the direct control of the Ministry of Justice. While there are many fine men and women in the *gárdai* — just as there are in the RUC — there has been a problem in the past with that level of political control. Indeed, Southern Government Ministers, particularly in the early 1980s, were involved in corruption. A garda sergeant who enforced licensing laws against a relative of the Minister of Justice suddenly found himself moved — exactly the sort of situation we want to avoid.

An even greater worry is that the Bill is being used as the first step towards a very radical reform of the RUC, and we must guard against that. We do not want to see the RUC cantonized, leaving the running of certain areas to thugs and bully-boys. While this is already the case in some parts of the province, giving things respectability by letting them become part of some form of local police force would be very dangerous and against the wishes of law-abiding people.

Furthermore, not only do we need to ensure that the civilians of Northern Ireland are protected, we need to ensure that this Bill does not increase the problems faced by the ordinary, decent men and women of the RUC, who are doing an excellent job. It is unfortunate that, whatever decisions are taken at a higher level, they are the people who always have to bear the brunt. We must stand four-square behind them.

I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr Eric Smyth: What we are seeing is the betrayal of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and of the law-abiding people of Northern Ireland. The Government are bowing to the men of violence, and the views of the majority of the people are not being considered. The majority of people in Northern Ireland respect the Royal Ulster Constabulary. We all know they are not perfect — I know that better than anyone. When they themselves have broken the law in the area that I represent, I have raised the matter in the proper manner.

What galls me is the Secretary of State's interference in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and I call upon the Chief Constable not to allow himself to be controlled. He should speak out as he did yesterday and tell the people the truth about what is going on in the province and about what evil men are up to.

The Bible teaches us

“Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil”.

People have committed murder, yet the Government have taken them by the hand and nursed them and talked to them. The Government have told them that they will shape the RUC and the future of Northern Ireland, yet law-abiding democrats have been ignored. What is taking place in the province is starting to get through to the people on the ground. We had the Secretary of State running to the Maze Prison — against the will of the RUC and others — yet the people with whom she talked have been responsible for much of the recent violence. The Secretary of State must accept some of that responsibility also.

Then there is Mr Hugh Smyth, who attacked my Leader. He forgets that when he was younger he was one of the commanders of the day. But he is too old now. He is in a political wing, and he represents a party which supports violence. It is easy to condemn violence — anybody can do that. We hear it every day. Gerry Adams condemns violence, but everybody knows that he is not being serious. I live in the thick of it, and if I know what is going on in the province, how much more do the paramilitaries know?

I am a great believer in the truth, and we hear the real truth about what is going on behind closed doors. Evil will be revealed. I am not a prophet or the son of a prophet, but in the days that lie ahead more will be revealed, and a lot of Unionists will have egg on their faces. I am warning the Unionist family to be very careful about the road they are going down. In London next week the Government will have them in their parlour, and they will be putting the screws on to get them to reach an agreement as quickly as possible in order to save their face.

These are serious days. The province has been thrown into violence, and my Bible teaches me that men call for

“Peace, peace; when there is no peace.”

Why? Because they are evil and deceptive people, and people who work with dark and evil men will never secure any good for this province. Members may close their ears to what I am saying, but there is a God in heaven who sees all. He will not allow evil to win or to be hidden. As the truth comes out, it will be shown that the DUP were right. People are saying to me “Dr Paisley was right. We will never listen to them again. We can see what is going on behind closed doors.”

Now we are seeing an attack on the security forces. These men and women protect this province day in and day out, and they are being slapped in the face. Many of them have died for law and order, to ensure that terrorism will never win, yet the police are being told now “We are going to change you. We are going to do away with your name.”

It surprises me how many Unionists are already referring to the “police service”, instead of to the “Royal Ulster Constabulary”. We are not ashamed of our police force. I have been on the wrong side of the book on occasions — I admit that — but I always abide by the law. Why should we change a force which has not done anything wrong? If there are bad apples in the barrel you get rid of the bad apples, but you do not punish the whole force because of individual policemen who have abused their position.

I call upon the Chief Constable to oppose the Government on these issues, which he told us he would do. I remember having a conversation with him long before he became Chief Constable, and I raised these very points. He said that he would oppose any change to the name and to the structure of the force.

We all know that some changes are needed. I agree that there should be an independent body to investigate complaints against the police. Like any organization, they will cover up for their own.

I support the motion, and I support the RUC — the Royal Ulster Constabulary — in their fight against the men of violence.

Mr Coulter: This motion is very timely. It brings us to the heart of something that touches us all: law and order. However, I must question the motives behind introducing this Bill just now. Has it been introduced merely to appease the Republican community? The hatreds and prejudices that have cascaded down the generations are still with us, and if this is an attempt at appeasement, we will be tinkering with the very heart of society's happiness.

Is it to give the Secretary of State more power over the police and over the Chief Constable? Mr Empey referred to a civil servant who said that the Secretary of State gets very little influence for her £600 million a year. If that is the basis upon which this Bill has been brought forward, one must question the integrity of those who drafted it. Furthermore, many of those who have spoken have said that the operational independence of the Chief Constable must be maintained at all costs, and that is right.

3.30 pm

Secondly, the Police Authority, of which I am a member, is being undermined, though some changes do need to be made to its present format because it is not representative of the community either religiously or politically. As my Colleague Mr Weir pointed out, the DUP has no representative on the Authority, and I have argued inside and outside that that is wrong — the DUP should be represented.

All right-thinking people believe that the police should be more acceptable to every part of the community. We have seen them being rejected by nearly all sectors down through the years because of the policy of appeasement. We have to ask ourselves "Are we driving the forces of law and order to become a third unit of the population?" We have seen the police being murdered and abused, we have seen their homes and families being attacked. Indeed, I understand that there were plans at one stage to move police officers' families to England because their homes were being burned and members of their families abused. By trying to appease some, are we creating a third unit in society in which the police will be required to live in a false and unnatural environment, unable to mix freely and deprived of normal civil rights? Are they to be deprived of the freedom to enjoy the society of their fellow citizens, which their forebears had? We have to question that.

We must examine the balance of this Bill, and as we do that, we see that it is flawed in many ways. It was a mistake to introduce it in its present form and at the present time.

I could talk about many other aspects, such as community policing, but that has already been mentioned. Suffice it to say that I wholeheartedly support what has been said by most Members today and reject the essence of the Bill.

Mr Sammy Wilson: This has been an interesting debate, and all the contentious issues have been fully aired by other Members.

I want to sum up by making three points. Nobody is sticking his head in the sand and saying "We do not need changes to policing in Northern Ireland." There are some things

which we can welcome — Mr Neeson mentioned one in his speech. I am sure that many of us who sit on local police-liaison committees and have pushed the superintendents and others to set effective targets for policing in our areas to boost the community's confidence in the RUC would not disagree with the idea of police plans and objective-setting. Public money is to be spent on the RUC, and that is one change that we would welcome.

Changes to the police complaints procedure have already been mentioned by other Members, and some such changes are to be welcomed. But at the heart of this debate is the political intent of this Bill, and that is the main concern that has been expressed here today. The whole philosophy of the present Government — and, of course, the DUP takes the view that the present talks process is part of that philosophy — is that concessions, either political concessions offered through the talks process and through relations with Dublin, or concessions over policing to those who have terrorized this community for so long, will wean people away from violence and bring an end to terrorism.

That, in essence, is our objection to the Police Bill. It has not been designed and it has not been introduced to improve policing in the province — it has been introduced as a political and security sop to those who have killed policemen over the years in an attempt to get their Fascist way in our country.

There are a number of points that we need to bear in mind. First, the proposed changes seem to be based on the assumption that because Republicans and other law-breakers have complained about the RUC, the RUC is at fault. That is the oddest reason for change that I have ever heard. Of course, the job of the security forces is to bring to justice those who break the law, and the fact that such people complain about the RUC's doing that — either effectively or ineffectively, depending on your point of view — does not mean that the force is at fault. Yet the basic premise behind these changes is that the RUC is at fault and must be changed.

The second point is most bizarre, and those of us who have lived through the last 27 years will know that there is no foundation to it: it is alleged that if you make these changes, the police will become more acceptable. Mr Taylor could, perhaps, tell us a bit more about this because that was suggested in 1969 as well. As Minister of Home Affairs at the time, he introduced changes to the police — the B-Specials were disbanded, and the police were disarmed. These changes did not make the police more acceptable. Indeed, the campaign against them became even more ferocious, so Members from the Ulster Unionist Party can tell us from their own experience that this does not work. We also had the support of those Members when, more recently, the UDR was merged with the Royal Irish Rangers to become the Royal Irish Regiment, following a clamour from Nationalists for changes to the UDR. That did not stop the IRA from wanting to kill those soldiers.

Changes to the names and in the nature of the security forces will not appease the law-breakers, and I suspect that if the name of the RUC is officially changed to become the Northern Ireland Police Service, or NIPS, and they start nipping the terrorists, they will still be unacceptable, regardless of the change. It is ludicrous to say that these changes will make the police more acceptable.

But even more dangerous is the risk that the RUC could become a political football. If people say that they want changes and the Secretary of State jumps to their calls, the RUC will become a political football, and there will be demands for even more change. The RUC will be swayed this way and that, depending on which group happens to be strongest and cries loudest. That is no way to run a police service and no way to run the security of this province. Those are the fundamental principles which form the basis of our objection to this Bill.

However, this Bill is not the end of the matter. The Secretary of State has made it quite clear that further amendments can be made in the light of whatever demands are made during the talks. That is the most damning point that we can make about this. Already we see political concessions being made — political concessions which, it is falsely assumed, will make the police more acceptable. And further concessions will be poured out and further amendments made as confidence-building measures.

As I said here last week, Unionists have provided a rod for their backs and for the backs of the RUC because of the loose way in which they have approached the talks that have taken place since Christmas. They boasted that they had got something from the Heads of Agreement document. I do not know what they got, but in making that boast they convinced the Government that Unionists had been given some satisfaction, and, as we know, for every crumb which is handed off the table to Unionists, a loaf will be handed to appease the Republicans. To counter the optimism which Unionists have shown since the beginning of January, the Government will pour out all kinds of concessions to Republicans — constitutional, security, policing and others — so we are likely to see many amendments being made to this Bill to counter what the Government see and what the press are now describing as an imbalance in the process.

Today's debate has been a timely warning about the dangers of the changes which are being introduced, and I hope that the motion which is before the House today will be accepted.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum takes note of the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill.

SPECIAL DEBATE (RULE 10(5))

Motion made and Question proposed:

That this Forum at its rising today do adjourn until Friday 30 January 1998. — [*The Chairman*]

Rev Trevor Kirkland: I want to speak about the current political/security situation. It is ironic that those who complained and pontificated in the past, saying that they were not into the politics of condemnation, have, over the past couple of weeks, been busily doing precisely that. Indeed, one spokesman slammed the LVF as gangsters representing no one, who want to bring chaos to Northern Ireland and do not like change.

It is only when we face even more change that we begin to realize how much change has already taken place. First, there is the peace process and all that that entails. Given the speeches that were made when the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed, when the Downing Street Declaration was announced and when the framework document was launched, if the current process is the result of terrorism, it can equally be destroyed by terrorism, and that is change.

3.45 pm

Another change is that terrorism has become legitimized and is now rewarded in this society. If it has been legitimate over the past 27 years for people to shoot and bomb, then they may continue to do so. There is absolutely nothing wrong with someone leaving here today, walking down the street and shooting the first person he meets, because that has been made legitimate over the past 27 years. They just need to be capable of doing it, able to sustain it and be backed by a fake political party that can — with someone with the political acumen of Mr Ervine — appear on television to explain why their actions were necessary. That is what has changed in our society.

Further to that, and given the proposed changes to the RUC that we discussed earlier, they will eventually start talking about community policing. I would not be at all surprised if there were suggestions that the IRA should be incorporated into a community police service, given the interesting personnel who surround some of the Sinn Fein leaders. The day will come when they say "Let us incorporate them." When that happens, if it happens, it will be quite legitimate to go out and shoot a member of NIPS. After all, this has been acceptable for the past 27 years, and has subsequently been rewarded.

These are the changes that have come to pass in our society. They may be appalling — but so what? They may shock — so what? Our political masters have deemed it necessary to go down this road. As for the vast majority of totally law-abiding citizens — the silent majority — they are totally irrelevant.

Now a certain scenario is presenting itself to us: if the silent majority, the law-abiding people, want to effect change, they have only one option, and that is to adopt the methods and tactics of the gangsters who have been running riot for the last 27 years. That is the only way they will be listened to. But the Secretary of State will not be interested in them, and the

Government will not be interested in them because they have not got the capability to wage a campaign for change that can be sustained. The irony is shocking and disgusting.

I have listened to the Women's Coalition and the PUP and others telling us how important it is to be involved in the current peace process because it will bring about change. How on earth will talking bring about change for the law-abiding, silent majority when they are being harassed and terrorized by thugs and gangsters about whom the Government, who are charged with responsibility for law and order, will do absolutely nothing, a Government, in fact, that wants to reward them?

Mr Peter Robinson: I would like to, if I may, intrude briefly on the area of responsibility of my good friend from West Tyrone.

When the Minister for Education, Tony Worthington, came into the job he set about looking at every head of expenditure to see whether any savings could be made — an altogether acceptable thing for a Minister to do. Indeed, one would be disappointed if a Minister did not carry out an exercise like that. When he noticed that £1.5 million was being spent on preparatory education, coming from a Socialist background, he probably asked himself “Why on earth are we spending £1.5 million on preparatory education? Surely this is an area where we can save some money.”

But had he looked a bit closer, he would have seen something very different indeed. The reality is that while the Department spends about £1,000 — in some cases it is more than that — on each child's education in a mainstream primary school, it only contributes £400 towards the education of those attending preparatory schools, and that is, in effect, a saving to the Department of £600 per child.

Of course, if the parents of children at preparatory schools were prepared to meet the entire cost — the additional £400 — of their children's education, there would be a saving for the Minister of £1.5 million. But that will not happen in the real world, especially when some parents have two or three children at a preparatory school, and it would cost them thousands of pounds to keep them there.

In a delegation that my colleague Mr McCartney and I jointly led to see the Minister, there was a middle-ranking civil servant who is spending one third of his salary on educating his children. Somebody in that position cannot be expected to take on the additional burden — he just cannot do it.

There are three or four preparatory schools in my area, and the parents have already made it clear that they are not prepared to meet the extra cost. They will be sending — or at least trying to send — their children to the local primary schools. But they will have a problem with that, because there are no places in the local primary schools. The net effect is that the preparatory schools will close, because once even a few children are withdrawn and the money lost is apportioned among the remainder, the cost to them will be so high that they will not be able to carry the burden, and the system will collapse.

This blight on preparatory education has already led some parents to try to get their children into local primary schools, so a decision on this matter needs to be taken very quickly indeed.

In East Belfast there is only place left — at least there was only one place two weeks ago; it is probably taken by now — in the local primary schools. Yet, if this proposal goes ahead, dozens of children will need places. That either means much larger classes, which is bad for education, or building more schools. And if you do that it will cost more than £1.5 million. Economically, it is nonsense. I hope the Minister will quickly realize that he is getting good value for his £1.5 million, because if he has to pay the full £1,000 per child it is actually going to cost him over £4 million in total for those children who are presently in preparatory schools.

Then we come to the matter of choice. There is a separate and special ethos in preparatory schools. Not everybody will make this choice, but people should have the right to do so. There is also the issue of equity. Why should the Government pay £1000 for a child going to a Roman Catholic school, yet expect the parents to pay for the children who go to preparatory schools? Why should those in integrated schools have their education paid for, but not those in preparatory schools?

For all these reasons I urge the Minister to leave things as they are and to take that decision very quickly before the preparatory schools are blighted.

Mr Gibson: The Education Committee interviewed representatives from the preparatory sector this week — a headmaster and concerned parents. Indeed, we are in the process of collating that evidence so we can forward it to the Minister. It was that evidence which led me to try to change the wording of the motion last week. I wanted to ensure that the principle of choice remains a part of the education system and that this was reflected in the education debate. Unfortunately, it was voted down.

I thank Mr Peter Robinson for forwarding the correspondence he has received from the Minister and for the representations he has made.

The Chairman: The Minister will, of course, read about this in the Record of Debates.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Forum at its rising today do adjourn until Friday 30 January 1998.

The Forum was adjourned at 3.58 pm.