

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 30 January 1998

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

The Chairman: We have been working out how many Forum meetings are left. I think that it is 16. Let us hope that they will be very effective.

TRADE UNION RALLY

The Chairman: As I am sure many Members know, the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has organized a series of demonstrations for today to enable people to express their opposition to the recent spate of murders. The Business Committee agreed yesterday that the Forum should break for lunch from noon until 2 o'clock so that those who wish to attend may do so. The rally at the city hall, which I will be going to, will begin at 12.45.

PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

Mr Gibson: I beg to move the following motion:

That the Forum adopts the response to the Government's consultation paper on pre-school education prepared by Standing Committee B and asks the Chairman to forward it to Mr Tony Worthington with the request that he give serious consideration to its comments and recommendations.

Before dealing with the subject of the motion, I want to inform the Forum that next Tuesday a delegation from the Education Committee will meet the Minister, Tony Worthington, to discuss our report of 5 December on public/private finance partnerships. We hope that it will be a useful meeting.

In its report of last June Standing Committee B encapsulated its objectives with regard to pre-school education. The consultation document contains many ideas, some of which are very welcome. In general terms, it is very agreeable. Much of what it contains is laudable. Unfortunately, however, it does not indicate acceptance of our recommendation concerning universal provision of pre-school education. Northern Ireland has fewer places for three- to four-year-olds than any other part of the United Kingdom. We have a great deal of catching up to do. The Committee's view is that there should be universal provision on the basis of the sound principle of value for money.

Every person who gave evidence to the Committee made the point that prevention is better than cure. That principle applies as much to education as to health. Those of us who attended the Educational Guidance Service for Adults conference on Wednesday know about the £23.2 million spent on correcting the faults in the system. Every witness referred to the importance of provision at the very early stages to avoid the need for remedial education at the stage of transfer from primary to secondary level.

The Conservative régime promised Northern Ireland £8 million for the voucher system, but that offer was eventually withdrawn. We hoped that the new Minister would honour the commitment, but that has not happened. The consultation document indicated an input of £2 million, and the figure was increased to £2.7 million this week. We welcome the Minister's commitment to priority for education, but we need proper resourcing and a management programme for one year of pre-school education throughout the province.

I hope that the Committee's eight proposals will be given proper consideration. I am grateful to its members for their diligence. Yesterday, when we were finalizing a statement on preparatory education, we heard that the Minister had withdrawn his proposal to stop supporting the preparatory departments and decided instead to reduce the contribution from 40% to 30%. We welcome the change of mind, but next Friday we shall make the point that any reduction would be a breach of natural justice. There is 100% funding for those who send their children to Catholic schools, integrated schools or controlled schools. Why should it be different for preparatory schools and departments? We believe in freedom of choice.

I am grateful to the Committee's Vice-Chairman, Mr Weir, and other members, particularly those who made a point of attending every meeting and staying to the end of business. They made a positive contribution. I also record our thanks to Liz Benson and Stuart McDougall, who have served the Committee with integrity and distinction.

Mr Weir: I have great pleasure in supporting the motion proposed by the Chairman of the Education Committee and in paying tribute to him for all the work that he put into this response. I also endorse his tribute to Liz Benson and Stuart McDougall for their efforts.

Next week we shall deal in more detail with the question of preparatory schools. However, I want to make the point that, while there is relief at the fact that the Government have backed away from their original proposal, what was announced yesterday is wholly unsatisfactory.

This is a measured response from the Education Committee. When Forum Members met the Minister to discuss the issue of nursery education they got a fairly sympathetic hearing, and a number of the points that are made in the Committee's report have been taken on board. The Labour Government — not for the first time — have indulged in rhetoric. Some meat has been put on the bones, but, while the principle outlined in the Minister's statement is fine, there is again a problem with the practice.

The central recommendation of our report is that the Government fulfil their own policy, which will reach its twentieth birthday this year. I refer to the policy that one year of nursery education should be available to every child whose parents want him to have it. So

far it has not been properly implemented. These proposals are a step in that direction, but they are inadequate.

The consultation document concentrates on children at the upper end of the age range and on those from a socially deprived background. When resources are very limited great care must be taken in decisions about who should benefit from them. However, we believe that it would not take an enormous amount of money to provide for all families that want this facility.

10.15 am

We welcome a number of the recommendations — for example, those concerning the commitment to local strategic planning of pre-school services, rather their piecemeal development, and the emphasis on a co-operation or partnership approach. I should like to mention in particular that there is at least some intention to harmonize what are called educare services between the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Social Services. In the past there tended to be a very disjointed approach. Perhaps we are benefiting from the fact the new Minister is responsible for both Departments.

But I come back to the fact that the £8.3 million which was supposed to be Northern Ireland's share of the allocation under the voucher scheme, which was never introduced here, seems to have disappeared somewhere in the vast education budget. I think it is only equitable that we should have that money for nursery education. Any additional finance is welcome, but £2.7 million is not enough.

As I said, we have a number of criticisms of this response — in particular, that it is very restricted and therefore inadequate. Other members will deal with the details, but there is a point that I should like to make in conclusion. One of our key recommendations was that there be a definable role for parents. This document pays lip-service to that idea. The accompanying document deals with the constitution of pre-school education groups and refers to the absence of any role for parents. The key message that we must send out today is that Department of Education practice should match principle. The Department must put its money where its mouth is.

I welcome this measured response, and I hope that Tony Worthington will implement some of our recommendations.

Mr Neeson: First, may I apologize for the absence of Ms Bell, who is one of the Alliance representatives on the Committee. On her behalf I support the report on pre-school education, which follows a more extensive one and confirms many of the recommendations, including those concerning the involvement of parents and the need for more funds and specific training for this very important sector of education. It refers once again to the weak policy on parental choice, which, unfortunately, the Labour Government have carried over from the Tories. The right of choice of school has never been matched by funding, and this has repeatedly undermined education at all levels. There should be a mechanism to ensure that parents are involved in planning and management.

Pre-school education should be a sound basis for a child's whole educational life. It is essential that any legislation provide for adequate funding, facilities for training specialist staff and continuous assessment. I make no apology for asserting the Committee's belief that good-quality pre-school education is essential to intellectual, social and emotional development and could help to ensure a viable economic future for Northern Ireland.

I refer Members to the annex concerning the funding of grammar school preparatory departments. The important factors listed there ought to be examined before these proposals are implemented.

Many pre-school groups in Northern Ireland are integrated. The Committee might find it useful to investigate the rather ambivalent attitude that the Government now adopt towards integrated education at both primary and secondary levels. I firmly believe that schooling of this type could help to deal with some of the problems with which we in Northern Ireland are faced.

I commend this report as a constructive and comprehensive response to the consultation paper. We are grateful to the Committee Chairman and his colleagues for their hard work in drawing up the original report as well as this response. I am sure that Ms Bell would like to have special thanks and regards conveyed to all concerned, including the staff.

Mr Casey: On behalf of Labour I welcome this response. The Chairman and other members of the Committee are to be congratulated for the production of another excellent report.

As other Members have said, grandiose plans are all very well, but there never seems to be adequate funding. This is no exception.

I welcome the proposed co-ordination between the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Social Services. My main concern is the community sector. Will there be adequate finance for pre-school play and education provision in the voluntary sector? Many projects have been funded through Action for Community Employment (ACE). With the contraction of ACE and its possible disappearance in April, there will be a very big gap. Perhaps the money saved could go towards funding the new provision.

With regard to the adequacy of funding, I am concerned about the specified standards. Many pre-school play groups are run in village halls, community centres and other such venues. It will take money to bring the facilities up to the required standard. Here the health and social services people have been very strict, particularly with regard to safety. Many voluntary organizations have had to spend quite large sums of money.

There is talk of incorporating care into the programme and of the provision of facilities to enable parents to participate. This too could compound the problems for both voluntary and statutory sectors. All in all, we welcome the Government's proposals, but without adequate funding they will not succeed.

The medium-term objective is to provide an additional 6,000 to 7,000 places across the province. The pace of the expansion programme will depend on the resources available in

each year. It is to be cash-limited, and, as other Members have said, Northern Ireland is already far behind Great Britain in this respect. The first step should be to identify the highest-priority 3,000 places. Advisory groups will be asked to submit by the end of 1998 interim plans showing how they will secure in their respective areas the places deemed by the Department affordable in 1998-99. Needs identified by the education and library boards and the Department of Health and Social Services may be impossible to meet. Plans for the balance of the 3,000 places will have to be submitted by January 1999.

It is a long-term project. As much pressure as possible will have to be put on the Government to ensure that provision is adequate. Where premises are not available, there will be a need for capital expenditure.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: Let us not prostrate ourselves before this perceived panacea for the ills of society. Let us not swallow, hook, line and sinker, the propaganda of vested interests. The things that the report welcomes occupy half a page; matters of concern take up three pages. Let us not get carried away by the lies and myths.

There are several matters to which I want to draw attention. The first is the Government-sponsored discrimination that is to be introduced into pre-school education. This is highlighted in the report. Target groups constitute a very significant area of discrimination. Everybody will be expected to pay, but only a few will receive. This is a very important point. Our masters have decided that they will select the few.

My second point concerns discrimination in respect of pre-school advisory groups. Each group will draw six members from the education services — two from the education and library boards, two from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, one from the integrated sector, and one from the Irish-medium pre-school education interests — three from the voluntary sector, one from health and social services boards and two from the health and social services trusts. There will be great selectivity as to who sits on these wonderful quangos. Of course, we will all pay for the new layer of bureaucracy.

The third type of discrimination, against which I argued in the Committee, was noted in our earlier report. The registration of pre-school groups should be an inclusive process, but what we know of the curriculum and of staffing indicates that a significant sector of the community — the sector from which I come — will be deliberately ignored. As a Protestant community we do not have any schools, so we will not automatically have pre-school provision. It is a very sore point that there will be deliberate wholesale discrimination all the way. What we have here is, in effect, Government-sponsored nepotism.

Attention has been drawn to the fact that parents are one of the most important factors in pre-school education. It is pointed out they should be involved in provision for early education and child care. That is a beautiful notion, but — to put it bluntly — it means spit all in the content of registering, running or being otherwise involved with pre-school groups.

10.30 am

The fifth recommendation of our previous report, which is included in the appendix to this one, makes the point that parents should be involved in formulating the curriculum,

approving staff appointments and determining hours of operation. In other words, parents should be making the decisions in all the crucial areas relating to pre-school education. But the legislation does not include them. As always, those who sit in the offices of the Department and the boards think that they know best. The attitude is that parents are good for only two things — sending their children to school and paying their tax. When it comes to decisions they must keep their noses out. Unlike the camel, they do not even get their noses through the tent door.

When will these people who favour nepotism so much put into practice what they have committed to print? I will not be sending my children to so-called pre-school educational groups or to any of these classes, for the reasons that I have outlined and for other reasons which are revealed in this report. It irks me that, as a taxpayer, I am expected to fund these things but, as a parent, I am told that there is no place for me. If we are to prostrate ourselves before this new panacea let us do so with our eyes open. Let us be aware of the trap that has been set for us.

Mr Benson: I support the Education Committee's response to the consultative document. As a member of the Committee, I should like to compliment its Chairman and all the other members for their diligence. I also endorse the tribute to the service of Liz Benson and Stuart McDougall.

I support the Committee Chairman's comments on the funding of preparatory education. The Government must think again. Even the reduction suggested in yesterday's hand-out is not acceptable. They say that preparatory education is subsidized. What a strange subsidy. It costs £1,447 per year to provide a child with primary education. The parents of children in the preparatory sector contribute, on average, more than £1,000 per child, and the Government meet the rest of the cost. But if those children were taken out of the preparatory sector the cost to the Government would be £1,447 each. That would be a loss rather than a saving. Thus the least that we demand is maintenance of the *status quo*. Indeed, there is a strong case for additional funds for the preparatory sector.

There is plenty of statistical evidence that nursery education is most advantageous. Children who have been to nursery school are at a decided advantage. There has never been a statutory requirement to provide nursery education. Provision, especially by the boards, has been piecemeal and very limited and has depended on the availability of surplus money. Indeed, such has been the shortage of finance in recent years that there has been virtually no provision, except perhaps in Greater Belfast, where the money has come largely from Making Belfast Work funds. Small towns and rural areas have been getting nothing.

I believe strongly that nursery education should be available to every child. It is said — I do not know whether it is true — that currently the children of richer people are privileged and that that is wrong. Like Mr Kirkland, I believe that it is equally wrong to argue that children from a socially deprived background should get special treatment. Everybody should be treated equally. I know of homes that are getting perhaps £300 because of the number of children, but the parents squander most of the money in the bookie's and the pub, and at the end of the week the children are living below the poverty line. I sympathize with those children, but I do not think that we should make a special case for them at the expense of people who work hard and look after their money.

About six years ago I prepared a paper and sent it to the Northern Ireland Office Minister. I received only an acknowledgement, and nothing happened. I made the point that every primary school with an average annual intake of at least 20 should have a nursery unit. Nursery provision should not be in separate units, as happened in the past too often. In fact, many units were in the grounds of primary schools. That is an expensive way to operate. Small rural schools could be clustered for this purpose.

It is alleged that the Labour Government are more sympathetic than their predecessors. If that is so, let them look at my paper — if it is still around. Maybe then we could have some action. We have heard today that the new Government are demonstrating commitment. Well, the Conservatives, who, it is alleged, were not committed, made £8.3 million available under the voucher scheme. We all agree that that was a flawed scheme which would have been very expensive to administer, but £8.3 million is £8.3 million. Even after prodding, the new Government are offering only £2.7 million — a third of what the Conservatives were prepared to give. When does a sympathetic hearing amount to commitment? I have some difficulty in regarding a reduction of two thirds as indicating commitment.

Mr Bolton: I too support the Education Committee's response.

I endorse other Members' references to the financial constraints within which what is proposed will have to operate. I am thinking especially of those highlighted by Mr Kirkland and Mr Benson. No doubt the blunt and imprecise instrument of TSN (targeting social need) will be applied in a stringent budget.

In the controlled sector, with which, as a member of the North Eastern Education and Library Board, I have a connection, there is considerable disquiet about the lack of consultation and, indeed, the urgency in setting up the advisory groups. I am concerned in particular about the omission of transferor and elected representatives. This cuts across the good faith that was shown by our forefathers when they handed over the schools that they had founded. It also cuts across the modern phenomenon of partnership and balance in government.

My board is not just concerned but alarmed — so much so that it is seeking legal advice as to whether, under British or European law, diverse and competing interests in the education and library boards could have a say in who should represent the various sectors of education. This phenomenon is not confined to pre-school education. There is a proposal to set up adult education groups in the same vein, and again elected representatives are missing. It is a matter for great concern.

Mr Gibson: I thank the Members who have taken part in this debate, and I am grateful to the Committee for its support.

The points that have been made today were the subject of hot discussion in the Committee, but they are covered in the recommendations.

I hope that we shall have an opportunity to discuss these matters with the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Forum adopts the response to the Government's consultation paper on pre-school education prepared by Standing Committee B and asks the Chairman to forward it to Mr Tony Worthington with the request that he give serious consideration to its comments and recommendations.

The meeting was suspended at 10.41 am and resumed at 11.00 am.

NORTHERN IRELAND COMMUNITY

Mr Weir: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum believes that there is, and can only be, one community in Northern Ireland and calls on the Government to treat all the people of Northern Ireland as equals.

Many normal societies would regard this motion as being so superfluous as to be irrelevant. It is amazing that, despite the obvious fact that the people of Northern Ireland are a self-contained community, Government policies seem to be predicated on the myth that there are two separate, self-contained, hermetically sealed communities — Unionist and Nationalist — to whom it is necessary to apply different standards. We are constantly told by some Nationalist politicians that there is a Catholic Nationalist community whose members have stood pluckily together against institutionalized discrimination and denial of their basic rights at the hands of a larger Unionist Protestant community.

In some people's eyes, the 50 years of Unionist rule grow worse day by day in retrospect. One sometimes wonders whether extreme Nationalists dealing with a hyperactive child say not that the bogey-man might get him but that if he does not go to sleep the old Stormont will be returned.

The SDLP tells us that the Nationalist Catholic community cannot express its identity within the United Kingdom and that it needs the friendly protection of the Irish Government and the territorial claim contained in articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution to enable it to withstand the onslaught of discrimination. My party wishes to take this opportunity to nail that lie. We believe that every person living in Northern Ireland is a British citizen with equal rights but that those rights come with responsibilities. No individual or group can claim to be immune from those responsibilities by reason of either political opinion or religious belief.

Unionism, I submit, is by its very nature inclusive, whereas Nationalism is exclusive. Nationalist philosophy is the concept of a chosen people. All those who do not measure up to the standard are aliens, and so we are sometimes told by extreme Nationalists either that we are planters or invaders and have no part in Ireland or that we misunderstand our true Irish identity. This concept of the chosen people is true of the nationalism of Le Pen in France, Terre Blanche in South Africa, Zhirinovsky in Russia and Gerry Adams in Northern Ireland.

We accept that in those other countries strident Nationalism is a bad thing, but in Northern Ireland it is apparently something to be accepted and supported. We even have the nonsense of John Hume talking about Europe being in a post-Nationalist era, while he himself has spent the last 10 years trying to cobble together a pan-Nationalist front which has no purpose other than to increase the pressure on non-Nationalists. Unionism is different. It is profoundly libertarian in tolerating divergence.

The Union was created in response to economic and military pressures at the start of the nineteenth century. It involved pooling the sovereignty of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales within a Parliament in which all constituent elements of the Union were represented. To many of us that sounds very much like an early model for the European Union, of which John Hume is such a great supporter. There is now talk of a Europe of the regions, which presumably Nationalism supports. There is also the prospect of a United Kingdom of the regions, with local administrations in Scotland and Wales, but Mr Hume would deny us that same arrangement in Northern Ireland. How strange that the SDLP has spent the last 20 years working with all its strength to prevent the restoration any accountable democracy in Northern Ireland while posturing as the great Europeans.

The myth that there are two communities has worked very well for some Nationalist politicians. For example, the Fair Employment Commission constantly tells us that Roman Catholics are twice as likely as Protestants to be unemployed. As a result, there are measures in place which amount to positive discrimination in all but name. We readily accept that unemployment remains a very serious problem for all the people of Northern Ireland and that all reasonable steps must be taken to put the unemployed back into work, but we do not accept that there has been an ongoing campaign of discrimination against one section of the community which must be addressed by discrimination against another section.

If that fallacy were to be accepted as a basis for employment practice it would be a green light to every minority group, for, as we know, there are statistics which show that members of the Church of Ireland are more likely than members of the Presbyterian Church to be unemployed. Statistics also indicate that in the Republic of Ireland — that great bastion of Protestant ascendancy — Catholics are two and a half times as likely as members of the Protestant churches to be unemployed. And, of course, in the United Kingdom as a whole, ethnic minorities have long experienced higher levels of unemployment, some of which has undoubtedly been due to discrimination, yet the Government would not dream of introducing quotas or targets for that section of the community.

We do not accept, and have never accepted, that there is a self-contained, separate Roman Catholic/Nationalist community. That is why we oppose such artificial creations as the West Belfast community festival to perpetuate the myth of Nationalist West Belfast. That is why we strenuously object to the tokenism of giving grants to “cross-community” groups — one or two of the “other sort” have to be found before a project can be approved — while perfectly feasible community projects in places from Cappagh to Cloughmills are overlooked.

We on this side of the House do not concede that there is a Catholic Nationalist community or a Unionist Protestant community. We do not believe that there are little self-contained groups of Nationalists or Unionists battling away against their opposing neighbours. If we were to do so we would have to accept that there are host communities

who are entitled to decide who may walk down public streets — streets that are the property of all. Once you accept that a community has a right to prevent people from exercising their civil and religious liberties or to keep people from what it regards as a different community out of its area you are walking down the road to apartheid.

We do not accept that to be Roman Catholic is necessarily to be Nationalist or, indeed, that to be Protestant is necessarily to be Unionist. We do not concede that John Hume or Gerry Adams alone has the right to speak for Roman Catholics. We believe that the benefits of living in a multicultural, liberal democracy such as the United Kingdom are of equal importance to all the citizens of Northern Ireland.

Our Leader was once asked what his vision for Northern Ireland was. He said that it was simply to be left alone. At one level, that seems a vision of great modesty, but it would be most liberating if Protestant, Roman Catholic, dissenter, Jew, Hindu and atheist were allowed to live their lives free from the constant interference of racists who demand that all people either attain a certain standard of Irishness or — in the words of one Republican — “learn to swim”. If people in Crossmaglen wish to speak Irish or play Gaelic, that is entirely a matter for them. They need no help from outside to express their identity. They should stand on their own feet rather than whinge about discrimination.

Charles J Haughey — himself now a failed political entity — once told us that the state of Northern Ireland had failed. How can anybody know, as so many of its citizens have never even attempted to make it work? Some Nationalists have pursued at times what they call an equality agenda. That is a useful code name for the removal of everything in Northern Ireland that is British. As Unionists, we believe in true equality. We want an agenda under which all citizens of the United Kingdom will have the same rights, responsibilities and privileges. Everyone should be equal under the law. There should be parity of esteem and parity of opportunity — not for self-contained communities but for everyone.

With regard to the concept of the equality of all citizens, the State's first duty must be the protection of life. The Government must be proactive in getting rid of terrorism. The protection of life is the first element of true equality, which is what lies at the heart of Britishness and at the heart of Unionism. We have got to move away from the myth, perpetuated by some Nationalists, that there are two communities and, instead, work together for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland. That is how we can make progress.

I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I congratulate Mr Weir on his introduction of this very important motion, which I am happy to support.

Any historian will tell you that the question of national identity has bedevilled Ireland for centuries. Indeed, the events that led to the foundation of Northern Ireland were influenced by the argument about whether Ireland is one nation or two and about the question of allegiance. Should we retain the British link and our British identity, or should we turn to an inverted Irish Nationalism?

The “community versus communities” argument is essentially sectarian, as Mr Weir pointed out. Those who argue that there are two communities encourage others to ask whether one has suffered more than the other, whether there is more poverty in one than in the other, and whether one faces more hardship than the other. The people who pursue that myth shore up and institutionalize sectarianism. Unfortunately we see this in Government policies throughout Northern Ireland and in all manner of legislation, including fair-employment law.

How often do we hear the words “There is more that unites us in Northern Ireland than divides us”? Those who cling to the false concept of two communities do not want to look for genuine unity in the struggle for better democracy, for efficient government, for the eradication of poverty, for harmonized education structures and improved health standards. One suspects that those who argue that there are two communities want hardship for their community rather than genuine unity.

There is one community — the people of Northern Ireland — but Government policy is to undermine that fundamental. The purpose of the current talks process is to find institutions that can win the allegiance of all, but the Government are encouraging unrealistic aspirations to which violent Republicans are holding and from which intransigent Nationalists are not prepared to move. Thus, allegiance to anything other than what those groups deem acceptable is now all but impossible.

Government policy has perpetuated the myth that there are two communities, and we are struggling with the consequences: selective apologies, the ludicrous rewriting of history in response to anti-British propaganda, and the deliberate frustration of the democratic will of the people of Northern Ireland. The proposal to redefine the foundations of this state — section 75 of the 1920 Government of Ireland Act and the sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament — is a blatant attempt to undermine the people of Northern Ireland.

I do not understand those who argue for special rights. As Members know, I support the concept of a Bill of Rights for the entire United Kingdom. Such a measure should apply equally to everyone. But there are those who argue that we must have a selective Bill that gives more rights to certain groups than to others. That would be grossly unfair. It would go against the whole concept of equality.

The people of Northern Ireland are not just a community in the context of this region but also part of a much wider community. We tend to forget that we are part of the community of the United Kingdom, from which our citizenship derives. We are entitled to equal rights and equal treatment. I am not asking for special rights. I am not saying that the people of Northern Ireland should be treated differently from other citizens of the United Kingdom. In fact, that would take away from our sense of Britishness. But as a citizen of the United Kingdom I expect equal rights, and I will fight for what we are entitled to.

I challenge the hypocrisy of successive British Governments, including the current Administration, who have undermined my citizenship. The people of Scotland and Wales are being given a direct say in their regional affairs. The new Government moved immediately to give them what they wanted, and it will happen in England too. We in Northern Ireland are

entitled to no such direct say. Our will is frustrated, and good government replaced by a process that is working towards the erosion of our Britishness.

11.15 am

The hypocrisy of successive of British Governments was exemplified by Michael Ancram soon after he left office. He said in the House of Commons on 24 July last, during a debate on devolution, that proposals cannot be Unionist-friendly and Nationalist-friendly at the same time. One is deceiving the other, and people are in serious danger of being misled. If ever a statement applied directly to what is happening in Northern Ireland, that was it. Mr Ancram never spoke a truer word. His comments completely exposed the flawed nature of what Northern Ireland is being put through, but when he was challenged about his words and was asked how they applied to Northern Ireland he claimed that the circumstances in this province are unique. Here we get to the heart of the matter. Treating Northern Ireland differently allows Governments to get away with erroneous policies for our future.

The problem with national identity in Northern Ireland is not unique — indeed, the problem of national identity across Europe is not unique. What is unique is the way in which the Government are trying to solve it by involving another Government in the internal affairs of the United Kingdom. That is where we get to the very heart of the issues of national identity and citizenship, which is what the motion is all about. There is just one community — the people of Northern Ireland — and only when we recognize that fact will we start to build a lasting solution to our political instability.

I support the motion.

Mr McBride: There is a kernel of something quite important in this motion, but there is also great difficulty given the way we talk about these things, as exemplified by Mr Weir and Mr Paisley. Both said that we are one community and that it is all the Nationalists' fault that everything has gone wrong. That does not make sense, and a close examination of their speeches will reveal inconsistencies.

However, it is important to recognize that we are one community — a troubled community, it may be said. We are a distinct entity. If nothing else, the difficult experience of living together for 70 years has made the people of Northern Ireland a distinct and separate community. We are separate from the rest of the United Kingdom. We have quite different characteristics and our own history. We are not as British as people in Finchley — we are quite different, and we have our own ways of doing things.

Similarly, people from the Nationalist tradition in Northern Ireland are cut off from the rest of the island, and they have a different past. But we know each other. We have history in common (often tragic), we have shared experiences (often bitter), and we have many common interests. So there is, in the broad sense, a community here, and it is important that we build on it. But we must acknowledge that it is a troubled community. It is not united in any way, and nobody can pretend that it is.

There is a pernicious and regrettable tendency to see the situation purely in terms of two blocs — Nationalist and Unionist, or Catholic and Protestant. I want to use the right words here: we have two broad traditions which embrace a large number of the Unionist and Nationalist people, but within those categories there are huge variations — from physical-force Republicans to constitutional Nationalists and, within Unionism, from diverse elements within the various churches to those people who do not go to church very much. The simple idea that there are two communities, two blocs, is not acceptable and not very helpful. We are a community with many traditions, a large number of which overlap.

We talk of two main traditions, but I take the view that there is at least a third main tradition — the one that we in the Alliance Party are part of. There is a long-standing tradition of people in Northern Ireland who have rejected sectarianism and do not want to be categorized as Unionists or Nationalists. They have always been a significant group.

We have to recognize that we are diverse — a complicated society. It is no longer adequate to talk about “us”. We have immigrant communities, including a significant Chinese community, and are moving in many ways towards being multicultural. We must give positive recognition to our diversity and not pretend that we are all the same, that we all have the same likes and dislikes. We must reflect our various traditions in a positive way.

I agree with some of Mr Weir’s comments — in particular, his point that we must not deepen the already fundamental division. Indeed, we cannot continue with it as deep and as bitter as it is now. It has always been a recipe for disaster, but it has got worse. If people are honest they will recognize that this is a very divided society. It is probably more divided now than ever before, and that is extremely dangerous. We must work to build the common ground and break down the barriers that are driving people into separate education systems and separate housing estates.

The Alliance Party believes that the Government should make this central to their approach here. We already have various PAFT (policy appraisal and fair treatment) initiatives. The Government should make it their policy to assess every decision with regard to economic development, housing or education and judge it by whether it is likely to promote separation and division or the breaking down of barriers. That is essential if we are to be a real community — people who can live together, accept their differences and make the most of the things that they have in common. We are a single though diverse community, and we must find a way of recognizing that properly.

Mr Casey: I support the motion as it is in line with the policy of my party. We have declared within the talks process that we are not interested in two communities having parity of esteem, that we want one community where everybody is equal.

When I saw the motion on the Order Paper this morning I wondered what it meant and whether there was a sting in the tail. I soon found out from the contributions of Mr Weir and Mr Paisley Jnr. The latter said that he supported the motion, particularly because of the manner in which it had been introduced. Nationalist-bashing I call it — all the ills that we in Northern Ireland have faced over the last 50 years have been caused by the Nationalist community! Let us proceed a little further down that road. When we had the Stormont Government one of the rallying cries was “A Protestant Parliament for a Protestant people”.

[Interruption] I did not interrupt anybody. I am not trying to write fiction; I am only stating facts.

We had that rallying cry then. What did it say to the Nationalist people? It said "You are second-class citizens." Naturally the Nationalists felt excluded, and if the shoe had been on the other foot the Unionists would have felt the same way. Down the years any talk of unification was greeted with "Oh, we cannot have that. It would be Rome rule — a Catholic Parliament for a Catholic people". But that was not all. We also had voting manipulation and bias in education, employment and housing. *[Interruption]* This has all been proved, and it troubles me to take part in a debate which is completely divisive. I agree that much of the blame lies with the Nationalist side of the community, but the major part belongs to the Unionist Party, the DUP —

A Member: The Labour Party.

Mr McKee: They have no party.

Mr Casey: If the Member is denying his party's share of the blame let me make the point that parties which are not here are just as much to blame for the divisions in society. Nobody has contributed to those divisions more than the political parties with which we have been afflicted down the years. If the cap fits, the Member can wear it.

If we want to embrace the philosophy of the motion we have a golden opportunity to do so in the present talks process. But our DUP colleagues have opted out because of their fear of being absorbed in a popish Parliament — the main reason for our division. All that is preventing us from reaching an agreement that would help to create what the motion calls for is the attitude of the very political parties that are responsible for most of the division in this country. I am talking about the people who have opted out, who will not set political considerations aside.

Rev William McCrea: The IRA has maimed and slaughtered, but it is not to blame for anything! It has filled the graveyards.

Mr Casey: I have not taken sides with anybody who has murdered. I deplore all killing. Labour has said so before. We do not hide our heads in the sand; we come out and condemn all murders. We are not selective.

The parties have a golden opportunity in the talks process to make the terms of this motion a reality if they have the courage to set aside their political philosophies and work for the common good of all the people in this — I was going to say "country" — part of a country. If you were born in Jamaica you are a Jamaican; if you were born in Wales you are Welsh; if you were born in Scotland you are Scottish; and if you were born in Ireland you are Irish. *[Interruption]* Members are hiding their heads in the sand again. If you were born in the North of Ireland you are a British subject. I am a British subject, and I am Irish and proud of it. We have the Welsh-British, the Scots-British and the Anglo-British.

11.30 am

A Member: You do not know what you are.

Mr Casey: I know what I am.

Mr Calvert: You cannot be an Ulsterman and an Irishman at the same time.

Mr Casey: Rubbish. How then can someone be English and British, Scottish and British or Irish and British at the same time?

The Chairman: I should be grateful if Members would address the Chair.

Mr Casey: We are all equal before God, and we should all be equal before man.

I support the motion.

Mr Junkin: I fear that my speech may be somewhat duller than Mr Casey's.

Northern Ireland people always say that they would rather live here than anywhere else, though sometimes they go abroad on holiday or to see farming in New Zealand or wildlife in Nairobi. We have a mild and stable climate — no floods or volcanoes — and this has led to a steady influx of people of all races, particularly from Europe. Some of us are descendants of Viking marauders, others are descendants of people who were shipwrecked, while my own family may be refugees from religious persecution in France. As Mr Paisley says, I have even been accused of being a descendant of Scottish sheep-rustlers, but that has yet to be proved. The Chinese and the Indians do quite well here, particularly in the catering trade, and even the odd Italian can make a living selling leather coats at roundabouts. These people all appreciate the relatively low population density and the clean air.

Mr Weir highlighted the Government's willingness to accept that there are two communities here, in spite of our homogeneity. Even then they sometimes get mixed up: sometimes it is Unionist/Nationalist; at other times it is Protestant/Roman Catholic. They perpetuate a myth that was created and has been nurtured by the absent John Hume, whose goal in life is to make the citizens of the United Kingdom believe that this society is irrevocably divided. The divided-community idea has been swallowed by the Government, who bolster it *ad nauseam*. The Unionist Protestants, who form the majority here, have been accused of "Paddy-bashing" ever since the partition of Ireland. Indeed, we heard that accusation just a few minutes ago.

John Hume is single-minded in pursuing the goal of a reunited Ireland. He is prepared to perpetuate division here for so long as it takes to completely wreck this community, no matter what it costs in lives and property. He does deals with the IRA's Gerry Adams in order to keep pressure on the Government to further this goal. He then calls for dialogue with a neighbouring country, which is no friend of ours, and he deliberately uses the tactics of boycott to ignore those of us who live in the real Northern Ireland. Mr Hume's cold, calculated absence from the Forum is nothing but a ruthless ploy to accentuate the them-and-us scenario, which is dogging natural progress in this land.

It is now claimed that my village is Nationalist and out of bounds to Orangemen parading to church. My area is often visited by the media, but there are no headlines from a settled community so they exploit the divided-community idea for their own ends. I always challenge the media to select a house which is within a mile or two of my own and then to give me 15 minutes in which to borrow a tractor or a cup of sugar from its owners. They have never taken up the challenge. They do not believe that we are one community. The fact that my neighbours are Roman Catholics who like fiddle music does not mean that they are part of another community. We grew up together, we were all poor together, and we have all struggled to improve our lot together. There is so much that unites us that we can only be one community.

It is for this reason that I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: In George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' the animals took control. They were all equal at the start, but by the end some animals were more equal than others. Likewise, in Northern Ireland some people are more equal than others. That is what we are trying to highlight. The motion

"calls on the Government to treat all the people of Northern Ireland as equals."

Some people in the province believe that they are different and should be treated differently. I suggest to them that there is only one community.

I would like to mention some of the issues that many people feel go against one side of the community and to highlight the double standards that are being applied. For instance, job opportunities go primarily to Nationalists and Roman Catholics. The fair-employment legislation has left Protestants lagging behind in the opportunity stakes. I have always believed — and I am sure that everyone here agrees — that ability and experience should be the only criteria. However, many have found that this is not so — that Nationalists and people of the Roman Catholic persuasion are favoured.

Where are new factories built? We all know that they generally go to Nationalist areas, and we are concerned about that. Many Protestants cannot go into those areas because they feel threatened.

Is it fair that Nationalist areas should get more peace and reconciliation money from Europe than Unionists areas? The figures show that this has been happening. The allocation should be more equitable.

What about the very real deprivation and poverty in Unionist areas? The index of the International Fund for Ireland ignores a large proportion of our people, who are equally deprived, and targets Nationalists. Is that fair?

The Government encourage integrated education. I want to make it quite clear that I am not against integrated education, but I question the fairness of a system which takes money from the central budget, thereby depriving other schools. This has resulted in lower expenditure on state schools. Repairs and renovations are falling behind; school books are

not purchased; teachers are not always replaced; and class sizes are increasing — and all because the Government are funding an integrated education system.

I hope I have shown that people in this province are not always treated as equals. We want equality, and I call upon the Government to prove it.

I support the motion.

Mr Foster: I too support the motion. There seems to be a sociological perspective here (that is, if you agree with sociologists — and I do not know anyone who always does).

I am not convinced that Northern Ireland folk are being treated as equals. The Government and, indeed, many people with influence treat one part of the community in a preferential, accommodating and facilitating way.

Mr McBride professes virtue, but there is nobody more illiberal than an alleged liberal. Mr Casey points the finger at Unionists. Surely he must accept that it is Nationalists who have opted out over the years to make this state unworkable. They want to be involved only when there is an all-Ireland thrust. It is a sad reflection on them that the pro-British people are being discriminated against. It is entirely wrong. Nationalist/Republican elements have fostered the idea that saying no to them is discrimination. Indeed, that notion has been allowed to fester over the years. Hence, it is the pro-British people who have suffered discrimination. This discrimination cry by Nationalist/Republican elements is insidious. Its purpose is to further the interests of the tradition whose aim is to erode everyone's quality of life.

The word "community" evokes a great range of images. There are communities within communities, and there are overlapping communities. There are various ethnic communities within the community at large. There is a range of social relationships, and these can be analysed.

We regularly hear Government spokespersons and others indicating that there are two communities. This in itself is divisive. I heard such a reference on a well-known radio programme yesterday. The description is used by people seeking political or financial benefit. It is also used by those who oppose the very essence of this state. They use it as a political weapon to distance others from their Britishness. However, when funding is being sought, the word "community" is used. One cannot fail to note the singular form in "community hall" or "community group". This is humbug and hypocrisy. Why can the word not be used to express togetherness, which is so important?

I agree with the view of many sociologists that the community, in spite of its diversity, remains a single entity. The reference to "two communities" by those who wish to erode the structures of this state is meant to be divisive. They want to enjoy the state's benefits and privileges but denounce its very existence or seek to overthrow it. They are so prejudiced that they are intent on creating a schism in Northern Ireland, a denial of citizenship, a destructive force. Northern Ireland is one community within which there are several ethnic groups.

11.45 am

The onus is on Her Majesty's Government to ensure that they do not further aggravate our situation. They have a duty to try to bring people together, and they should therefore treat us as one community — equals as British citizens — and not two. There is no other way. Let them not encourage further division by differentiating between people. We seek equality of rights as British citizens in Northern Ireland.

Mr Weir: I welcome the support that all parties have expressed for the motion. The Forum believes in the concept of equality of citizenship. Unionists have always advocated equality — look at the speeches of Carson or Craig. It is something that every democrat should support. Our position is based upon two fundamental principles: first, that all citizens of Northern Ireland should have equal rights — we, as Unionists, seek no special privileges, nor do we expect others to have advantages over us — and, secondly, that they should have the same rights, privileges and responsibilities as every other citizen of the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, that is not the case at the moment. There is a lack of accountable democracy in Northern Ireland, and since the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement a foreign Government has had a say in the internal affairs of this part of the United Kingdom. The Government have abdicated responsibility with regard to terrorism — a situation which would not have been tolerated in any other part of the United Kingdom. Our demand today is simply for equality of citizenship.

I do not claim, as was suggested by Mr Casey and Mr McBride, that one side is responsible for every wrong. No section of the community is entirely blameless. I was trying to make the point that the concept of two communities has been pursued only by Nationalists and accepted by the Government. The blame for the concept must lie with Nationalist politicians. I disagree with Mr McBride, who said that we are different from the rest of the United Kingdom. We have a unique heritage and unique traditions, but so does every other part of the kingdom. Indeed, it is a model of diversity in richness. As Mr Junkin said, the British are a nation of invaders, made up of different immigrant races, and, as such, we have diverse traditions. Northern Ireland is a single community of one and a half million people for whom we demand proper equality of citizenship within the United Kingdom. The vast majority of people would support that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum believes that there is, and can only be, one community in Northern Ireland and calls on the Government to treat all the people of Northern Ireland as equals.

TRADE UNION RALLY

The Chairman: I suggest that we break until two o'clock to enable those who wish to do so to attend the rally.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I was amazed to hear this morning's announcement that the Forum would suspend business so that Members could support this rally. I understand from members of my party who were at the Business Committee that you, Mr Chairman, wanted an extended break because you intended to go — and you are entitled to go where you want.

I want to make it clear that I do not support the rally, for it is in support of the so-called peace talks, where this week, as I heard from Mr Hume himself, savage, vicious, lying and scurrilous attacks were launched by the paramilitaries on Rev William McCrea.

My party went to the country and made it clear that if Sinn Féin were to come to the table we would not be there. Everybody knows that. I do not support the so-called peace process. It is a sell-out and a charade. And it is a disgrace that some people at the table are still engaging in offences against others. Even the Chief Constable admits that. In his statement he condemned not only the Ulster Freedom Fighters but also the IRA.

I do not agree with blanket condemnation of all killings — for example, the killing of a guilty person by a police officer who, in the line of duty, has to use his weapon. The signatories to this document, in order to please the 'Irish News' and to get a relationship between that paper and the 'News Letter', condemn all killings. Do we condemn every person, Protestant or Roman Catholic, who fought in either world war and shot the enemy? Surely not.

I am the Leader of the second-largest party in the Forum, but I was not consulted about this matter. It has not been debated or voted on. I believe in civil and religious liberty for all men. If you want to support the rally, Mr Chairman, that is your business, but let it be clear that the Forum is not officially supporting it.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions is on record as supporting the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Downing Street declaration and the framework document. I have fought and won elections on a platform of opposition to those things, so I cannot lend my support to this event.

The Chairman: Nobody is required to go to the rally, but those who wish to go are entitled to do so, as Dr Paisley has said.

Mr Neeson: For the sake of accuracy, Mr Chairman, I want to point out that, having been at the Business Committee yesterday, I know that approaches were made to you beforehand about the possibility of an extended break. Democratic Unionists were present when the suggestion was put to the meeting, but there was no dissent.

I am disappointed that the DUP has taken this stance, because the country is crying out for an end to all violence. Today's rally is an attempt to unite the people. We have just agreed that there is one community in Northern Ireland. I would like to see that community expressing its revulsion at all the terrorism here over the years.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Mr Neeson has wilfully misrepresented the position of my party at yesterday's Business Committee meeting, which I attended. He has said that he made representations to you, Mr Chairman, before the meeting. When Mr Morrow, the Chief Whip of my party, and I arrived it was put to the meeting simply that there had been a request for an extended lunch break — 12.00 to 2.00 pm. No reason was given, and we were quite happy to agree. It now transpires that this was to facilitate the peace rally. If Members want to go to that it is entirely a matter for them, but it is unfair to misrepresent my party by saying that we were having any part in this ICTU event.

The Chairman: We are dancing on the head of a pin — an expression that is used in Parliament occasionally. We are breaking for lunch now, and those who wish to go to the rally are perfectly entitled to do so.

The meeting was suspended at 11.56 am and resumed at 2.03 pm.

SPECIAL DEBATE (RULE 10(5))

Motion made and Question proposed:

That this Forum at its rising today do adjourn until Friday 6 February 1998. — *[The Chairman]*

Mr Shannon: I would like to address an issue that is much in people's minds at present — the "bloody Sunday" inquiry. I will question the need for an inquiry and compare that event with some of the things that have happened in the province over the last 28 or 30 years.

The furore about "bloody Sunday" and the requests over the years for a Government inquiry have been answered by a weak-kneed, feeble Labour Administration with only one thing in mind: how to make more concessions to IRA/Sinn Féin. Their incredible and abysmal decision to agree to a public inquiry is just one more concession from a Labour Government heavily addicted to attempts to satisfy the evil demands of Republicans. It is just scraping the barrel. The decision is unnecessary. It is simply pandering further to insatiable Republican demands for everything under the sun, and if this sort of thing continues, it will further alienate Unionists. The whole agenda is to promote everything Republican and to ignore all Unionist, Protestant and Loyalist beliefs and traditions. If Republicans had their way we would be ostracized, discriminated against and ultimately destroyed in their mad pursuit of a united Ireland.

What I and many others in the Unionist community want is real recognition of the endless hurt that our people have suffered over the last 28 or 30 years. What about the "bloody Mondays", "bloody Tuesdays", "bloody Wednesdays", "bloody Thursdays", "bloody Fridays", "bloody Saturdays" and "bloody Sundays" — and "bloody" is the word — that they have known? What about an inquiry for the thousands of our community who have given their all for their country, only to be ignored by this Government? What about Government inquiries into the Abercorn bombing, the Droppin' Well massacre and the awful murders in the fire that engulfed La Mon House Hotel? I remember La Mon very well, as, I am sure, do

other Members. Why do the Government not hold an inquiry, and why do Republicans not apologize for their murderous and wicked deeds? What about an inquiry to establish the identity of the evil-doers of the "bloody Friday" atrocity? Were they ever brought to justice? I cannot recall it. I can recall the murder of four young UDR men outside Downpatrick, two of whom I knew personally. Why was it allowed to happen, and were the IRA men responsible ever made amenable for their crimes? Do the Government wish to ignore all the atrocities against the Unionist population? All the signs are that they intend to.

In the 'Belfast Telegraph' of Wednesday 28 January there was an interesting letter from Mr Malcolm Patterson of Bushmills, County Antrim. He made reference to a Sinn Féin rally to mark the 1798 rebellion at Vinegar Hill in County Wexford. The letter included some extracts from 'The History of Presbyterianism in Ulster' by Rev Thomas Hamilton, which gives an account of the events of that time. It describes the murderous campaign carried out by "a Romish Priest" against Protestants, which began with the murder of a clergyman, his son and seven of his parishioners and continued with the slaughter of hundreds of Protestants. Will the Church of Rome, as the writer of the letter asked, apologize for the most vile and hideous things done by priests and their followers in the name of their church? If anyone is looking for an apology, why not an apology for that?

The point I am trying to make — and I hope I have hit home brave and hard — is that we in the Unionist tradition, in spite of all the hurt that we have suffered during this relentless campaign of murder and genocide, have never had either an apology or an inquiry. Why has Neil Latimer not been released early? Many of us believe that it is because he is a Unionist. Why no public inquiry into the murder of Billy Wright? An independent inquiry would be the best way of addressing the growing concern of a very suspicious public who need their questions answered. Why do the Government not announce inquiries into and make apologies for all the atrocities and discrimination that the Unionist community has suffered over 30 very bloody years?

Rev William McCrea: Mr Shannon raised the matter of the inquiry that is being set up by the Government into what they call "bloody Sunday". They ask "Do these families not have a right to know why their loved ones were killed?" Let me remind the Forum of two young people. A girl, engaged just that day, together with her brother and her fiancé, was travelling from near Coagh to Tullahogue to show her engagement ring to an aunt. A lady waved them down and told them that there was a car over the hedge. They got out to help, but there was no one in the car. Somebody said "Watch. Maybe there is a bomb." As the young people were walking back up the road — the brother 16 years of age, the sister 21, with her engagement ring on her finger — they noticed something in the field. What did they see? We will never know, because they were blown to bits.

I went to the mortuary that Saturday night to identify the bodies. Rachel McLernon was on the mortuary table, her body totally disfigured by the bomb. She had been a beauty queen, but when the Provos had finished, there was nothing beautiful about her. When I asked to see Robert the sister told me to leave. I said "I can't. I have been brought here to identify Robert McLernon, and I want to see him." Then I realized why she wanted me to leave: there was nothing to show me. On a little white sheet, by the mortuary wall, were a few bones. That was Robert.

My question to Tony Blair is a very simple one: "Do we as a family not have a right to know why Robert and Rachel McLernon were murdered?" Why did the Provos kill them? They were not connected with any organization. They were just two young people travelling down the road together. They stopped to help and were blown to bits. Their mother died at 43 years of age of a broken heart — she did not make the statistics — because two children left her one day and never came back. Two boxes came back, but not one of the family, except myself, was allowed to look inside to see what was in the plastic bags. Do I and my family circle not have a right to know why those young people were murdered? It was the slaughter of the innocent.

Derek Ferguson was at home one night with two of his children lying in their little bunk beds while his other two youngsters sat in the same room. Terrorists opened the door of the mobile home — his wife was away getting the things that she needed to continue work on the house they were building beside the mobile — and asked "Are you Derek?" He said "Yes." They waved "Bye, bye, Derek" and shot him down like a dog in front of his children. The five-year-old lifted the phone and rang his granny: "Nana, come quick. Bad men have shot my daddy dead." When the granny arrived the wee boy was over his daddy's body with his fingers in the holes trying to keep the blood in.

Why did they murder Derek Ferguson? Do I not have a right to know? But there will be no inquiry to enable our family to find out why Derek Ferguson was killed. Nobody is interested; nobody cares. He happened to be a Protestant. He was an ordinary citizen of Ulster. He had no teams of terrorists behind him with Semtex and bombs. No, he was just an ordinary individual, and his mother is left with a broken heart. We too have a right to answers.

We are told that the reason for this inquiry is that members of the security forces were involved. Billy Wright was in one of Her Majesty's prisons when he was murdered, so why is there to be no judicial inquiry to find out who was involved? Justice is a wonderful thing. I would like to say to Marjorie Mowlam and Tony Blair "These things will not go away, you know. We will keep seeking justice, and one day we will get it."

2.15 pm

Mr Poots: Members will have seen the recent Coopers and Lybrand report which warned that Northern Ireland could very soon enter a period of recession. The only person who does not seem to be aware of this is the Minister for the economy, Mr Adam Ingram.

Let me remind Members of some of the firms which have closed down over the last few weeks: Coats Viyella, Porter's, Elizabeth Alexandra, Kennedy's, O'Hara's and ECS. Seagate has laid workers off for two weeks, while Short's is making 200 employees in the design and engineering section redundant. What is this all about? There are several factors, but a primary one is the strength of sterling. The continuing rise in the value of the pound has created tremendous difficulties for people in the manufacturing industries, particularly in textiles and agriculture. Imports have increased, exporters are being undercut left, right and centre.

The only solution that I can see is a cut in interest rates. People borrowing money to invest in businesses have to contend with high interest, and the speculators who pump up the price of sterling create difficulties for those selling their produce. Indeed, many are selling at a loss, as we saw in the case of Powerscreen's Matbro operation. That company needed to shift its product, and £46 million had to be put into it to keep it viable.

Almost three weeks ago the DUP asked for a meeting with Adam Ingram, but we still have not got a date. We have been told that it will be some time in the middle of February. The fact that no date has been fixed indicates how concerned about the economy the Minister is. He has been warned by Coopers and Lybrand, who are eminent accountants. We have brought to his attention information that we have been given to the effect that 800 people are to be laid off in the Industrial Development Board's client companies. But he is not concerned about that; he thinks it can wait. When prisoners were giving trouble in the Maze he had plenty of time to nip in, having his car checked in front of the security cameras, but he is not all that interested in people who are losing their jobs.

The economy will go into recession very soon, largely because of what has been happening with sterling and the problems of the agriculture industry. As I have said before, agriculture represents 8% of our gross domestic product and employs 12% of the work-force, and when it is badly hit the whole economy is affected.

Then there are the public-sector spending cuts. Northern Ireland is far more reliant on the public sector than any other part of the United Kingdom, and cuts in that sector damage its economy badly.

I urge the Minister to deal with this problem and try to avoid a crisis in the course of the next year.

Mr McKee: There has been a lot of talk today about peace. You, Mr Chairman, mentioned it in declaring that the Forum would rise for two hours to allow people to attend the peace rally.

The Chairman: Let me correct you. I gave Members an opportunity to attend the peace rally.

Mr McKee: Many people took exception when some said that they would not be attending the peace rally. My party Leader certainly spoke for me when he referred to the present campaign for peace. It is phoney; it is a sham. Let me make it very clear that I am all for peace. I want peace in Northern Ireland just as much as you do, Mr Chairman. I want to live in a country where nobody has to die for his beliefs, where there are no more tears, where there is no more suffering. But peace has to be founded on sincerity, on decency and on what is right for Northern Ireland, and it has to be built on democracy.

I was appalled by comments of the Labour Party representative today. He started by telling us how loving he is and how he wants to see peace, but ended up singing from the same old hymn-sheet as Gerry Adams, John Hume and all the rest of the pan-Nationalist front who cry about 50 years of misrule and the poor downtrodden. Where in Northern Ireland are Protestants given more rights than Roman Catholics? I believe that the opposite is the case.

There is a great outcry about peace today. It is right that there should be an outcry when there is death and destruction, but, as many Members have pointed out, the violence has been going on for years. We have seen members of the RUC and members of the UDR laid below mother earth. There was no great outcry about those murders. Are the tears of the loved ones any less bitter than the tears of Roman Catholic families? I think not. Of course, RUC and UDR personnel are legitimate targets and should expect to be killed, according to Gerry Adams and his cohorts.

The most divisive thing in Northern Ireland today is the so-called peace-talks process, which is a sham. In our midst we have unrepentant terrorists. They have told us that they will keep their guns and that they reserve the right to go back to doing what they do best — killing Ulster-British subjects. They want the right to keep their guns at the table. If these people really wanted peace they would have no need of arsenals. But this is not about peace; it is about Ulster and what ground can be gained.

There is a lot of treachery in Northern Ireland. The air reeks of sell-out. So-called Loyalists, many of whom joined me on the streets to make a stand for Loyalist prisoners and for Ulster (and were washed off with water cannons), are today to be found at the conference table with their traditional enemies — those who want to do us to death, those whose only aim is to get our country.

I do not want to hear any talk of peace when there is no peace. If there is to be peace, let it come from the heart. Let it be a sincere and lasting peace in which people can live and work together. That is what I know peace to be. I have many Roman Catholic friends, as you, Mr Chairman, know because you visited their homes in Larne with me when you were in charge of the Housing Executive. I highlighted their problems, and I was a real thorn in your side.

Let nobody run away with the idea that our opposition to this phoney set-up at Stormont means that we are opposed to peace. We want peace, but it must be peace with justice.

Mrs I Robinson: I have a love of Ulster. I have a love of democracy. I was brought up to love my neighbour, hard as it is sometimes. I was brought up to believe that democracy is government of the people by the people for the people, on the basis of one man, one equal vote — the politics of equality. I was brought up to believe that murder is wrong, that destruction of property is wrong, that theft is wrong, that armed insurrection is wrong, that criminals should pay for their crimes. I was taught that where restoration is possible it should be attempted, that where rehabilitation is possible it should be explored, and that where neither is possible, there should be retribution.

A democratic society must be based on principles of justice and equality, on the right of all to freedom to express their culture and heritage. It must protect freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of faith and freedom from fear. I expect my Government to protect democracy. I, in return, am happy to live within the democratic process; I am happy to live within the law. I have no fear of accepting the outcome of an honest, democratic political process.

When Mo Mowlam went to the Maze to speak to the representatives of terrorist organizations I despaired. It seems that Ms Mowlam is prepared to confer political legitimacy on groups that, whatever their motivation, have waged a sectarian war against the law-abiding people of this community. She is one step away from sitting down with the most militant and vicious murderers in the IRA — the declared enemies of the state.

I have been trying to arrange a meeting with Tony Worthington to discuss the proposed closure of Belvoir Park Hospital. So far, there have been three cancellations. If I were a terrorist, maybe he would visit me in the Maze. But I do not have bombs and bullets to back me up.

Yet Ms Mowlam's visit to the Maze is entirely logical in the context of the so-called peace process. The British Government, who have deserted the Unionist people of Ulster, seem prepared to sell out the democratic process. They fear and have capitulated to the IRA. The fact that they cannot afford a resumption of the IRA bombing campaign on the mainland is what is driving the so-called peace process. The Government have been negotiating with terrorists, secretly and continuously, for 25 years. Now everything is in the open, and the beliefs of the honest, law-abiding people of Northern Ireland are shattered.

In the eyes of many people the Secretary of State is guilty of treason. She is certainly giving support and succour to the enemies of the state. The wishes of ordinary people are ignored. Artificial political arrangements have been made to include small vociferous and armed groups in the political discussions and to subvert the democratic process. It is sad enough that the political representatives of terrorist organizations have been admitted to the Forum and the talks, but now we have direct negotiations with terrorists in their prison — and it is their prison.

What are we to do? What is the way forward? Certainly the talks are finished. A process that moves within the parameters of the framework document is of no use to Unionists or anyone else who believes in legal and democratic methods. A process that gives priority to the views, wishes and demands of paramilitary prisoners and their political representatives will not be a basis for a peaceful way forward.

It is time for reality. It is time to reassert the primacy of the genuine democratic process. The British Government are the legitimate Government of Northern Ireland. They must shoulder their clear responsibility and support the people who wish to remain within the United Kingdom. That is their moral and legal duty and a democratic imperative which does not preclude the right of Nationalist people to work peacefully for change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland.

2.30 pm

It is time to face up to the terrorists on both sides. People in Ulster want peace, but they do not want to surrender the principles of democracy to achieve it. They will not surrender their legal birthright. We are very much at the crossroads. There is a great deal of anger and resentment developing in the hearts and minds of law-abiding people.

If the people of Ulster are betrayed by their Government they will not be absorbed into a 32-county republic. They will have nowhere to go, and that will create a situation 100 times more dangerous than anything we have seen in the last 30 years. The majority of the community here have a legitimate democratic right to be British, and we expect our Government to defend our rights.

Mr McAlister: I would like to support all that my Colleague Mr Poots has said about the economy.

This week the Minister announced a new review of economic development strategy. We in the Economy Committee welcome that, but we fear that it may be too late. However, something is better than nothing. In its initial economy debate the Forum called for economic strategy to be rethought. In fact, a few years ago I was calling for a change in the way we in Northern Ireland do business. It could certainly be improved. We look forward to that, and we hope that the Government will take on board the comments we have already made and any future reports that might be of assistance to them.

My Colleague Mr Poots listed the companies that, tragically, have lost business, lost employees or gone to the wall in recent weeks and months, but what is causing particular concern at the moment is the situation in Short's.

The Economy Committee is in the process of hearing from both sides. We have heard the arguments from the workers and the trade union side, and next week we hope to hear Mr Roy McNulty. There is great concern. I will not go into the details at this stage, but we hope to be able to report on the situation. Suffice it to say that we are concerned.

Many questions have been asked — some by Short's employees — but most of them remain unanswered. The company has a tremendous responsibility to give answers. There is a feeling that there will be a review after the work-force has been cut down. I hope that this cart-before-the-horse situation will be commented on by the Economy Committee today or on Monday.

There is also concern about the relationship between the Department of Economic Development and Short's. Just what has the Department done this time? Does it have a good working relationship with the company?

I must comment on "bloody Sunday". I agree with all that my Colleagues have said. Let us hope that in the inquiry there will be some consideration for the soldiers on the ground. A few people in this Chamber, including myself and you, Mr Chairman, have been in such a situation and could justify what happened. Normal thinking and normal procedure are set to the side when there is a riot going on. If people were killed by terrorists a few days earlier, a situation can be volatile and things can go wrong. I hope that when all the facts are brought out, someone will speak up for the ordinary soldiers on the ground, for it looks as though responsibility is going to end with them. I also hope that the heat of battle that day and the circumstances of the time will be taken into consideration.

I am amazed that the people who want this inquiry seem now to be intent on getting judges who will give them the outcome they want. This is to do not with truth but with a fixed agenda.

Of course, the current process is based entirely on a fixed agenda. No matter what we talk about now, the agenda for the future will not change. It is time the Unionist, Protestant people started demanding a few things. What about an inquiry into the Southern Irish Government's involvement in the early days of the IRA and its funding? Let us not forget that.

Why do we not start now? Why do we not rally to a flag and begin demanding some of our rights and some of the truth about what started this whole process 27 or 28 years ago?

Mr Dodds: Rallies for peace have been taking place throughout the province. Some of the parties in the Forum that are absent now, as they usually are in the afternoon, are very vocal about such public demonstrations. Unfortunately they were not present when the Political Affairs Committee met recently with Families Against Intimidation and Terror (FAIT). The spokespersons for that organization presented us with a litany of the terrible crimes committed by the paramilitary organizations, even during the so-called cease-fires. But none of the parties that are so eloquent on the media about peace bothered their heads to turn up to listen to people who were prepared to give evidence of the ongoing punishment beatings, shootings, intimidation, and so on. Perhaps that speaks more eloquently about their real interest in ordinary people than all their flowery language on television. Of course, elsewhere their message is sometimes different.

I want to deal primarily with some of the events at Lancaster House this week, because they are very important indeed. I read somewhere that the transfer to London cost about £0.25 million. When you consider some of the issues that we debate in this House and the lack of resources, that makes you wonder what the Government's priorities are. Consider, for instance, the cost of the international team of chairmen at the talks (Mr Mitchell, Mr Holkeri and Gen de Chastelain): so far almost £1 million for pay, accommodation and travel. You go to the Government about some housing scheme or traffic-calming measure and they tell you that they have no money, but they can find funds for this sort of carry-on when it suits them.

At Lancaster House the Ulster Democratic Party was expelled. On the day when the UDP have been meeting with Government officials many people in Northern Ireland are scratching their heads. They are bemused because other parties in the talks are in exactly the same position. The only difference is that the UFF came out and admitted what they had done.

The reality is that IRA/Sinn Féin are also guilty. The Chief Constable admitted this when we met him, and when we put these matters to the Prime Minister yesterday he admitted that the situation was very difficult and that he could not argue against what we were saying. He did not deny it. Nor did the security Minister, Adam Ingram, who was present. The IRA are breaching the Mitchell principles almost daily, but a blind eye is turned. The Government deliberately ignore advice and information from the RUC. Why?

They will keep IRA/Sinn Fein at the table at all costs. Indeed, they will keep everybody at the table unless they are forced to take action.

Many are asking why the UDP have been picked out when IRA/Sinn Fein were clearly involved in the Banbridge bomb. Mr Robinson has given in great detail, here and elsewhere, the facts surrounding the IRA's involvement in that incident. Given their help with the bomb that went off in Enniskillen and given recent statements by the Chief Constable about their ongoing activity, it is clear that they are in breach of the Mitchell principles and must be excluded.

In conclusion, I must mention the two documents that were published in London by the Governments. These were welcomed by some and dismissed by others. Mr Trimble said that they were irrelevant. No matter what you think of them, "irrelevant" is not quite the right word. They are extremely relevant. They make it clear that what we had said about the 'Heads of Agreement' — a document welcomed by Mr Trimble — had been absolutely correct: that it is in line with the frameworks document. This is explicitly stated in both the strand-two paper on North/South structures and the strand-three paper on East/West structures.

We are told that the Governments remain committed to the position set out in the joint declaration and the frameworks for agreement document, paragraphs 39 to 49 of which are particularly relevant, and a similar line is taken in relation to the strand-two paper. The two Governments remain firmly committed to that position as being their best assessment of where agreement might be found in the negotiations. Mr Trimble told us the previous week that he had got 80% of what he wanted; last week the Ulster Unionists were busy tearing up documents. Will they stop trying to bluff the people of Northern Ireland, and, most of all, will they stop trying to delude themselves about the reality of what is going on in the talks.

Mr Peter Robinson: My position and that of my party is clear: political problems can be solved only through political dialogue. Ultimately, talks are the way forward. But the DUP and, I believe, people outside recognize that certain components are essential to negotiations and dialogue. The first is that all participants must be there on the same basis. They must have ownership of the process; as a body they must be responsible for determining the rules that will order their procedures; they must determine who is to be the chairman; and they must together reach agreements and arrive at a conclusion.

2.45 pm

From the very first day we recognized that there was not a level playing-field, and day and daily the evidence mounts that the process is tilted in favour of the pan-Nationalist front. Concessions are given regularly to ensure that the Provisional IRA stay in — concessions that are to the detriment of the Unionist community. The chairman was imposed; the rules were determined by a Command Paper before the talks began; and the process continued with the two Governments determining in which direction the parties would go and producing papers to try to send them there.

But the basis on which all parties were to be at the talks was, according to the Downing Street declaration, that all who were involved in violence had to cease the violence

permanently and be committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. Academically at least, each of us could understand the Government's position. They were saying that if we wanted to wean people away from violence and encourage them to take part in democratic politics, this was the way to do it, this was the route open to them. And if they should turn their back on the democratic process they would be excluding themselves rather than being kept out of the process. Each and every one who wanted to take part had to be committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means.

My party determined that when Provisional Sinn Fein were invited into the process they had not met those criteria, and we have had a lot of evidence since to support that view. The reality, of course, is that the Government set up the process to get Sinn Fein/IRA in because it was with Sinn Fein/IRA that they wanted to do a deal. Therefore the entry conditions were changed to assist the Republican movement, and the exclusion conditions are also being changed to allow it to remain.

At a meeting with the Chief Constable it became very clear to us that he recognizes that there has been a catalogue of incidents in which the Provisional IRA have breached their cease-fire. Almost nightly, people have been having their legs bashed by baseball bats. Hatchets, iron bars and cudgels of various kinds have been used against them, and the use of shotguns has left them incapacitated. The security forces know for certain that the Provisional IRA have carried out such attacks. A shooting at the Meadows Tavern is known to have been the work of the Provisionals, though they used Direct Action Against Drugs as a flag of convenience.

RUC documents that I have show clearly that the Banbridge bomb was also the work of the IRA in South Armagh. A caller, having given a code word, admitted it. The call was made to the Samaritans in Newry and to the local radio station in County Louth. The documents also show that the detonator has been forensically linked to the Provisionals.

But the Government have refused to face up to the fact that that is a breach of the Mitchell principles, requiring Sinn Fein to be put out of the talks. Indeed, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister cocoon themselves from the reality of what is going on in our streets. IRA/Sinn Fein have breached the Mitchell principles, and if I were Gary McMichael I would be scratching my head and wondering why I had been put out of the talks process when others, who are equally guilty, have not.

The Chief Constable has said publicly that the IRA are undoubtedly active. Why do the Government refuse to accept his word?

Mr Weir: Before I speak about the question of accountable administration in Northern Ireland I want to associate myself with the very powerful and pertinent remarks of Rev William McCrea. I believe that, in doing so, I speak for most people in the Chamber.

This week Lord Dubs announced an increase in the number of locally elected representatives on quangos. I suppose we should welcome any increase in the number of elected representatives involved in the administration of Northern Ireland, but the announcement was wholly inadequate. Look at the quango system and at the amount of money that is distributed by the voluntary sector. None of these people are properly

accountable to the electorate. Many quangos have a much bigger budget than most district councils, whose members have at least to face the electorate every four years. Look at the budget that Quintin Oliver manages at the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action though he never has to face an election.

Some of these bodies are very unrepresentative — for example, the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights (SACHR). There have been problems with SACHR. One thinks of its recent reports on fair employment and its attitude to the funding of preparatory schools. But the situation is even worse because SACHR's membership is now drawn predominantly from the Nationalist section of the community — there is no balance. Two members have direct links with the SDLP, and a third is the sister of a well-known Republican solicitor. There is no reason to exclude people with political links from these organizations, but there must be balance. The last person from the Unionist community to serve on SACHR was Dermot Nesbitt, a Member of the Forum. He produced a minority report on fair employment and, perhaps as a result, was not reappointed. There is no one on SACHR who is in any way associated with any Unionist party.

But this is a wider matter. There are many fine and dedicated people on quangos, but persons who are not elected cannot be as accountable as councillors or Forum Members. We have to move to a system in which people who have responsibility for spending public money are accountable. If we must have quangos their members should be locally elected representatives.

We have seen many disgraceful decisions taken by quangos and a lot of money wasted. There will have to be a radical transformation of the way Northern Ireland is administered to ensure that locally elected representatives have responsibility and are accountable to the people.

Mr Foster: This is a critical stage in the continuous attempts to overthrow Northern Ireland. Members may have heard me say so before, but it needs to be emphasized.

We all know that Gerry Adams demands a united Ireland now. His favourite theme is "Brits out". John Hume also seeks a united Ireland, and he too would like it now, but, being devious, he seeks to achieve it in the drip-feed way. He is the man who humbugs about dialogue but will not allow his party to have dialogue in the Forum. Hume and his party veto anything that is constructive. He is a man who never reaches out to Unionist communities; he treats the majority of Northern Ireland's citizens with contempt.

Mr Tony Blair talks humbug and does the usual mainland politician's balancing act. One day he leans in one direction, the next day in the other. What a way to treat and put pressure on true British citizens.

Mo Mowlam said on television the other day that no one will get everything he wants. By implication, a Minister of Her Majesty's Government is saying that they will concede some of the sovereignty of Her Majesty's realm to a neighbouring, foreign state. To us that is offensive, unbelievable and totally unacceptable. During the past week, amidst all the intimidation of Her Majesty's subjects in this part of her realm, we had a Roman Catholic cleric from County Tyrone saying that the IRA had people in Nationalist areas in a Mafia-like

grip. They could not inform the RUC of any strange or shadowy movements in their midst in case those involved were Republican terrorists rather than Loyalist terrorists. What an admission. Things like that need to be brought out into the open.

Such statements are evidence of what we know have been regular occurrences over the years. This is the oxygen on which terrorism survives. We have murder in our streets, and we had destruction in Enniskillen during the past week. In spite of his present pretence at respectability — that word is somewhat tarnished now — we cannot forget that Gerry Adams was a pallbearer at the funeral of one of the Shankill bombers. He and Martin McGuinness have been seen, and apparently directing events, at the funerals of IRA terrorists. Obviously you do not do such things unless you are part and parcel of the system.

Hume, Adams and their party faithful are unscrupulous. Our Government play ducks and drakes with us, to the benefit and delight of those who seek to overthrow us. On the surface, Republicans and Nationalists are for ever saying "Let me have everything exactly as I want it, and a sunnier, more pleasant person will not exist." They deny others everything and are famous for refusing nothing. These elements of Republicanism and John Hume's Nationalism are insidious and cunning, and they are plotting daily the destruction of this state. Even if they humbly bend the knee they cannot be trusted. They have a superabundance of foulness towards Northern Ireland's place within the British family — you cannot have a clean pigsty.

What I have said today we already knew. And what has been said to Ulster Unionists by other members of the Unionist family we already knew — only too well. But in these critical times I appeal sincerely for the Unionist and pro-British family to unite against the onslaught on our very existence. The Unionist family must unite now and put all its skills and oratory together. We should not be throwing brickbats and vitriol at each other, especially at those who are defending our position against insidious people. Support is required for those Ulster Unionists who are confronting the enemies of this state. They must not be continually berated. It is so sad that this should be the case.

Mr King: I want to focus the attention of the Forum on a piece of good news about employment in South Antrim.

Tesco is to open a depot in Antrim town. It is hoped that over 200 jobs will be created. We must welcome this and the knock-on effects on the local economy. The news comes on top of the announcement that a telecom centre is to be opened in the Antrim area, close to the airport, also bringing about 200 jobs. Members from South Antrim will welcome that.

But how many more jobs could be created if there were a proper, integrated transport system in the Antrim area. The borough of Antrim contains the international airport, but the main railway line from Antrim to Belfast goes via Lisburn, though that may change. It skirts the perimeter of the airport. Belfast International is the only major northern British airport that does not have a direct rail link to the city centre. That is a huge disadvantage for anybody travelling to Northern Ireland. It is very inconvenient to get people and goods from the airport to Antrim.

3.00 pm

I call on Translink, Northern Ireland Railways and the Government to look very seriously at establishing systems similar to those at Manchester and Heathrow. There ought to be a fast link between the main airport and the capital city and provincial towns. Business travellers should be able to get from Aldergrove to the city centre in less than 15 minutes, and Antrim, with all its industry, should be easily accessible, not just from the major United Kingdom cities but from those in Europe as well.

The Government could then start to address the question of an integrated transport policy for Northern Ireland. Why do we all use cars? I can drive from Antrim to Belfast in 25 minutes using the M2. The train journey would take 40 to 45 minutes because I would have to go via Lisburn. Lisburn is a fine place — I can tell Mr Poots that I like it a lot — but I do not want to take that route to the city.

Why are there so many lopsided transport priorities competing with one another? I suspect that it is because there is no accountable government in Northern Ireland. Civil servants have built the infrastructure in a piecemeal fashion, without giving any thought to strategy, and the economy is suffering.

Why is there no rail link between Belfast and the west of the province? Why do we have to drive to Enniskillen? Why is it that an area like Fermanagh, with such tourist potential, does not have a rail link to the international airport? As politicians, we should be asking these questions. I hope that in the not-too-distant-future we will have the power to do something about this.

I want to talk about the Lancaster House events of the last three days. I am reluctant to bring this up, for after three days in London I have had enough, though it was amusing up to a point. People talk about agendas, but the Government have determined the political field on which Northern Ireland's future will be dealt with. Whether we stay out of the process or not, the field will not change. Nobody is saying he likes the process, but it is the only one available to us. And nobody should think for one moment that if we were to withdraw, the multi-party process would not go on. It would. It began in 1985, and it will continue for the next 10 years. I am not saying that we shall succeed, but this is our only opportunity to try to arrest it.

Mr Peter Robinson: Not at all. You are giving it credibility.

Mr King: No, we are not giving it credibility. Can anybody who watched the television pictures from London be in any doubt about our attitude towards the framework document?

A Member: Yes.

Mr King: How? *[Interruption]*

The Chairman: Please address the Chair.

Mr King: Everybody knows that in this process, as currently constituted, nothing can happen without sufficient consensus. That means that the Ulster Unionist Party's imprimatur must be on anything that comes forth. I can give everyone an assurance that the Ulster Unionist Party will not assent to the framework document in any shape or form. That is the clear message that we gave to Tony Blair and the pledge that we give to the people of Northern Ireland. *[Interruption]*

The Chairman: Mr Smyth, please address your remarks to the Chair.

Mr Eric Smyth: Mr Chairman, I say to you to say to him that we do not believe what we have been told. The facts speak for themselves. We were told that there would be decommissioning, but that has been reneged on. The Ulster Unionist Party are now silent on that issue. They told us that they would oppose all violence, but they would not speak up to have the UDP and others who are involved in violence thrown out of the talks. It took the Alliance Party to threaten to do that. We all know that the UDP did a deal with the Government. They pulled out to keep everything right, but they will be back in a few weeks' time.

How on earth can anyone with any decency at all support a process which has no credibility? Let other Members go out and talk to people on the streets, as I did this week. I talked to folk on the Shankill Road and to upper-class people in Bangor.

A Member: Ring 'Talkback'.

Mr Eric Smyth: Anybody can ring 'Talkback'. We all know that political parties use that programme as a platform. They get people to phone in support. The real talk is through the ballot-box.

People are disgusted with what is going on in the talks. The Ulster Unionists ask us to trust them, but they do not have a great track record. In bed at night I worry about whether this little province of ours is safe in their hands. Only time will tell. I hope that Mr King is right when he says that our country is safe in the hands of true Unionists. Any cross-border organization, whatever it is called, will be a half-way house. The Union will have been sold down the river.

To get my party into the talks, the Government said that decommissioning would continue to be an issue. That was a lie from the start, but it has been forgotten. The Government do not want to know, and nobody else wants to know. It is the old story: "Get them in, and then you can forget about these things." The Secretary of State says that cross-border bodies will come on board. She seems to know a lot. Whom do we believe? The Minister from the South of Ireland says that Mr Empey has had talks with Sinn Féin, and Mr Ervine tells us that we must meet these people face to face. Mr Ervine is not being honest. He has been facing these people in the city hall for many months. He has been talking to them and having tea with them. If that is what he and his party want to do, so be it, but let them be honest. They were engaged in dialogue long before this process began.

Let us have honesty. What about Adams and Trimble talking? We get news flashes from Dublin. Is what we hear true or false? Let us be honest with the people of Northern Ireland.

A couple of Ulster Unionists stopped me on the Shankill Road this week. One of them said "Eric, this is terrible. What is our party doing?" I replied "Don't get at me. Go to your own party and tell them to get out of the talks while they can."

Mr King: I hear what everybody is saying about the process. Nobody likes it, but let someone give me a credible alternative to our participation in the talks. There is no alternative. If we leave the table, the process will go on without us. It will not be called a multi-talks process; it will be an intergovernmental conference — infinitely worse. Have Members any idea of the alternative? *[Interruption]*

Mr Peter Robinson: Does the Member agree that a credible alternative to being part of a process that will lead to Dublin rule is not to be part of a process that will lead to Dublin rule?

Mr Eric Smyth: That is the point. The Ulster Unionists are bolstering a process which will lead to Dublin rule. That is what will happen, no matter what is set up. This is a soft-soap process to get parties into the parlour. In four or five years' time the British Government will give more, or the Irish Government will come back for more. We see the Government giving in to Republicanism every day. We need to stand together as Unionists. The success of the process depends on the participation of the Ulster Unionists. If they were to withdraw, the Government could not do anything, because they cannot go against the view of the majority in Ulster. We should stand together against those who are seeking to destroy us, and we should demand our rights.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I agree with Mr Eric Smyth that the ballot-box tells the truth.

Mr Chairman, I was delighted that you gave us the opportunity to go to the peace rally at the city hall today. I attended in memory of all the dead. I was thinking particularly of the people to whom Mr McCrea paid such a moving tribute. I am sure we could all tell similar tales. Certainly I could, for more coffins have left the Shankill than anywhere else in the whole United Kingdom. But what happened at the rally sickened me, and I left.

As has happened too often, the rally was taken over by the scum of the IRA from the Falls Road. They came to a peace rally with their anti-British banners, their anti-RUC banners and their anti-Unionists banners. It was a disgrace. I and those who were with me withdrew, as did many others, including speakers from the platform. Men from Short's and from Harland and Wolff did not bother to attend, having heard what was going on. I want to put on record how appalled I was. The trade union leaders who allowed this to happen should have cancelled the rally and told the people why. They told us that they had appealed to those concerned to keep their banners down. That was not good enough.

The rally was not about British soldiers or the RUC; it was about the 3,200 people, Protestant and Catholic, who have died. I want to make it clear that until the trade union

movement gets its act together I will not be going to any of its rallies. It can stick them, so far as I am concerned.

Mr Poots talked about the state of the economy. For the second year in a row the budget of the Housing Executive has been cut — slashed by over £19 million. How long is this to go on? We expected these things from the Tory Administration, and we were all crying for change. Well, we got change, but may the Tories be given back to us, for the new Government are proving to be the most difficult ever. They do not understand.

3.15 pm

I have criticized the Executive on many occasions, but it has made an enormous contribution to the quality of life in Northern Ireland. Just when we were getting the number of unfit homes down to an acceptable level, this comes along. It is going to cause at the very least, 150 redundancies. That is bad enough, though we could probably learn to live with it, but we know that there is worse to come. Everyone will be affected, but especially those waiting for repair grants, and so on. In that area help will be practically wiped out. And those waiting for new-build houses can forget it. Mr Sammy Wilson in particular knows that Northern Ireland will need 100,000 new houses by the year 2000. I just do not know where we are going to get them. We cannot tolerate what this Government is doing to the Housing Executive.

Mr Foster: Was Mr Smyth blaming the Labour Government when he said that he would like to have the Conservatives back? Members opposite berated my party for allegedly underpinning the Conservatives when they were in power. This just goes to prove how wrong Mr Smyth was.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I was only joking when I said that I wanted the Tories back.

I appeal to Forum Members who are also councillors to stand firm and, through their housing liaison committees and other groups, let the Government know how the people of Northern Ireland feel about this and the very difficult task of the Housing Executive.

Mr Jim Rodgers: Unfortunately, Mr Hugh Smyth has stolen my thunder — not unusual for him.

I want to refer to a very important subject — the so-called peace rally at Belfast city hall, which was organized by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

I was invited, as Deputy Lord Mayor, to share the platform, but I came away very saddened, disappointed and angry. I refused to go onto the platform when I saw what was taking place. As Mr Smyth has pointed out, the rally was hijacked by IRA/Sinn Féin. Many decent citizens, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, walked away in utter disgust. I apologized to Terry Carlin, head of the Irish Congress, and I told him that under no circumstances could I join the platform party as my presence would send out the wrong signals.

People came to show their anger and disgust and to express sympathy with those who have lost their lives since Christmas, but others once again chose to use the occasion, in front of the world's press, for a display of banners and posters about Northern Ireland, the Government, the RUC and everything else under the sun. Obviously, in future those organizing such gatherings will have to think carefully.

What hope can you have for peace in Northern Ireland when you hear the scum of the earth — and I make no apology for calling them what they are — who have been murdering innocent civilians and members of the security forces since 1969, talking about discrimination and the police?

Mr McAlister: Are the scum at the city hall the scum that are in the talks process with the Member, or are they different scum?

Mr Jim Rodgers: I have no hesitation in saying that they are the same scum.

I resent the comments that Mr Eric Smyth made about the Ulster Unionist Leader. Mr Trimble has not been involved in talks with Gerry Adams. That lie must be nailed. I hope that Mr Smyth will withdraw his totally untrue remark.

With regard to what Mr McAlister said, my party knows what Sinn Fein/IRA are — I am not the only one who has a certain opinion of them. But unfortunately the Government have brought them into this process. My party is trying to put forward the views of those who want to maintain the link with the rest of the United Kingdom. It is a pity that the DUP and the United Kingdom Unionists are not there to support us. We are fighting a lone corner.

Mr Peter Robinson: Is Mr Rodgers forgetting his own statements?

Mr Jim Rodgers: Mr Robinson should make himself familiar with my statements before shouting across the Floor.

A message must go from the Forum, which is just half a mile from the city hall, that we are all annoyed at what was allowed to happen today. The Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam, turned up. She was to be on the platform, but when her advisers saw what was happening they told her that she could not stay, and off they went.

Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of those who have lost loved ones, not just in the last few weeks but since 1969, when this campaign got under way.

Mr Sammy Wilson: I was very pleased by some of the comments of Mr Rodgers. The Forum notes the sacrifice that he made today when, rather than go onto a platform with 60 to 100 television cameras from all over the world watching and with reporters waiting to hang on to every word of the Deputy Lord Mayor of Belfast, he took a principled stand and left. Otherwise he would have to face — to use his own words — IRA/Sinn Fein-supporting scum who want to do down the Government of Northern Ireland, the RUC and the good name of the province. What I find difficult to understand is that, while he could not go to a peace rally with people expressing those sentiments, he supports, at least publicly, his party's participation in a peace process where the same people are doing and saying the same things.

This encapsulates the contradiction between the words and the actions of Unionists who condemn Republicans but negotiate with them. I find it very difficult, as many people outside find it very difficult, to understand how those things can be married. Mr King tried. He made an impassioned appeal to us — indeed, there have been many impassioned appeals from Ulster Unionists — but there was near-desperation in his tone. He wanted us to accept his assurances that his party will have nothing to do with anything based on the framework document. This week there was a very public display of that. I wonder if Mr Donaldson made a wee tear in the framework document before ripping it up. It would have been very embarrassing if he had failed. I could not find a copy to see how easy it is to tear up.

I am sure Mr King was being totally sincere today. No doubt, there is political fear among Ulster Unionists for they know that the electorate will have nothing to do with the framework document. Mr Hugh Smyth may take a different view — I think he is happy enough with 90% of it.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I think it was 99%. We could all look at headlines that Mr Wilson has made, but we do not want to do that. Last week Dr Paisley told me to be sure to give in full and in context any works of his that I quoted. He was right, and I apologize for what I said last week. I am now asking Mr Wilson to do the same. If he had quoted my remark in context it would be clear that on three occasions I have said that the Unionist people and I are utterly and totally opposed to the framework document and will not accept it. The fact is that 99% of it is nonsense. It means nothing.

Mr Sammy Wilson: That was a speech, not an intervention. I am sorry that I got it wrong. It is 99%. In the queer mathematics of the PUP 99% means absolute opposition. The editors of the 'News Letter' and of the 'Irish News' do not have difficulty with mathematics; they just have difficulty with hearing.

No doubt the reassurances from members of the Ulster Unionist Party are meant, for they must fear the electoral consequences of accepting the framework document. The problem is that they cannot even recognize the framework document when it is thrown up to them. Two weeks ago exactly the same proposals were 80% acceptable to David Trimble, yet when he went to Lancaster House Jeffrey Donaldson tore them up. The reassurances would be OK if the Ulster Unionists knew what this is about, but it appears that the Government can disguise it. The other week I referred to the Liam Averill version of the framework document. Something that a fancy dress had been put on was called the Council of the Isles, and the Ulster Unionists fell for it hook, line and sinker. Of course, later they realized what had happened.

Mr King made a sincere plea: "Look, we can do nothing else. There is no alternative." It was almost as if in desperation he was saying "Offer us something else and we will grasp it." The fact that the Government are desperate to keep the Ulster Unionists there tells us that we are right when we say that the alternative is to withdraw. Why are the Government doing their best to keep them in? Because they know that the process will fall if they are not there, that they give it credibility. If the Ulster Unionists are looking for an alternative, if they are looking for a way of saving the situation, they should follow the principled path that this party has taken and withdraw.

3.30 pm

Mr Calvert: We learned this week that the Government are set to ban pistols and revolvers owned by Ulster gun club members. There are also plans to restrict further the distribution of personal-protection weapons in the province. This Northern Ireland Office policy is directed mainly against the Protestant community. There are many gun clubs in Northern Ireland, and their guns are kept very securely. No one can doubt that the members are very responsible people, and I am quite sure that these weapons have not been used in acts of terrorism. Adam Ingram's decision is another example of blatant appeasement of Sinn Féin, which has been demanding that legal weapons be banned. Ministers are prepared to seize legally-held firearms but do nothing about decommissioning illegal firearms held by Republican terrorists.

Look at what happened to Billy Wright in the Maze. The IRA have so many guns that they are giving them to the prisoners. What about the murder of Jim Guiney in Dunmurry? He was killed by the Provisional IRA operating from Twinbrook and Poleglass, yet they are still at the talks table. That is total hypocrisy.

I was at a meeting last night attended by the MP for Lagan Valley, Jeffrey Donaldson. I understand that a line has been drawn in the sand, and I have been given an assurance that the Ulster Unionist Party will not accept cross-border bodies with executive powers. Of course, they said the same thing about decommissioning. But what happened? They are sitting round the table with Sinn Féin. Never in all my life did I think I would see the day when the Ulster Unionist Party was sitting down with the enemies of this country.

As a B Special I fought to keep Northern Ireland out of the Twenty-six Counties, and I can assure Members that as long as there is breath in my body I will be fighting against it. I was elected to the Forum on my party's mandate. We have stood by our mandate. We always said we would not sit down with Sinn Féin. But the Ulster Unionists backed down and think that it does not matter. Circumstances may change, but my principles and the principles of my party do not change. But Mo Mowlam and Tony Blair do not have any principles. I have no respect for them, and no council in Northern Ireland should have anything to do with them. They should not be invited to council meetings; we should ostracize them because they are no good.

It is time the Government had a proper security policy. They should take the handcuffs off the security forces. We have heard much about "bloody Sunday", and every time a person is shot the first question asked is "Was he a Catholic or a Prod?" In the sight of God it makes no difference whether he was a Protestant, a Roman Catholic or a Jew. Life is given by God and can only be taken by God. No one has the right to take the life of anybody, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic.

The Government have no proper security policy. Those present at the "bloody Sunday" incident in Londonderry may not have had firearms, but in 1972 the Government said that anyone caught with a petrol bomb in his hand would be shot — it was an illegal weapon. The people who were killed were not all snowy white. The media do not show us

the throwing of petrol bombs at soldiers and the rioting. This inquiry will not bring out the truth. I commend those soldiers for taking a stand.

The handcuffs should be taken off the security forces. They should go in and search Republican areas for illegal arms, instead of concerning themselves with legal firearms held by very responsible people.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Forum at its rising today do adjourn until Friday 6 February 1998.

The Forum was adjourned at 3.35 pm.