

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 27 March 1998

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

AMBULANCE SERVICE

Mr Hugh Smyth: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum adopts the report on the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service prepared by Standing Committee C on 23 March 1998 and agrees to forward it to the Minister for Health and Social Services with the request that he give serious consideration to its recommendations.

I am not going to say very much. I regret that I was unable to get involved in this study to any extent. However, I want to thank my Committee for producing yet another excellent report, which includes some smashing pictures of members in action. In particular, I want to express my gratitude to Mrs Parkes for steering the Committee so ably.

I also want to thank Mr Arnold, the Committee's Clerk. I am sure that Committee members will agree that he did some excellent work in a very short time.

I will now let Mrs Parkes introduce the report. She will also wind up the debate later. Because of my involvement in the talks at Stormont the preparation of this report was left entirely to her. Some people say things that they do not mean, but I do mean this: I am very fortunate to have been blessed with one of the finest deputies anyone could hope for.

Mrs Parkes: I want to thank all the members of the Committee for their hard work and commitment. This was particularly evident during the recent visits to Essex and South Yorkshire, where members attended a wide range of meetings and demonstrations in the limited time available. I want to thank the members of the delegation for all their invaluable help.

I also want to convey the Committee's thanks to the individuals and groups who gave evidence, whether written or oral, without which we could not have produced the report. In particular, I want to mention the Ambulance Service and UNISON (I believe that Lily Kerr and her colleagues are here today).

We are also grateful to Mr Arnold, the Committee's Clerk, for his dedication and invaluable assistance. We also appreciate the support given by other Secretariat staff, including Mrs Young. And I want to say a special word of thanks to someone who is never mentioned — Wilma Meredith, a very skilled typist, as the standard in the report demonstrates.

For the past 30 years the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has provided a facility of which we can all be proud, particularly as it has had to cope with some terrible atrocities. We pay tribute to the entire staff for their dedication and commitment to all the people — and I stress “all the people” — of the province.

We are waiting for the Government to publish their consultation document on the future of the Health Service in Northern Ireland, a key element of which will be their proposals for the Ambulance Service. This will be even more important if they decide to close hospitals, for the Ambulance Service will then have to take on a greater role in the delivery of health care.

The situation in areas which are already experiencing difficulties with ambulance cover — the West and the Glens of Antrim — will deteriorate further if additional resources are not made available. We understand that a strategic review of the Ambulance Service is being carried out and is due to be completed by the autumn. This review is vital, and we fully support it.

Funding is also a matter of major concern. The Government recently made extra money available for the purchase of several modern ambulances. This very welcome step has already been mentioned in the Forum. Indeed, as a Committee, we like to think that we played a significant part in highlighting the Ambulance Service's lack of resources.

The present funding arrangements are based on competition, and this leads to much conflict within the Health Service when there ought to be team-work. The provision of funds from a multitude of sources is confusing and leads to inconsistencies in funding levels, contracts and purchasing. The Committee has made a number of recommendations in this respect.

During the recent visit to England we saw at first hand the latest technological developments and how they play an essential role in the daily life of the Ambulance Service there. Modern computers with the latest technology are vital to increase efficiency and effectiveness, and the Committee welcomes the Ambulance Service's recognition of the need for a computerized interrogation system and its commitment to putting such a system in place.

During its visit to South Yorkshire the Committee discovered that ambulances there are cleaned by specialist cleaning staff and not, as happens here, by the ambulance crews. Requiring highly skilled paramedics to do such work is not making the best use of scarce resources, so the Committee recommends that the Ambulance Service here consider employing specialist cleaning staff.

I have highlighted just a few areas of concern. The report makes many more significant recommendations, on which other Members will comment.

I commend the report to the Forum.

Mr Gardiner: I join with Mrs Parkes in paying tribute to Mr Arnold, Mrs Young and the other members of staff who helped the Health Committee to produce yet another weighty document. I also want to thank my colleagues, particularly those from other parties, for their co-operation and for the work that they put into producing the report in the interests of both the Ambulance Service and the people of Northern Ireland.

Like others, I want to comment on the £2 million that the Health Minister, Mr Worthington, allocated to the Ambulance Service. Yet more money is needed, and much work remains to be done.

When we visited Essex and South Yorkshire, as Mrs Parkes has already said, we learned a great deal. If we had the same facilities here we could have higher standards. The services in those places have a system whereby all calls for help from the elderly or disabled go directly into the monitoring room, where staff can decide what sort of help is needed, or whether, for example, a cardiac ambulance is required. There is room for improvement in Northern Ireland, where social workers or health visitors are sent out in response to such calls.

I want to record my appreciation of the co-operation we received from everyone we met — management, paramedics and other staff — in the Northern Ireland ambulance depots that we visited. Some personnel have to work in appalling conditions. Gone are the days when such people were all male. Today there are many women, but in many depots there is only one toilet for both sexes. In addition, there are no showering facilities for staff and no facilities for cleaning up bodily fluids that are spilt in ambulances.

Standards here must be raised. It is good that we are to get new ambulances, but the welfare of staff must be considered. I urge management to work harder on staff welfare and to co-operate with employees. They must have staff on their side when changes are being made.

10.15 am

The Ambulance Service needs more financial assistance. If rumours about hospital closures are realized the Ambulance Service will have an even greater burden to bear. Ambulances will have to travel greater distances to acute hospitals.

I urge the Department to recognize that this is an emergency service, just as the police and the Fire Service are, and to finance it accordingly from the Northern Ireland budget. It depends on the four boards at present, but it could stand on its own feet and serve the people well.

I wish all those associated with the Ambulance Service every success. I trust that they will go from strength to strength. They do a tremendous job, yet they are so often forgotten. Their contribution should be given greater recognition.

I commend the report to the Forum.

Mr Neeson: May I thank the Committee for this excellent and very timely report. I also thank Mr Arnold and his staff for their help.

I would also like to pay tribute to the work of the Ambulance Service, whose staff have had to work in very difficult circumstances over the years. As well as being a place where bombs have gone off, Northern Ireland has a reputation for carnage on the roads. And on a number of occasions ambulance staff have been attacked by mobs and rioters and their lives put at risk. The very important contribution of the Ambulance Service has often been above and beyond the call of duty.

One of the Alliance representatives on the Committee, Mrs Margaret Marshall, asked me to highlight a number of the issues raised in the report. Mr Gardiner has already referred to the conditions in which many of the staff have to work. I am informed that one of Northern Ireland's ambulance stations is a former stable. This is disgraceful, bearing in mind the importance of the service.

Each of the four boards has its own contract with the Ambulance Service. I know from experience the problems that this presents. Ambulances are not always available to move patients from one board area to another. For example, about a year ago a constituent of mine had to wait more than 24 hours before an ambulance could take her from a Belfast hospital to Carrickfergus. This is just not acceptable.

I welcome the extra funding for new ambulances, but the sooner facilities are rationalized the better for us all. I refer in particular to these words from the report:

"We recommend, on the basis of our enquiries in England, that NIAS consider rationalizing of control systems now that it is the sole Ambulance Service in the province. The existence of board control centres is a relic of the past and it should now be possible, in the public interest, to reduce the four-site model."

I agree entirely. That would make the system much more effective and efficient.

The Northern Health Board yesterday released its so-called consultative document on future hospital provision in its area. It is clearly the intention to reduce the services at the Whiteabbey and Mid-Ulster Hospitals. This is scandalous. The Forum and its Health Committee have done an enormous amount of work to get the Northern Board, as well as the other boards, to understand the implications of any reduction in services. If the boards get away with this it will have a major impact on the Ambulance Service. People will have to make longer and more frequent journeys by ambulance. It is important that the effect of these proposals be recognized.

I am very impressed by this report. I hope that we will be given the opportunity, either as Forum Members or as Members of an Assembly, to ensure that Northern Ireland has an adequate and effective Ambulance Service.

Mr Calvert: I value this opportunity to speak about the Ambulance Service, which is such a vital part of the Health Service, and I am more than pleased to have contributed to the report.

I should like, first, to say a few words of thanks. The members of the Health Committee worked well as a team. I have been on many council trips, but the Committee's visit to England was one of the most productive in which I have taken part. I would like to thank the Vice-Chairperson, Mrs Parkes, for her leadership. She has great patience and a great personality. I would also like to thank the Committee Clerk for his hard work. We have great expertise in the Forum, and we are very privileged to have such good Committee Clerks.

We spent a good deal of time visiting ambulance stations in the province and meeting with staff, and we did the same in England, where we visited two trusts. The photographs show that our visit was no jaunt. I can assure the Forum that we all worked very hard and earned our keep — so much so that when we arrived back in Belfast some of us thought that we would need an ambulance ourselves.

We went to England thinking that the standard of many of Northern Ireland's stations was very poor, but we came back with the view that perhaps the answer does not lie in upgrading, which would cost more than £4 million. In England we came across the concept of out-stationing. Ambulance crews are cab-based, and their vehicles are located at strategic points where, from experience, they know that accidents are likely to occur. We therefore make no recommendation about upgrading stations — it would make no sense to do so. Instead, we leave it to the Ambulance Service and UNISON to decide how to provide an efficient facility which is in the public's best interest. A balance needs to be struck between a crew's comfort and service to the public.

We have also seen the advantage of a satellite-tracking system, which allows control staff to pin-point an ambulance's position. We commend the Ambulance Service's efforts to introduce this technology here.

The Government will be publishing their Green Paper very shortly. Senior trust executives with whom we have discussed the future of the Health Service recognize that there must be change. We believe that the Ambulance Service should be better funded. Ideally, the finance should come from one source only. This is just common sense. Implementation of this recommendation would lead to a better and more uniform service.

I commend the report to the Forum.

Mr Coulter: I was glad to be a part of this aspect of the Health Committee's work because of my interest in the Ambulance Service as an emergency facility. It was amazing to learn about the difficulties that the service has had in getting funds, especially for capital expenditure.

As my Colleague Mr Gardiner has said, work needs to be done on co-ordinating ambulance operations with the operations of the other emergency services. This is especially true of the 999 system, where much more could be done to improve efficiency.

Another point which struck me very forcibly is that some stations do not have facilities for putting ambulances under cover. In the winter, crews have to defrost windscreens before answering a call. Stations with no garage should ensure that somehow or

other at least one ambulance is kept under cover at all times so that they can respond immediately.

Some of the communications equipment is antiquated. We recommend upgrading.

The visit to England was very enlightening. For Mr Calvert and myself it brought memories of youth.

10.30 am

The Chairman: You are referring, of course, to your motor-cycling youth.

Mr Coulter: Exactly.

The Chairman: Other inferences might be drawn.

Mr Calvert: Does the Member agree that the bridal suite that he occupied at the first hotel brought many happy memories?

Mr Coulter: I had the four-poster bed in the bridal suite, but I hasten to add that that aspect of the trip did not bring back my youth. It really was a marvellous experience. I should add that any member of the Ambulance Service who is thinking of becoming a motor-cycling paramedic need not have any worries about Mr Calvert or me — neither of us could get his feet on the ground when sitting on a bike. Our heads may have been in the clouds for a moment or two, but our feet were not on the ground.

I suggest that the Committee's recommendations on the training of paramedics be looked into. In certain parts of the province paramedics have to provide midwifery services 16 hours a day — from evening until early morning. I understand that they are not trained for this. As the report says, they are often left, literally, holding the baby. I am pleased that the service is looking at the possibility of introducing a paramedic degree course. This would be a great incentive to develop skills.

May I associate myself with the commendation of Mr Arnold and the Vice-Chairperson, Mrs Parkes. Compiling the report was very rewarding, thanks largely to the help of the Secretariat and the leadership given in the Committee. I am pleased to be associated with the report, and I call on Members to support its adoption.

The Chairman: I noted with interest the recommendation that a computerized interrogation system be put in place — some Members may have heard of such a system being used during that ghastly event in Arkansas — but I cannot find any reference to this in paragraph 3.28. I wonder if there is a mistake. Perhaps someone could tell me where the system is mentioned.

Mrs Beattie: I welcome the opportunity to speak about the Ambulance Service, which is especially dear to my heart because I have kin who work in it.

First, I would like to thank Mrs Parkes (the Vice-Chairperson), Mr Arnold (the Clerk) and other Committee members.

An acute services review is being carried out by the boards, and it is no secret that there will be hospital closures — a fact which is noted on page 23 of the report. This document is timely as the Northern Board has just issued a consultative paper. Members will know that I am particularly concerned about Whiteabbey Hospital, being a member of the committee dedicated to fighting for its preservation. It is vital that its present status be not diminished in any way. Let there be no doubt about the fact that Whiteabbey Hospital is needed.

If this acute facility is downgraded, where will people go? Distances are not great, but road networks are poor and traffic is heavy. We need acute hospitals, but we also need an ambulance service that is equipped and manned to get people to them so their lives can be saved. As we say in the report, any reduction in on-the-ground facilities will inevitably place a much heavier burden on the Ambulance Service. Ambulances will have to travel greater distances, with, perhaps, a greater risk of road-traffic accidents, and patients will be in the care of crews for longer. Ambulance personnel are highly trained, but they cannot be expected to substitute for the sophisticated facilities of an acute hospital.

In addition, if ambulances have to spend longer on each emergency, the crews' capacity for dealing with even the existing number will be reduced. The problem, of course, is not confined to emergencies. A hospital doctor may, because of lack of facilities at his own hospital, refer a patient to one a considerable distance away.

Finally, I want to refer to the lack of facilities for women in ambulance stations. The number of female operatives in the service is growing, and they are making a wonderful contribution — many are ex-nurses. We need to ensure that full provision is made for all staff, and I know that the service, along with the boards, is aware of what is required.

The Minister should read and learn from the report. He could learn not only from the written word but also from the photographs — the Committee Clerk is multi-skilled.

Mrs Parkes: Mr Chairman, you mentioned the computerized interrogation system. It is referred to in paragraph 3.32.

Mr Foster: The Ambulance Service is something that we take almost for granted. This is wrong, for it is a vital facility. It is a sad reflection on society that it is not yet officially considered an emergency service in the way that the police and the Fire Service are — and rightly so — even though the phrase “police, fire brigade and ambulance” is often used.

When we are ill, or when a loved one is ill, we expect an ambulance to come immediately. In the case of a heart attack or a serious injury, we expect the service at once. If someone is badly hurt in a road accident — and we have too many of those — it is vital that an ambulance get to the scene quickly. Sadly, the Ambulance Service is considered almost an adjunct to the Health Service, yet it is a vital part of health provision. It is incomprehensible that it should be seen as the Cinderella.

I was one of the first to ask the Health Committee to look into the underfunding of the service. Members felt that it was important to get to the root of the problem, so evidence was sought from Mr McCormick, the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, from UNISON, from the health and social service boards, which play a key part in the funding, and from ambulance staff themselves during a series of visits we made to stations and control centres round the province.

We sought evidence from ambulance trusts across the water. I was impressed by the dedication and co-operation of ambulance personnel. They feel that they have a vital role to play, and I commend them all. But the service is understaffed and has insufficient ambulances and poor locations to operate from. There must be improvements.

I am glad that the Committee took on the job of highlighting the weak points in such a vital service, and I commend Mr Arnold and his staff for their efficiency. Mr Arnold has compiled this report from many disparate presentations. He has an abundance of initiative. (It is said that showing initiative is doing the right thing without having to be told.)

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has a staff of 700. There are approximately 230 paramedics. The aim is to have one paramedic in each emergency ambulance. The Government have laid down charter standards for the whole United Kingdom. However, the only ones that apply in Northern Ireland are that in 50% of emergency cases an ambulance should be at the scene within eight minutes, that in 95% of emergency cases in the Eastern Board's area an ambulance should be at the scene within 18 minutes and that in 95% of all other emergency cases an ambulance should be at the scene within 21 minutes. It may be that the standards are being met in the area of each board, with the notable exception of the Northern Board, but certain individual stations — for instance, Downpatrick, Enniskillen and Dungannon — are failing to meet them.

In the past year the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has dealt with some 60,000 emergency 999 calls and 40,000 urgent calls. An urgent call is one from a GP who has decided that a patient needs to be admitted to hospital, for example.

The service has a particular problem with its fleet of aged vehicles. This has been partly dealt with through a substantial end-of-year windfall — an investment of £1.5 million by the Department and the Northern Health and Social Services Board. The Committee welcomed enthusiastically the news of that capital boost. We have been working hard over the last few months investigating the needs of the service, and we believe that our interest and efforts played no small part in influencing those who hold the purse strings. The current budget for the whole province is nearly £19 million. Of this, 36% goes to the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, 22% to the Northern Board, 17.1% to the Southern Board and 16.6% to the Western Board. The largest geographical area with the most difficult terrain gets the lowest share.

In a 1996 audit of ambulance services KPMG reported that of 16 services in the United Kingdom the Northern Ireland Trust had the lowest cost per mile for emergency and non-emergency journeys and the highest mileage. Enniskillen is supposed to have two ambulances from 8.00 am to midnight each day for accident and emergency situations. One

of those vehicles has regularly to transfer patients to one of the Belfast hospitals or to Altnagelvin. Thus for five to six hours each day one vehicle is not available for use in Fermanagh. If the other one is called to an emergency the whole county is without an accident-and-emergency service. If outside help is needed, an ambulance is sought from Omagh, or maybe Castlederg where there are no paramedics. Those stations are more than 30 miles away. Can you imagine a loved one in a critical condition waiting for an ambulance in these circumstances? Such grossly neglectful and dangerous treatment is preposterous and very frightening, and this precarious situation cannot be allowed to continue in Fermanagh or, indeed, anywhere else.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Trust has stated publicly that it is concerned about the service in the western area, particularly in the Enniskillen and Omagh districts, and that, beyond a shadow of doubt, extra investment is needed. Because of the topography of the lakelands, great distances have to be covered. This logistical difficulty must be recognized when it comes to funding.

The problem has been further compounded this week. It has been intimated that 200 trauma cases from Enniskillen are to be dealt with at Altnagelvin. That will put extra pressure on an already depleted ambulance service at the Erne Hospital. This matter must be addressed now by the board and the trust. People must not be without an ambulance when an emergency occurs. We cannot just hope for the best; we must always prepare for the worst. People in the west are not satisfied with ambulance provision, and the Western Board must take heed of their needs. We believe that the board recognizes the needs, but it should place itself beyond criticism by contracting to meet them promptly.

There is a lack of sluicing facilities for the disposal of vomit and other bodily wastes. Most sluicing takes place in the accident-and-emergency departments of acute hospitals. There are more advanced facilities at fire stations for chemicals, and for decontamination. The Ambulance Service should consider introducing specialist cleaning staff as a means of making better use of scarce resources. It is wrong to expect an ambulance crew to clean the vehicle when they get back to base, having been at the scene of a horrific bloody accident — they are traumatized enough already.

10.45 am

We welcome the interest in having paramedic courses established here. This is an imaginative initiative akin to that being developed at the University of Sheffield, about which we heard during our visit to south Yorkshire. The skills of paramedics need to be recognized, and there is scope in the Health Service here for practitioners. We need an efficient Ambulance Service that is able to deal with the variety of incidents that are becoming more and more a part of the job. A paramedic's lot is perhaps not a particularly happy one.

Ultimate responsibility for the provision of these services should lie with the purchasers — currently the boards. They must ensure that demand is met and that care of a uniformly high standard is provided whenever it is needed. We seem to lack uniformity — the ways of the market-square are in vogue. Some people in the upper echelons of management worry too much about what everything costs and lose sight of how necessary this service is.

I commend the report.

Mr McKee: I commend the Health Committee for an excellent report and thank the staff for their help. Although I am not a member, I accompanied the Committee to the ambulance stations at Magherafelt and Downpatrick.

I want to pay tribute to the Ambulance Service for the excellent job that it does. For more than 30 years, during the worst of the troubles, its dedicated staff have provided an excellent service, often at great danger to themselves. Although many have been honoured in some way, ambulance personnel have been to a large extent sold short. As public representatives we should take this opportunity to pay tribute to them for all that they have done for the people of Northern Ireland.

I was appalled at the conditions in the stations at Magherafelt and Downpatrick. That the boards and the trusts should treat their staff in such a way is deplorable, especially when funds are available for other, less important things. There is only one toilet for males and females, and there are no sluicing facilities. That is not acceptable in this day and age.

I was appalled to hear about the condition of some vehicles. Several would not have passed an MoT test. Often the presence of an ambulance crew makes the difference between life and death. It is shocking that staff are being treated in such a way.

We need an effective ambulance service. Our dependence on ambulance cover increased with the closure of hospitals such as the Moyle in Larne. Thanks to ambulance crews, many lives have been saved on the road between Larne and the hospital in Antrim. However, their hands are tied. Now we hear that Whiteabbey may be downgraded. It will be totally unacceptable if people in that area do not get proper medical care and attention.

The £2 million that is to be pumped into the service will help, but it is too little too late. Ambulance personnel will be expected to do more, particularly in areas such as east Antrim, where hospitals have closed.

Mr Hussey: I welcome this very timely report, which will help to highlight the concern of many that a crisis situation is developing in the Ambulance Service, due specifically to inadequate funding. The report should enable trust managers to put pressure on the health boards and the Department to secure the necessary finance for this vital part of the Health Service.

At page 42 the report says that the Committee

“feel in light of the changes that will arise from acute services reviews and perhaps from the Green Paper that the strategic review of NIAS activity is indispensable.”

I agree. The review of acute services and the centralization of medical services have put additional pressure on people who live in the more remote areas, and that makes the Ambulance Service even more vital. In an emergency we depend on an ambulance.

At page 41 the report says

"We are not satisfied with the ambulance provision in the West and call upon the Western Health and Social Services Board to take heed of the needs ...".

This is a very real concern for many. In the west, cover is often provided through the goodwill of staff on recall and standby, who have virtually no social or family life.

I want to express my appreciation of the work done by ambulance crews. Recently staff in the Western Board's area withdrew the standby service because they could no longer tolerate serving the community in an *ad hoc* manner. In spite of representations to the Western Board, they had failed to secure any additional funds. Eventually they responded to a management plea not to withdraw recall because of the possibility of life-threatening situations, and I congratulate them on that response.

Owing to overspending, managers have been instructed to cover sick and annual leave where possible. If this instruction is complied with, there will be a serious depletion in the already inadequate cover. Mr Foster referred to ambulances being withdrawn from Omagh and Castlederg to cover emergencies in Fermanagh. The people of Omagh and Castlederg were quite rightly concerned about that.

The report, at page 44, mentions fast-response vehicles —

"The issue of motor cycle deployment".

I hope that the Committee thinks of this as an additional facility and not a replacement. Ambulance personnel are concerned about it. In England an ambulance man on a motor cycle was killed when responding to an emergency call. Motor cycles should be a means of getting a paramedic to the scene of an emergency quickly, before a properly equipped ambulance.

There are many shortfalls in the service throughout Northern Ireland. This is something that public representatives should not tolerate. We should unite in welcoming the report. We must ensure that our voices are heard so that lives will not be lost because of insufficient ambulance cover.

Mr Shannon: I am concerned that the Committee was unable to recommend the concept of "out-stationing" or "out-posting". Given the inadequacy of ambulance cover in many rural areas, that would be an appropriate line to take.

For years we in the Ards Peninsula have been asking for an out-station. The peninsula's roads, particularly the one from Portaferry to Newtownards, are twisty, and the emergency services of the Ards Hospital are being transferred to the Ulster, so an ambulance crew could have a round trip of 40 or 50 miles to get to the scene of an accident and then to the hospital. They might have to travel up to 60 miles on twisty, narrow roads at night or when there is heavy traffic. The Chairman or the Vice-Chairperson may wish to comment on this matter when summing up.

Section 4.31 refers to the fact that garaging facilities are not always satisfactory. This illustrates my point. It is not always appropriate to have an ambulance in a garage; it might be better for it to be outside and ready to go. Unfortunately this matter is not addressed in the report, though it was discussed at Committee meetings. The Committee should have taken on board a problem that exists in many rural areas.

11.00 am

Mr Tom Robinson: First, I want to pay tribute to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, which has some of the best and most experienced staff in the United Kingdom. We are justifiably proud of personnel who have served us faithfully during 25 years of violence.

I want to draw attention to one or two issues that are mentioned in the report — for example, funding. From the evidence it is clear that it would be better for the Ambulance Service to have one source of funding. At present it has to negotiate with each of the health boards. The Committee recommends that funding be based on need.

The Committee visited several ambulance stations and saw clearly the need for a major cash injection to bring some of them up to an acceptable standard. In particular, there should be proper facilities for female staff. The Committee did not make a recommendation about this, but it is a matter that needs to be drawn to Members' attention.

Members are aware that while this report was being compiled, the Health Minister announced funding for 25 new ambulances in addition to the 23 which were already on order. I do not believe for one moment that the timing of that announcement — before the Committee's findings were made public — was a coincidence. Without such an announcement the report would have been pretty damning in its assessment of the state of the ambulance fleet. So the Committee can take some credit. The injection of £1.5 million is very welcome, especially as 23 of the 43 new vehicles will go to the area that I represent. That will leave only two ambulances in the area that are outside the replacement guidelines.

The Committee found a striking degree of co-operation between the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and its counterpart in the Republic. I understand that a special project funded by the European Union Special Support Programme will benefit both services. This is the sort of co-operation, without executive powers, that Ulster Unionists welcome, and I hope that it will continue.

I want to deviate slightly to refer to Larne. During an evidence session I asked Mr McCormick of the Ambulance Service about response times following the closure of the Moyle Hospital. There was concern about the impact on people in Larne, its rural hinterland and the Glens of Antrim. Mr McCormick said

"Larne ambulance station does not achieve the performance standard. Certainly there are many occasions when it would not, and I am quite happy to say so because of the very large area which it has to cover."

He went on to say

"I cannot remember ... all [the statistics] off the top of my head, but certainly Larne has particular difficulty. There is a problem with the Glens, which is also covered by Ballymena and, indeed, Ballycastle, because, in

official terms, it is labelled as a sparsely populated area. Larne is not sparsely populated, and neither is Ballymena, but that is the basis on which we receive our funding and on which the service is measured. The ambulance station — a total misnomer — is very poor in Larne, and several of the vehicles are in very poor condition."

When questioned about the closure of the Moyle Hospital and ambulance response times Mr McCormick replied

"There has to be concern because some areas of the Glens are very remote and may take a long time to reach. I am sure it would take 25 minutes to go from any station to anywhere in the Glens at all. Fortunately, we get very few calls from those areas, but, as you know, in the summer months that whole area can be tremendously busy and you can get some horrific road traffic accidents. There is no doubt that the closure of the Moyle casualty unit means that crews are further away, and that does pose a difficulty."

When I asked Mr Deboys of the Northern Health and Social Services Board if there were any concerns about response times in the Larne and Antrim coast areas he said

"I am surprised at that because I spoke to the local controller before I came here. I asked him specifically about that because it is something that comes up all the time. He feels that there is no particular problem at the minute."

When I further queried the response times and the guidelines he said

"That is something that I need to pick up then — I was not aware of that. The figures I got did not show that, but obviously they have figures that I am not aware of."

I am concerned that the evidence from the Ambulance Service did not match that from the Northern Board. There is a problem in the Larne area, and I will be taking it up with the board.

I welcome the cash injection. The Committee's visit to England was very worthwhile; we learned a number of interesting things, and the ambulance personnel who were with us got something out of it.

We have gone a long way towards helping the Ambulance Service — look at the new vehicles — and I commend the report to the Forum.

Mrs Parkes: This has been a very good debate, and I want to thank everyone who took part. Mr Neeson's contribution was particularly helpful in spite of the fact that he is not a member of the Health Committee.

The Committee is very conscious of its wide remit and of the fact that anything its members do or say can have wide-ranging repercussions. We welcome the recognition by the ambulance management and UNISON that change is necessary. Many changes have been suggested which might involve computerized systems: proper funding; proper provision in the west; training in obstetrics for paramedics; the relocation of ambulance stations; charter standards; bringing central functions together under one roof; reducing the retirement age for ambulance personnel; introducing specialist cleaning staff; introducing health education in schools; and avoiding having to defrost vehicles in inclement weather.

Mr Shannon spoke about "out-stationing". The Committee is sympathetic to his concerns, and so is the Ambulance Service. The arguments are in the report, and the subject can be revisited in the future. Of course, others may legitimately take a contrary view.

The Committee is to meet with the Minister on 7 April to discuss the report on men's health. I have no doubt that the imminent Green Paper and the Ambulance Service will also feature in our discussions. We were impressed by the dedication of ambulance personnel, and we are determined to do what is best for the people of Northern Ireland and for the Ambulance Service, which we all value.

I am grateful to everyone who took part in this exercise, and I commend the report to the Forum.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum adopts the report on the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service prepared by Standing Committee C on 23 March and agrees to forward it to the Minister for Health and Social Services with the request that he give serious consideration to its recommendations.

The Chairman: Members may be interested to know that last night I had a telephone call from Dr Maurice Hayes, Chairman of the Mater Hospital, expressing his appreciation of the Health Committee's visit to the hospital. He said that it had been most useful.

The meeting was suspended at 11.13 am and resumed at 11.34 am.

BRITISH CITIZENSHIP (IRISH REPUBLIC)

Mr Trimble: I beg to move the following motion:

This Forum calls on the Home Secretary to take such steps as are necessary to facilitate those of British descent living in the Irish Republic who wish to obtain British citizenship.

This is an important matter which draws attention to a unique facet of the relationship, within the British Isles, between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. All of Ireland was part of the United Kingdom until 1922 and consequently all its residents were United Kingdom subjects. The situation was complicated by the secession of parts of Ireland to form the Irish Free State, which technically remained part of the British Empire until 1949. Up to that time all those domiciled in the Irish Free State were technically entitled to British citizenship.

Since Eire became the Irish Republic we have had a rather complex situation, and there are some anomalies which ought to be looked at. The Ireland Act 1949 declared that the Irish Republic was not a foreign country. Consequently citizens of the Irish Republic are not aliens and therefore have free movement across the borders into the United Kingdom.

Indeed, they have a right to reside in the United Kingdom. In effect they can acquire British citizenship simply by moving to the kingdom.

Since 1949, and particularly since the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act of 1956, the Irish Republic has been in the habit of granting Irish passports to residents of Northern Ireland who apply for them. The 1956 Act is, however, a bit opaque. Whether everybody in Northern Ireland has the right to apply for an Irish passport is open to interpretation. Indeed, it could be argued that an applicant should have to show that he is a descendant, within three generations, of someone born before 1922. If that interpretation is accurate the right of persons living in Northern Ireland to obtain an Irish passport will gradually disappear. The fact that this does not correspond with the practice of the Irish Foreign Ministry needs to be looked at.

One could even argue that aspects of the 1956 Act, in conferring on people living in Northern Ireland the right to hold an Irish passport, conflict with part of the McGimpsey judgement — the judgement that followed the famous court action over articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution — and in particular with the Irish Supreme Court's interpretation on that occasion of article 3, which, it is said, limits the effect of Irish legislation to the Twenty-six Counties. It is a little-known aspect of the McGimpsey case, which the Irish Government have been ignoring, that, while the Irish Supreme Court affirmed the territorial claim — and, of course, we object to that — it also made new law by limiting the effect of Irish legislation to the Twenty-six Counties. But this is only one anomaly.

The motion focuses on the anomaly that affects those currently domiciled in the Irish Republic whose ancestors lived there at a time when everybody in what is now the Irish Republic was a British subject. The British Nationality Act 1948 created the concept of citizen of the United Kingdom and its colonies, as distinct from the concept of British subject. Under section 2 of the 1948 Act citizens of Eire who were also British subjects could, by giving notice in writing to the Home Secretary, claim to remain British subjects on any or all of the following grounds: Crown service; possession of a British passport; association, by descent, residence or otherwise, with the United Kingdom and its colonies. This was done through the British embassy in the case of people domiciled in the Republic. British citizenship law was changed again in 1981 and 1983.

The British Nationality Act 1948 was repealed in 1981, but the joint status of Irish citizen and British subject was allowed to continue. Those who did not give notice to the Home Secretary under the 1948 Act may do so under the 1981 Act, provided that they meet the same requirements. Obviously this right is limited and will eventually die out. A very limited number of people do claim British passports under this provision.

These anomalies — people in Northern Ireland claiming Irish passports and Irish citizenship, and people in the Republic of Ireland claiming British passports and British citizenship — should be remedied. There should be uniform practice so that what happens in one jurisdiction is mirrored in the other jurisdiction. To consider what this uniform practice should be, let us look at the unique situation in the British Isles.

Despite separation over the course of this century, the two jurisdictions still have significant common interests. For instance, the British Isles is a common travel area — a fact

which is not generally appreciated — and should therefore have common immigration laws and procedures. Of course, the fact that the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland constitute a common travel area means that passports are not required for movement between them, and there ought to be a common entitlement to passports.

Citizens of the Irish Republic can acquire a British passport by moving to Britain and, in effect, becoming British citizens. The present practice of the Irish Government is to grant an Irish passport to anybody in Northern Ireland who applies for it, although, as I have said, the legal basis for that ought to be clarified. If it is declared to be sound, there ought to be an equivalent right for persons in the Republic of Ireland who wish to acquire a British passport. I do not see how the Irish Government could reasonably object to this, given their practice for people domiciled in one part of the United Kingdom.

A significant number of people in the Irish Republic regard themselves as British. They have a British heritage and background, yet they do not qualify for a British passport under the provisions of the British Nationality Act 1948 as amended by the 1981 Act. They ought to be able to apply for a British passport and British citizenship.

I welcome the creation, in the Republic of Ireland, of the Reform Movement which draws together a number of people who wish to see a coherent approach. They are calling for reform in the Republic so that people there who enjoy a British heritage can celebrate it in the same way as those who are Irish celebrate their heritage. The concept of parity of esteem, insofar as it has any meaning, ought to apply in the Republic, and people there who regard themselves as British and wish to take advantage of their British heritage should have the right to claim British citizenship. And with that should come the right to a British passport. Simple justice and fairness demands such a move, and, of course, it would do a great deal to ease the irritation that is sometimes felt by people in Northern Ireland who see their fellow citizens brandishing what some regard as a foreign passport.

Ms Sagar: The Women's Coalition has no problem with the assertion that people of British descent in the Irish Republic should have British citizenship rights. Indeed, we have proposed measures aimed at allowing people throughout the island of Ireland to have dual citizenship. However, we are slightly puzzled about why the Ulster Unionist Party felt it necessary to move this motion. So far as we are aware, the rules for claiming British citizenship are applied in the Republic in the same way as in any other country: anyone with a grandparent born in the United Kingdom is entitled to full British citizenship.

11.45 am

The Chairman: I am sure you will get an answer before the day is out.

Mr Brewster: I hope to be able to answer the Member's question, but if not, other Members will be happy to enlighten the Women's Coalition — and not for the first time.

Recently the British and Irish Governments proclaimed once again their commitment to good-neighbourliness and mutual co-operation. Time prevents me from dwelling on the numerous ways in which the Irish Republic has shown itself to be anything but a good neighbour, but this House should again record its rejection of the Dublin Government's

illegal territorial claim in articles 2 and 3 and its objection to their interference in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland through the Maryfield secretariat.

The two countries claim to be close allies, and it is perverse that the one small area where genuine co-operation would assist has been studiously ignored by our Government, for they could solve this problem. I refer to the invidious position of people in the Irish Republic — and there are many — who have been refused British citizenship. The Leader of my party has detailed the position of descendants of those born before 1922, and I understand that before 1 January 1949 anybody with one British parent could have obtained a British passport. But, apart from the few loopholes that Mr Trimble quite properly mentioned, the 1981 British Nationality Act virtually closed this option.

It is instructive to note how our Government treat citizens of the Irish Republic in other regards. An astonishing one quarter of the Republic's population is resident in the United Kingdom. The economic strategy of successive Dublin Finance Ministers has been predicated on the knowledge that the jobless can be dumped on the United Kingdom. Irish students have targeted our universities — Queen's in particular — because they know that taxpayers here will pay for their education and subsequently employ them.

It would be very easy to indulge in xenophobia, but I hope that we will not do so today. I prefer to look at the behaviour of those Irish people as voting with their feet in favour of the Union. How interesting it is that Nationalists can live happily in Liverpool or Luton without feeling that their identity is in any way threatened, but Nationalists cannot tolerate living in Larne or Londonderry. These people's children and grandchildren will be entitled to British passports, yet the descendants of some of the most loyal citizens of the United Kingdom — people who before 1921 fought for this country in wars and administered it at the highest level — are in effect being told that they will not be entitled to British passports. What a begrudging response compared to the Irish Government's issuing of a passport to anyone here, or to anyone who can find £1 million, from whatever dodgy source, to pay Fianna Fáil.

The situation has worsened since 1981, when the Nationality Act made it virtually impossible for anyone born after that date of Irish parents in the Irish Republic to obtain a cherished British passport. Some people will still apply, and I hope that they will be successful, but they are not encouraged — not least because some civil servants in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office seem more concerned with the interests of the Irish Republic than with the interests of this state. It has been well said: the Department of Agriculture looks after the interests of farmers; the Department of Trade and Industry looks after the interests of traders and industrialists; and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office looks after the interests of foreigners — it certainly does not look after the interests of these United Kingdom descendants or, indeed, the people of Northern Ireland.

A replacement for the 1981 Nationality Act is long overdue. Such would benefit not only the British/Irish community in the Irish Republic but also the citizens of our sadly few remaining colonies. Members will be aware of the recent grubby treatment that the Government meted out to British passport holders in Hong Kong and the West Indies. On several occasions in recent times the Government have been little short of overtly racist in their treatment of citizens.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Should the Government decide to allow these citizens to hold British passports, could they then register as British electors? Has Mr Brewster's party considered the effect that that might have for the Union?

Mr Brewster: Indeed we have. Of course, as Mr Paisley well knows, we have consistently opposed any extension of the so-called "I" voter category, which continues to be used by Nationalists to bring in voters — literally sometimes. This week's electoral reform investigation did not touch on that matter, though perhaps it should have.

In recent months the Unionist community in the Irish Republic has finally been raising its head cautiously above the parapet. Later today Mr David Christopher, one of the co-ordinators of the Reform Movement, will be in the Forum. I hope that Members will take the opportunity to talk with him about the campaign to restore some form of link with the United Kingdom. The organization's recent statement of principle says

"The Irish separatist tradition has too often used outdated resentments to blind the Irish people to the fact that our future and that of the United Kingdom are closely linked. No shame attaches to the people of a small nation who recognize that their future is inextricably bound up with that of a larger neighbour, and who voluntarily organize their affairs accordingly. In this context we are proud to place the Unionist tradition once more at the service of the Irish people. Our Unionism is not a Unionism of subservience and deference; rather it is a Unionism grounded in the realities of the Irish situation and, as such, can look forward with confidence to the challenge of the coming century."

Would it not be a small glimmer if the Government were to grant British passports to those who wish again to be British and whose families have proved themselves British throughout the generations? Or will the Government continue to ignore the embarrassing and inconvenient fact that Her Majesty's most loyal subjects have always been found on this island and that it will continue to be so for generations to come?

Mr Hunter: It is a matter of considerable regret that since the partition of the island of Ireland, when what is now the Republic left this kingdom, the Ulster/British community in the South has been consistently ignored by the British Government. In a spirit of good-neighbourliness and in the context of the European Union, these people should be permitted to apply for the citizenship that is rightly theirs.

United Kingdom passports are issued under the royal prerogative, at the discretion of the Home Secretary, and remain Crown property. Refusal, however, is judicially reviewable, and passports may become a common-law right where being a condition precedent for travel overseas. United Kingdom law grants the right to travel to, for example, the United States of America or India. A passport evidences British citizenship and the right to claim, but not necessarily to receive, Crown protection. However, for the purposes of immigration law, a United Kingdom passport is necessary to prove British citizenship or citizenship of a United Kingdom colony with the right of abode.

Naturally enough, British citizens in Northern Ireland may apply for a United Kingdom passport, as, in very limited circumstances, can British subjects in the Irish Republic. Between 1949 and 1982 one of the grounds on which the latter could establish their status was the holding of a British passport, but this was abolished in 1981. Now British

subjects in the Republic, who under Eire law are also Irish citizens, must have been born before 1 January 1949 in order to qualify. That is what Mr Trimble was talking about when he referred to section 2(1)(2) of the British Nationality Act 1948 and subsections (3) and (4) of section 31 of the British Nationality Act 1981.

The status of British subjects in the Republic must now be established by association, mainly by way of descent, or by residence in the United Kingdom or any dependent territory. It may still be claimed by notice in writing to the Home Secretary, and if the status of British subject is granted, it is deemed to have existed continuously from 1 January 1949. So it is not a simple matter of applying for a passport; you need a written declaration from the Home Secretary that you are a British subject.

Those people living in Eire who are regarded as Irish citizens according to the laws of the state have to go through two stages to obtain a British passport. The status of British subject must be established, in the case of those born before 1 January 1949, by notice in writing. On the basis of this notice, an application for a passport may be made through our embassy in Dublin or to the United Kingdom Passport Agency. The necessary application forms are not available generally in the Irish Republic, unlike Irish passport application forms, which for some obscure reason are available here. Any further extension of British passport rights for people in the Republic would require changes in the United Kingdom's nationality law, and nowadays that would probably require the imprimatur of Maryfield.

Ironically, Eire is one of the few states in the world that accept the principle of dual nationality, yet it is so difficult for people of British descent living there to get a passport of the state to which they rightly regard themselves as belonging. The United Kingdom Government have failed to recognize those people's rights, and the Irish Government have failed to recognize that a minority within their state do not accept their idea of citizenship, race and nationality and that those people must be dealt with. This might be one way of reducing the creeping genocide that is being perpetrated against the Ulster/British community in Eire.

It is a matter of regret that the British embassy in Eire does absolutely nothing to look after the interests of the people of Ulster/British descent there. How often do we hear of the British Ambassador to Eire visiting Cavan, Monaghan or Donegal to show some interest in the British people living in those counties? They have had their civil liberties and their job opportunities —

Mr Gregory Campbell: That is in stark contrast to the recent activities of one Jean Kennedy-Smith, who has stumbled on the fact that she can come, almost with impunity, to Northern Ireland whenever she likes. She not only has been present at various functions but has actually performed opening ceremonies in Strabane and Londonderry within the last six weeks.

Mr Hunter: It is indeed outrageous and very curious. I wonder whether the United States Ambassador in Paris often crosses into Spain to represent his Government there. What would the Spanish authorities think? This is one of the ironies. It is sad that our Government so rarely send their diplomatic representatives to the northern and far western areas of the

Irish Republic to visit people who still closely identify with the British way of life. Nothing whatsoever is done for those people. That is why it is encouraging to note —

Mr Hussey: If the motion is carried, will it go some way to redressing the iniquitous dumping of the three Ulster counties by a certain Mr Carson, still often referred to in the border counties as “Ned” Carson?

Mr Hunter: As someone whose family comes from those three occupied counties, I certainly regret that those people were forced out of the United Kingdom. It is sad that the British Government have done absolutely nothing since 1922 to assist them or even to recognize that a British community still live there. It is good that the Reform Movement has now been established in Eire to represent their interests.

If only our Government were to show the same interest in that British minority as the Eire Government show in the minority in this state who claim to be of Irish descent. It would also be good if, in the interests of neighbourliness, the authorities in Eire were to treat their minority as well as the Unionist Administration treated, and the British Government continue to treat, the minority population here.

12.00

Another iniquity in legal terms is that you can use a foreign passport to prove that you are entitled to vote in Northern Ireland. This must be the only country in the world where a passport from another state is regarded as proof of citizenship and of one's right to vote. If British people living in Eire were entitled to carry British passports, would they be treated with the same regard? This ought to be looked at.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The trouble is that a passport from any European Union country can be used, so long as the right name is on it, but that is not the anomaly Mr Hunter is talking about.

Everything to do with protocol has vanished. The President of the South of Ireland can come here at any time and simply be received by Her Majesty's Lord Lieutenants. One of them told me “I am just told to be there.” The Government order Her Majesty's Lord Lieutenant of a county to attend, even if it is an unofficial visit. When I questioned the Secretary of State about this she said “Visitors are always welcome.”

Mr Hunter: We welcome foreign visitors, particularly heads of state, but proper protocol should be observed. For example, they should be greeted with the national anthems of the two states. I wonder if the Eire President would find the playing of our national anthem in her presence offensive now — she did have some difficulty with it when she lived here.

The Government must seriously consider introducing legislation to permit British people living in Eire to acquire a British passport without having to write to the Home Secretary to claim the right to be a British subject because they were born before 1 January 1949. The indignity of it. If that anomaly were removed and there were equality of treatment, it would be of considerable benefit. The Government might want to look closely at

how legislation is drafted in Eire to permit people living in the United Kingdom to claim Eire citizenship and, indeed, an Eire passport.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum calls on the Home Secretary to take such steps as are necessary to facilitate those of British descent living in the Irish Republic who wish to obtain British citizenship.

EUROPEAN UNION COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY

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

This Forum takes note of the proposals for further reform of the European Union common agricultural policy as part of the Agenda 2000 package.

The Grand Committee of the House of Commons debated the economy yesterday, and how interesting it was that agriculture was hardly mentioned. The Minister, Mr Ingram, was there to answer questions, but there was no input from the Department of Agriculture, yet the European Commission has announced a package of reform of the common agricultural policy (CAP) which will determine the future of the agriculture industry. From the year 2000 it will be the subject of much controversy.

The Government should have taken note of that, but if others, from both sides of the House, had not raised the matter, agriculture would not have been on the agenda at all, even though it is the foundation of our economy. If agriculture and its spin-off industries are doing well, the country is doing well. If they are not doing well, it does not matter what other industries we have, for they are only appendices to the one that provides jobs for so many people.

If the agriculture industry is to succeed under Agenda 2000 there will have to be significant modifications to the proposals. If they go through in their present form they will be the obituary notice for the industry. Those of us who are interested in the subject, as I have been for almost 20 years now, recognize that this is the one area in which Europe has supreme control. Other facets of government can still be influenced at Westminster, but decisions about agriculture are taken wholly by Europe. A European decision, no matter what the result, will stand.

It has taken a lot of work to get the beef ban lifted, and we are not out of the woods yet. The Veterinary Committee is to come here, and the rumour in Europe is that it will insist that any meat for export be slaughtered separately. That will cause great difficulty. It is an impossible condition, and all the plans for getting Northern Ireland beef back into the market could fall down because of it. I had a meeting yesterday with Dr Cunningham, the Secretary of State for Agriculture, and he admitted that he is alarmed that this stipulation may be imposed at the last minute. However, he did assure me that it would not be allowed to happen as the Council of Ministers has already voted on the matter.

The broad parameters for the future of agriculture in the province have now been set. It is clear that the proposals, if left unchanged, will be completely to the detriment of our largest single industry. Change therefore is imperative.

The proposals continue the shift away from price support to the direct payments begun in the McSharry reforms. I have very grave reservations about that. We are giving an advantage to those European Governments that subsidize agriculture, and if our Government do not help to the same extent we will no longer have a level playing-field. The French Government will always bow to the agriculture lobby, and we know the attitude of the Benelux countries and Germany. We are at a grave disadvantage.

I am concerned about the proposal to give national Governments much greater discretion on the disbursement of agriculture funds. It is essential that there be fair competition throughout Europe. We have seen how other Governments give out favours. It is doubtful if ours will take the same approach. As the industry in Northern Ireland is grass-based the reforms will clearly discriminate against us.

I am unhappy with the arrangements for sharing out additional milk quota. They will discriminate against United Kingdom producers. I am also deeply unhappy that the compensation for price reductions is even less favourable than was originally proposed. The European Commission is proposing a 15% cut in butter and skimmed milk intervention prices — the figures for beef and cereals are 30% and 20% respectively — but its proposed compensation, through direct income payments, will be only 50% of farmers' losses. Farm incomes are bound to go down. They have already dropped by 40%. At a meeting of producers and the Ulster Farmers' Union I was told that these are not the real figures, that farmers in Northern Ireland, unlike farmers in the rest of the United Kingdom, have lost 60% of their income because of increases in feed prices and transport costs.

The Secretary of State lost a glorious opportunity when Mr Santer was in Belfast. She said "I am not going to make a speech. All I am going to say is that I was told to tell you that we want Objective 1 status." She waved her hand and then went on to talk gibberish and make jokes. The President of the Commission was in Belfast city hall, and the Secretary of State was treating with contempt the struggle we will face if Objective 1 status is removed.

It is essential that we all make it clear to the Government that we expect them to lobby against many of these proposals. When the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly are set up they will each have a voice at the table. The Government have made it clear that Scotland and Wales will have direct representation. We have no one directly responsible for agriculture, and even if we did he could not go there to say his piece. We are going to be voiceless when these decisions are being made.

It is utterly wrong that the Government have so far refused us moneys that are available. Should they decide today to introduce a retirement scheme for farmers they could put their hands on substantial sums of money from Europe. But they say "No, we will not have any retirement scheme for farmers", so that money is left in the European kitty.

These are matters that should concern us all, and I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr Coulter: The Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the fact that this important issue has been brought to the Forum's attention. Dr Paisley has ably and adequately covered the ground, and there is no need to go over it again. Our agriculture spokesman Mr David Campbell regrets his unavoidable absence, but I understand that Committee D will be bringing a report on the Agenda 2000 reforms to the Forum in the very near future. We are content to await that report.

I support the motion.

Mr Neeson: Agriculture is the most important industry in Northern Ireland, and Agenda 2000 has massive implications for us all. It is important, therefore, that we deal with this issue.

I agree with Dr Paisley that there should be a level playing-field. In the past, Northern Ireland has been disadvantaged. One area that comes to mind is shipbuilding. Companies in other European countries received subsidies, but no such help was available in the United Kingdom. It is important that we safeguard the interests of industry and of the people.

12.15 pm

The BSE question made it clear that Northern Ireland's interests are not properly represented in Europe. The lifting of the export ban is long overdue. In saying that we need more representation in Europe I do not intend to undermine the sterling work of our three MEPs and our representatives on the Committee of the Regions.

I am particularly pleased that Dr Paisley referred to the fact that, with devolution, Scotland and Wales will have direct representation when reform of the common agricultural policy is being dealt with. However, it is very disappointing that in this building this morning the DUP was doing its utmost to undermine the talks process whereby most of us are striving to establish a Northern Ireland Assembly. Even at this late stage — there are only nine talks days left — I urge the DUP to return to the table to deal with the issues that affect the people of Northern Ireland. *[Interruption]*

The Chairman: Mr Neeson, we must stick to the motion.

Mr Neeson: I am dealing with the motion, Mr Chairman. Establishing a Northern Ireland Assembly could be the best way to facilitate the agriculture industry. Such a body would give us representation at the table in Brussels.

Rev William McCrea: Does Mr Neeson not appreciate that the document which was released this morning proves that a deal has already been done and that he is being used as a stooge?

Mr Neeson: I read the statement issued this morning by the DUP. I have also read 'The Beano', 'The Dandy', and 'The Beezer'. *[Interruption]*

The Chairman: 'The Dandy' and 'The Beezer' are a little too far from the issue. There will be an opportunity in the Adjournment debate to ventilate these matters.
[Interruption]

Mr Neeson: The DUP's statement was on the same level as those comics.
[Interruption]

It is very important that Northern Ireland's voice be heard. I look forward to the day when a Northern Ireland Minister for Agriculture will be at the table with Ministers from Scotland, Wales and the other regions of Europe to deal with this issue.

Dr Paisley raised the question of Objective 1 status, as I did in the Forum last week. On such an important issue we should speak with one voice. Forum Members should be doing their utmost to ensure that Objective 1 status is retained.

Despite the interruptions, I support the motion.

Mr Poots: I am glad that Mr Neeson has been reading 'The Dandy' and 'The Beezer'. I look forward to hearing his views on Agenda 2000 when he gets round to reading that.

The contents of Agenda 2000 are obviously of the greatest importance to the agricultural community. While Objective 1 status and other matters are very significant, I want to concentrate on agriculture.

The price of beef is to be reduced by 30% — from 164p to 124p per kilo. Before the ban, Northern Ireland farmers were receiving 240p per kilo — twice the current rate. There is to be additional compensation, but, as Dr Paisley has pointed out, it will cover only 50% of the loss. Given the present circumstances, that is not sustainable.

What is proposed is aimed more at central European countries than at the United Kingdom, whose grass-based system produces steer beef rather than bull beef. The Germans and the French get 100% more compensation than is available in respect of steers. Whereas the United Kingdom produces steer beef almost exclusively, the Germans concentrate on bull beef. It is quite obvious that the German Ministers made a stronger and better case for their people than the British Ministers made for us.

In the dairy sector, the cuts will amount to about £250 per cow, or 4p per litre, and the compensation will be about £100, so there will be a loss of £150 per animal. Again, Northern Ireland farmers will lose more than their Italian and German counterparts. Dairy herds in Northern Ireland — indeed, in the United Kingdom generally — have been improved considerably. The yield per cow is much greater than in the rest of the European Union and well above the European average. With a significant cut in the price of milk and compensation per cow, the farmers who are producing less milk per cow will lose less than those who are more efficient.

In the case of cereals, there will be a reduction of £18 per tonne — about £36 per acre. As compensation will amount to roughly £18 per acre, the cereal farmers will lose. The reduction in the price will benefit central European countries because many of their farmers use feed lots, whereas those in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom are on a grass-based system.

What is proposed will put United Kingdom farmers at a disadvantage. We in Northern Ireland are prepared to operate the system as best we can, but it will be difficult to do so with our hands tied behind our backs.

We call on the Government to do their best to have many of these aspects renegotiated to the advantage of the British farmer.

Let me sound a note of concern at the fact that more decisions are to be taken by individual Governments. We have seen how French farmers respond when their Government take a decision that is against their interests. Inevitably the Government back down. Agriculture is a very small sector of the United Kingdom's economy, and over the years it has not been given the attention that it gets in the other European countries. If individual Governments take more decisions, farmers — particularly those in the United Kingdom, which is a net contributor to the Union — can expect a raw deal.

It looks likely that Northern Ireland will lose Objective 1 status. We are well above the 75% ceiling.

Mr Hussey: In the west of the province there is a developing argument that the Government should seek the preservation of Objective 1 status for that area since the main GDP thrust is in the east. I think that the figure for Northern Ireland as a whole is 83% or 84%, whereas the west is still below the 75% threshold. How does the DUP respond to that suggestion? I would certainly welcome such treatment for the area that I represent.

Mr Poots: It is a very interesting suggestion that the stinking rich, like Mr Weir, who live in the east, should lose out while poor sods like Mr Hussey —

The Chairman: Mr Weir is a member of the legal profession. I had not heard about his farming interest.

Mr Weir: If Mr Poots knows something that I do not, I would like to be enlightened.

Mr Poots: He is a wealthy barrister from the east. Farm land is now being bought by wealthy people, not by farmers. Mr Weir will probably one day have a large farm that is rented out to peasants.

If we are to lose Objective 1 status it is essential that it be phased out. With Objective 2 status we would probably get about two thirds of the amount of money that we currently receive from the European Union. Such a loss must not occur overnight.

Mr Shannon: Standing Committee D hopes to report on this subject in the very near future. I want to take this opportunity to outline some of the concerns of Committee members.

Agenda 2000 has created many worries for Ulster farmers. The hard-pressed agriculture community are more uncertain than ever. The supplementation that is available under Agenda 2000 has not always been taken up by the United Kingdom Government. Under a European Union agreement a net contributor can be entitled to abatement. We have never benefited from that because Ministers have been reluctant to take advantage of it. We wait with interest to see what the current Government will do.

Agenda 2000 is vague about many matters but very specific about others. I believe there is a wider agenda. The situation could well be influenced by the enlargement of the Union and by the levelling of world prices under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). What will happen if produce from the United States hits the European markets? In that country cattle are fed on meat-and-bone meal and are treated with hormones. In Northern Ireland such methods are unacceptable. As a result our produce is much safer but also much more expensive. Agenda 2000 and reform of the common agricultural policy, incorporating GATT, will seriously affect our industry. Is that fair?

Rural policy ought to take account of the effects of the major changes that will flow from Agenda 2000. The motivation for reform of the common agricultural policy is two-fold: the accession to the European Union of countries in central and eastern Europe, and World Trade Organization commitments, both current and future.

One of the Objectives of Agenda 2000 is to enable Europe to compete in world markets. The common agricultural policy covers three sectors of the industry: beef, dairy and cereals. We must be aware of the full implications for our major industry. There will be only partial compensation for price cuts. A reduction in suckler cow quotas is proposed, and there will be a severe lack of provision for new entrants to farming. These are just some of the matters about which we as elected representatives are concerned. Farmers have already suffered a 50% drop in income. Their backs are to the wall. They have no more to give.

We should all support the establishment of a retirement scheme for farmers. Such a project has not had the full backing of the Government. I therefore welcome the comments of Dr Cunningham. Let us hope for determination on the part of the current Government. United Kingdom farmers should have what is available in many other European countries.

It seems that we may lose Objective 1 status. That should not happen, but if there is to be change, it should be phased in.

12.30 pm

Agenda 2000 will affect everyone, but especially the farming community, and we must take this opportunity to record our concern at the direction in which things are moving.

I endorse what has been said by other Members.

Mr Dodds: It gives me pleasure to wind up this short debate. It is important that the Forum put on record its initial reaction to these proposals whose implications for Northern Ireland into the first decade of the next millennium, will probably be more far-reaching than those of any decisions to come out of Brussels in recent years.

Immediately after the good news about the lifting of the unwarranted beef ban in Northern Ireland we heard about the Agenda 2000 proposals. And farmers have had to endure other problems. This is another major challenge. Agriculture may not be vital to the United Kingdom as a whole, but it is vital to the economy of Northern Ireland.

The reaction of people in the Irish Republic was interesting. Farmers' organizations, the Government and others took a very robust line, saying that they would fight tooth and nail for the farmers. They are, of course, perfectly entitled to do so. I call on the British Government to do likewise for Northern Ireland. Too often in Brussels negotiations our interests have been subsumed under those of the United Kingdom as a whole. I hope that our case will soon be made directly by elected representatives. Our MEPs do an excellent job in Brussels, but it would be far better to have somebody involved directly in the decision-making. I hope that that will come about by the free choice of the people of Northern Ireland, not by a rigged process such as Mr Neeson appears to put so much faith in.

With regard to Objective 1 status it should be remembered that in 1994 we did not meet the 75% criterion but were included on political and social grounds. Our MEPs and others fought very hard for that. And the battle is not yet over this time. Indeed, it is just beginning. We have a major job to do. Those of us who have experience of Europe know only too well that many decisions are taken at the very end of the process. There will be a year or a year and a half of intensive negotiations, and all sorts of decisions will be taken at the last minute in the corridors of the Council of Ministers. We may well be able to persuade other member states of our need to retain Objective 1 status.

Mr Poots mentioned the transitional arrangements. At least we have a guarantee that we would be entitled to major transitional funds to ensure that change was gradual.

Specific points have been made very well. The Chairman of the Agriculture Committee asked me to apologize for his absence. He had to go to a function. I know of the keen interest that he and the rest of the Committee take in Euro-agriculture issues. We look forward to a detailed examination of these proposals, the outcome of which will be presented to the Forum in due course. In the meantime we urge people to recognize the importance of these matters to the people of Northern Ireland.

These proposals merited full-page coverage in most of the national dailies and two-page or three-page treatment in 'The Irish Times', but the 'News Letter' did not even cover them as a story, never mind give any reaction. That is astounding. It certainly says something about Northern Ireland's journalism. The media ought to focus on major issues that affect people. The press are very quick to criticize politicians for not dealing with social and economic issues. Those concerned should examine their own practices and consciences before criticizing politicians. Week after week, the Forum debates issues that are vital to Northern Ireland. Last week's important debate on disability allowances received not a line of coverage. I hope that the example which has been set up in the Forum will be carried

forward to a new, democratic Assembly, one which is able not just to debate but also to take decisions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum takes note of the proposals for further reform of the European Union common agricultural policy as part of the Agenda 2000 package.

The meeting was suspended at 12.39 pm and resumed at 2.04 pm.

SPECIAL DEBATE (RULE 10(5))

Motion made and Question proposed:

That this Forum at its rising today do adjourn until Friday 3 April 1998. — [*The Chairman*]

Mr Weir: First, I want to mention a disgraceful incident which took place in my constituency this week — the pollution of the river at Crawfordsburn. This resulted in the death of many trout, and the area had to be cordoned off for a time. Anybody who knows Crawfordsburn Country Park will tell you that it is one of the most beautiful places in Northern Ireland. It is a disgrace that an incident of this type can occur.

There are very severe legal penalties for pollution. Unfortunately, they are not imposed frequently enough. This is because one of the worst offenders is the Department of the Environment itself. Accidents can happen, but incidents of this sort occur too frequently in areas of great beauty. And persistent offenders view the fines as little more than a slap on the wrist. We must ensure that tough sentences are meted out to people who ruin the reputation of industry and of farming and destroy the environment.

Secondly, I want to talk about the Queen's University. The situation there has improved considerably since I last mentioned it. As a result of the Ulster Marketing Survey report and the Capita report, which highlighted the "chill factor" felt by Protestants and Unionists at Queen's — we have been talking about this for years, but it was dismissed by those in control as paranoia — there have been some changes. In particular, the removal of the Irish language signs, which discouraged Unionist people from going to the university, is to be welcomed. And thanks to the votes and efforts of Unionists at Queen's, Michael Gilgunn, a convicted IRA terrorist, has had his honorary life membership of the students' union removed by the union council.

However, there is still much to be done. A consultation exercise is under way at present to see how the university can be properly balanced to reflect the whole community. Radical steps will have to be taken. I encourage those involved in the exercise to produce the best results. For example, students' union executives must be elected on a proportional basis.

We must also look again at the possibility of playing the national anthem at graduation ceremonies. The decision not to play it caused grave offence to Unionists.

Although the Irish language signs have come down, that is unfortunately not the end of the matter, in spite of the senate's endorsement of the decision. The new president of the students' union was elected with a mandate to try to bring them back.

I urge those in authority at Queen's to ensure that the reform process continues apace so that every student feels welcome at the university and in its students' union.

Rev William McCrea: Most Members will be aware of a document that has been released today. I refer to the information strategy paper detailing the Government's plans to manipulate the minds of the people of Northern Ireland. Clearly the deal has already been done, and all that the Government need do is put the participants into a pressure cooker to get them to sign up to it.

Mr Neeson talked earlier about 'The Dandy' and 'The Beano' — so that is what they read at the Stormont talks — and tried to link this document with those comics. Manipulating the minds of the people of Northern Ireland is not 'Dandy' or 'Beano' stuff. This is a very serious matter — nothing short of a mockery of democracy.

In this document the Government say

"The momentum towards an agreement and the people's decision in a referendum must become a central part of every message government sends, whether the context is economy, health or even agriculture. It can no longer be an add-on at the end of the speech."

In other words, when a Minister is speaking about agriculture he will tell us that if the people of Northern Ireland accept an agreement the sheep will lamb better than ever before, for they will not have to look over their shoulders. This is how the people of Northern Ireland are being treated.

The document goes on to say that some people are to be manipulated. The Government deny it, but let us see exactly what the paper says:

"On some occasions this will be helpful to our cause" —

that is, in developing a communication strategy —

"and on others not so. It will be important therefore to ensure that not all the results of opinion polling, et cetera, will be in the public domain."

This document was written on 4 March, and everyone knows that there has been an opinion poll since then. The truth is out. Everyone knows that the Government are playing manipulative games with the minds of the people.

"It would be open to us to encourage some degree of public opinion polling by, for example, newspapers and current affairs programmes, where we believe the results are likely to be supportive. We have now

commissioned McCann Erickson to have both quantitative and qualitative research carried out, without it being seen to be Government-inspired."

In other words, the Government's dirty tricks department is continuing the work it has done in the past.

The document talks about champions and uses the interesting phrase "champion our cause". The plural word "our" refers to British and Irish Ministers and civil servants. It is "our" cause, not the cause of Ulster.

"We should, where possible, be enlisting the help of those people to champion our cause, eg, Robin Eames and the other churches leaders, the heads of community organizations and trade unions and other members of the G7."

Here is an interesting statement:

"While any overt manipulation could only be counter-productive, a carefully co-ordinated timetable of statements from these people will be helpful in giving our message credibility with those they represent."

The Secretary of State said today that she was not operating a policy of manipulation, but the Government's own document uses the words

"While any overt manipulation could only be counter-productive".

So the Secretary of State acknowledges that her purpose is to manipulate. First, she will manipulate the media. Then, through the media, she will manipulate the minds of the public.

This cesspool of iniquity has had its lid taken off. The people of Ulster are now getting the truth. This, however, is not the end of the revelations. As Jimmy Cricket said, "There's more."

Mr Davis: Some 15 years ago, during the life of another Assembly, the Eastern Health and Social Services Board published a document called 'Developing Hospital Services'. Mr Sammy Wilson may remember, as I do, his joining me in going through it with a fine-tooth comb. There were two paragraphs on the Lagan Valley Hospital. The document asked "Is there a need for the Lagan Valley?" From time to time such concern has been expressed, and once again doubt hangs over the hospital's future. This week the deputy chief executive of the Down Lisburn Trust, Mr John Compton, said

"Everyone here is worried about the future. What the Government is looking for is a hospital servicing a population of 200,000 or more. The Lagan Valley Hospital serves a population of around 100,000."

Mr Compton went on to say

"We do not know if it will be a question of closing, amalgamating or downgrading, but things will not stay the same."

I know that our MP, Mr Donaldson, is working extremely hard on this. He has already had a meeting with the Minister. But, as Mr Donaldson has said, it will be an uphill battle to retain the hospital.

This week Mr Worthington expressed his valid concern about plans drawn up by the Down Lisburn Trust for a 94-bed hospital in Downpatrick. Previously he said that he was prepared to provide money to develop a new community hospital in the town. But such a hospital would not — I emphasize “not” — deliver a range of key, acute services. This has worrying implications for Lisburn, but I have no doubt that, as in the past, the people of the borough will rise to the occasion.

We have a battle on our hands. I hope that with the support of the Forum and its Health Committee we can retain the Lagan Valley Hospital.

2.15 pm

Mr Morrow: For some time the Democratic Unionist Party has been saying that the process at Stormont is nothing but a facade and a bluff. The revelations in the information strategy paper go a long way towards substantiating that assertion.

We are constantly told that Northern Ireland's future will be decided by, and only by, its people. What we were not told is that, while we may have a vote, the Government — certainly no friend of the Unionist people — will be driving a “Yes” campaign, and in all their statements they will cleverly and very carefully incorporate the views of the Dublin Government.

We are told that we will decide our own future. I never believed that, and, having seen this document, I am even more convinced that others will decide our future.

The document reveals that the Government are looking for certain types of people — in particular, movers and shakers. I do not know who they are, but one ecclesiastic is named — Dr Eames. The Government must consider him a mover or a shaker.

This morning Mr Neeson said that the DUP was going out of its way to wreck any agreement. Let it be made quite clear, lest Mr Neeson spend too long reading ‘The Dandy’, ‘The Beano’ or ‘The Beezer’, that Democratic Unionists will go out of their way to wreck any agreement. We make no apology for that. Indeed, we will work overtime on it. We are not going to sit idly by and watch the Government, led by Mo Mowlam as she puts her movers and shakers into place, do a dirty deal on the people of Northern Ireland.

Can Ulster Unionist Party members now see the extent to which they have been conned and used at the Stormont talks? *[Interruption]* It is one thing to make a mistake; it is quite another to be told you are making a mistake and to ignore the warning. The Unionist people will take a very dim view of the fact that some of their elected representatives continue to give credence to this façade, this awful process at Stormont in which the people have been sold short. We declare here today that we are stepping up the campaign against the sell-out of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr McCrea has referred to the section of the document headed “Champions”. The Government intend to use

"churches leaders, the heads of community organizations and trade unions, and other members of G7."

In the days and weeks ahead we will see, as we have already seen, bright television advertisements to woo and con the people into a false sense of security — for that is what it is. Paragraph 14 says

"While any overt manipulation could only be counter-productive, a carefully co-ordinated timetable of statements from these people will be helpful in giving our message credibility with those they represent. It has the added benefit of providing a fresh face for that message and ensuring that it is not only government which is seen to be selling the process."

The document continues

"Tony McCusker's office is co-ordinating a data base of key movers and shakers from all sections of the community."

I have no doubt that members of the Alliance Party will acquiesce, for they normally agree with whatever the Government say.

Mr McCarthy: No problem.

Mr Morrow: Exactly. Alliance will have no problem acquiescing in the destruction of Northern Ireland. *[Interruption]*

Paragraph 19 — "Identifying Opportunities" — says

"We will create targeted opportunities such as Women and Youth conferences. "

We know whom that refers to. They too will acquiesce in the destruction of Northern Ireland. Under the heading "Briefing" the document says

"We will wish to put more emphasis on briefing of media people".

It continues

"We will be particularly anxious to use this means of exerting some influence on the content and quality of media coverage."

The Chairman: Your time is up, Mr Morrow.

Mr Morrow: I am finishing now, but I have been interrupted and harassed all the way.

We can see the machinations of the Northern Ireland Office. It even wants to manipulate the media.

Mr Brewster: The Ulster Unionist Party wholeheartedly agrees with Mr McCrea and Mr Morrow. This document is deplorable and despicable. It takes us back to the worst days of Nick Scott. We will continue to tell things as they are, and we will not be fooled by any

spin. If I judge the mood of the Forum correctly I think that, if not Marjorie Mowlam's, at the very least Tom Kelly's resignation should be on somebody's desk by 5 o'clock today.

I want to talk briefly about the very disturbing developments of the past few weeks, particularly last weekend's rally in Portadown. I hope Members from that area will forgive my trespassing on their territory, but it is an issue which affects us all. It is quite clear that the so-called residents' groups have determined — not that it should be any surprise to Forum Members — once again to endeavour to bring Northern Ireland to its knees. We know that there is a faction in Sinn Féin — possibly the majority — who, at the conclusion of this talks process, and no matter what the outcome, will try to get back to violence. They will do so on the back of the parades issue, presenting themselves as the defenders of the Nationalist people. And when the police force legal and decent parades through again — as I hope they will — there will be a propaganda coup for Nationalism.

What worries me about all this is not the awful predictability of people prepared to bring Northern Ireland to its knees, to destroy the economy and to damage community relations for decades, but rather the Government's response. Last year the Orange Institution took decisions that were very painful. It did so not lightly but because it felt that those decisions were best for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland matters to us, unlike the residents' groups, who would happily see it ruined, but the reward was the Parades Commission — a most iniquitous quango.

Alastair Graham had obviously not got the message today when he voiced his disappointment that people were not prepared to talk to the Commission. Even after twelve and a half years no one has found a Unionist prepared to work the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and I am confident that it will be a lot longer still before any Unionist is prepared to go to the Parades Commission — "licensed by HM appointment" — for approval of things that are his right.

However, it is not just the Parades Commission which concerns me but also the official Government response. We have all received leaflets telling us to give 28 days' notice and advising us of what we can and cannot do. There are, of course, people who will brazenly and blatantly ignore those requirements, as they have already done. It is quite clear that no notice was given for the Sinn Féin rally in Belfast city centre two weeks ago. It is equally clear that there were no prosecutions, and I am sure that there never will be any. There is undoubtedly a get-soft policy, from the Chief Constable down.

Mr Hunter: Is the Member aware that following the so-called Roslea martyrs demonstration in Enniskillen the authorities have decided to prosecute more than 70 Unionist counter-demonstrators? This contrasts with the inaction following numerous incidents in Dunloy, where protesters used hurley sticks and other types of violence against people coming to attend a church service. No consideration has been given to prosecuting people from the Nationalist so-called residents' groups in the Dunloy area.

Mr Brewster: I am aware of that fact. It is indicative of a worrying trend over the past few years.

The Unionist people are naturally law-abiding, but it is very hard to remind them of their responsibilities when their tempers are high because they see others breaking the law with impunity. When this state was founded, it was part of our Constitution that the Government would not be discriminatory, yet the law is clearly being applied now in a discriminatory fashion. Perhaps Mr Hunter can advise me — I am sure he will take the brief if we can find someone to pay — whether a judicial review or some other course of action could be open to the Unionist people.

I want to put down to Tony Blair a marker from the Unionist people. We are not prepared to have our liberties trampled upon or to turn a blind eye for the sake of political expediency. Perhaps one of our greatest faults is also one of our greatest strengths: we still have principles, and we still believe in equality. The Government must realize very quickly — before the summer — that we are not prepared to accept mealy-mouthed double standards in law enforcement such as we have seen in the past few weeks.

Mr McAlister: Like my DUP colleagues, I want to focus attention on this appalling information strategy paper. “Shocking” is the word that was being used this morning, even by the media, at our press conference. The public will, indeed, be shocked when they see the document’s contents. As always, it throws up questions. I have a genuine question for the Ulster Unionist Party, with whom I work well here on different issues. It is a question that the public too will ask in the not-too-distant future. We have been led to believe that this document has been in the hands of the Ulster Unionist Party for a few days. We only received it last night. Were they in a state of shock? Were they so appalled that they were dumbfounded and unable to move for several days? The public will ask when, if ever, the Ulster Unionist Party would have done something.

Mr Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr McAlister: No, for I have only five minutes.

The document is not only shocking but also shameful and sinful. My Colleague Mr McCrea referred to paragraph 4, which says that the momentum towards agreement

“must become a central part of every message government sends whether the context is the economy, health or even agriculture. It can no longer be an add-on at the end of the speech.”

The facts have borne this out.

This paper has already been accepted by the Government; it is not just a proposal. That much is clear from Adam Ingram’s statement the week before last about the future of Northern Ireland’s economy being dependent on a successful outcome of the talks. I am glad to say that, miraculously, I got a bit of time on the radio to nail that vicious lie.

The campaign has started. It is shameful. It is sinful. It is shocking. The document talks about the Government’s central message being that it is the people’s choice. Paragraph 16 highlights the concern that the content of any message could be seen as being “big government” — their words — “imposing its view”. It goes on to say, after a lot of gobbledegook,

"It is your choice."

The intention is to make the public believe that it is their choice. They can have it in any colour, so long as it is black — or maybe green in this case. But the people will not have a choice if the Government have their way. It is sinful, shameful and selective.

2.30 pm

Paragraph 10 refers to the movers and shakers and to those on whom influence will be brought to bear. Senior media people will be briefed and the movers and shakers spoken to. I am glad that Mr McCrea mentioned the reference to McCann Erickson and what they are going to try to hide from us. Paragraph 23 says

"I will, myself, arrange a number of occasions" —

little soirées —

"on which I will bring together selective influential media people."

That could be an opportunity to say "Keep it up, boys. The MBE or that little job on the quango you always wanted is just down the road."

This is subversion of the worst kind — shameful, sinful and selective — in which the British Government have been colluding with the Eire Government.

Paragraph 26 of the paper says

"I also intend to use the opportunity of Thursday's IGC to open dialogue with Dan Mulhall of Foreign Affairs and Joe Lennon of the Taoiseach's office as to how we and Dublin can co-ordinate our messages to better effect and avoid unhelpful clashes."

They are going to sit down and work the whole thing out. They have already been doing that. I call it subversion. It is subversion of the truth and of people's real choice.

No doubt we will be vilified by the great and the good. No doubt we will be marginalized — that is not unfamiliar territory for us — but we will do all in our power to wreck this process, because it is based on sinful and shameful lies. We will do everything we can to point the people of Ulster towards the path of truth. We intend to make this document available to as many people as possible. Let them read it and make the choice. Let them look at it objectively, and when they know the truth they will agree with all the points I have made today.

I support my Colleagues in condemning the Government, this document and the people behind it.

Mr Hunter: Tom Kelly's document, so fortuitously leaked, is a classic of its kind. It shows that the teachings of the good Dr Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's right-wing Minister of propaganda and enlightenment, are alive and well, and for media students of the future,

Mr Kelly's letter will be a classic example of all that you ought to do but should never commit to paper.

With regard to the question raised by Mr McAlister, my understanding is that Mr Empey received this document yesterday evening. He alluded to it on 'Hearts and Minds', a programme from the British Broadcasting Corporation — the "Deutschland wing" of the Northern Ireland Office — and it was to be further dealt with today. One of the most interesting things in the document — and this must surely concern all right-thinking people — is the revelation that key audiences were to be targeted. Paragraph 8 says

"But also we need to know how other groups, such as the young, first-time voter and the east of the province middle-class, silent-majority type are responding."

They are represented by my good Friend Mr Bolton of the Democratic Unionist Party.

The Chairman: He is not terribly happy about that.

Mr Hunter: People in the "Apathy Party" — the majority in the east of the country who no longer bother to vote — are the soft underbelly of Unionism. The Nationalists are voting in the west, but the Unionists are not voting in the east. It is the latter who are to be targeted in the hope that they will buy this mess of pottage.

This document must be of considerable embarrassment to the noble Lord Eames and some of his colleagues — the other church leaders — and, of course, to the great and the good, including trade unionists and the other members of the so-called G7. Many of us have long regarded these so-called G7 people as Northern Ireland Office stooges, and this document confirms our conclusion. Even the Northern Ireland Office calls them stooges. If these men and women have any self-respect whatsoever they will slam the phone down the next time one of Mr Kelly's delightful friends contacts them, or at least have the good grace to stay at home rather than come out and be used in this way.

Anyone considering doing business with McCann Erickson must now be very wary. Is there not a danger that the public will think that that firm is being manipulated by the Government in view of the fact that, according to this document, it is going to be approached to do both quantitative and qualitative research without its being seen to be Government-inspired? McCann Erickson must now question very seriously any work they do for the Government, and people in business must also question whether it is the sort of firm they want to do business with, considering the negative public-relations image that it will now have.

The point is that a major public-relations blitz is being planned. We have heard about Mr Kelly's salary, but, more importantly, we now know that Government officials are to be used to manipulate the media and the public. In paragraph 13 we read about how the great and the good — the Eameses and the G7s of this world — will be used to manipulate. But let us look at paragraph 23:

"The work of meeting and briefing media representatives should be spread around all of the Ministerial team, and there is no reason why on occasions officials should not carry some of this burden. I will myself arrange a number of occasions on which I will bring together selective, influential media people."

That paragraph shows that civil servants are now to be used to spread the message directly to the media — not indirectly, as at present — and, indeed, that their boss in the Northern Ireland Office's Information Service was pushing this very strongly.

We must also think seriously about the local newspapers. Paragraph 22 says

"The many weekly newspapers around Northern Ireland offer considerable scope for us to present our message, and the editors of these papers should feature in the efforts of Ministers to cultivate the media."

So if the editor of one of the country papers suddenly gets a telephone call from Mo Mowlam inviting him out for a drink and a meal he will know exactly why.

For the first time the Government are putting down on paper what they have been practising for years. We should be grateful to Tom Kelly for committing this to paper — at least he has been honest. Tom Kelly is doing his job — and doing it very well. His resignation has been called for, but I am quite sure that that would be far too embarrassing. People have been murdered in prison, and others have broken out of prison, but no heads rolled, so I doubt very much that the good Tom's job is under threat. And he is certainly putting in the work for his £70,000, or whatever it is he gets.

The majority in this country are up against blatant manipulation. The Government are even beginning to identify suitable television programmes through which to target people. This document is a revelation. If the media pride themselves on having the remotest degree of independence and integrity, the daily and weekly newspapers will print the document in its entirety, and it will be publicized on television.

We live in hope.

Mr Gibson: I want to reinforce what Mr Hunter and Mr Brewster have said. One must ask why the Government should bother to prepare such a lengthy document to manipulate an entire society. They must feel that the result they want is either not achievable or unacceptable.

It will be interesting to see who the movers and shakers are, but it is the final parts of the document that indicate its true purpose. It is suggested that there should be no differences between statements that come from the Southern Irish Government and those that come from the Northern Ireland Office. In other words, the deal has been done, and the important thing now is to get all the thumb-prints on to it, either reluctantly or willingly. Hence the 15-day pressure-cooker job. The deal is there; it is merely a matter of getting everybody to sign up to it and then forcing its sale.

But the Government's response is not unusual. If they want to sell this deal they must keep Sinn Féin on board. The fact that 78 people in Fermanagh were prosecuted for opposing the "coffin march" is typical of the Government's attitude. Mr Hunter will be interested to hear that outside the town that he and I belong to, in a village called Mountfield — you know it, Mr Chairman — a local Orange Lodge parades each year, as it has done for probably 150 years. Last year it was confronted by 40 people sitting on the road. On its way to the

parish church the parade passes the local school, which, of course, is closed on Sunday, an old police station, two pubs and an unoccupied private dwelling. The cases against the 40 people who sat down on the road were prepared by the same RUC division as worked on those of the 78 people who opposed the "coffin march" from Enniskillen to Roslea, but the Northern Ireland Office directed that the Mountfield cases should not be proceeded with. By trying to manipulate the media and the movers and shakers the Government are calling their whole integrity into question.

Like most other Members, I remember a time when if a Minister, either wittingly or unwittingly, conveyed an untruth to the House of Commons he would immediately tender his resignation. Unfortunately, in the Northern Ireland Office it is difficult to find someone who would recognize the truth. That is the real problem.

I want to support the comments of Mr Davis about the possible closure of Lagan Valley Hospital. We should be united in our efforts to prevent the closure of hospitals — and not just the Lagan Valley, Whiteabbey or the Mid-Ulster, but also the ones in Omagh and Enniskillen. Why should all the rural areas be deprived of acute hospital facilities?

Recently we debated the document 'Shaping Our Future', which highlights pollution as a major problem and suggests that there should be fewer cars on the roads. But my part of the world does not have proper roads — just a 7% increase in the fuel tax. And yesterday Translink, the company which is supposed to be providing public transport, put its rates up by 7%. It admitted that passenger numbers are falling and that the only way it can meet the Government's target is to increase prices. Rates have also gone up. The Northern Ireland regional rate has been increased by 8% — three times the rate of inflation. Yet the Government say they intend to consult people about shaping their future.

Like the reprobate preacher, Ministers say "Do as I say, not as I do." This document brings the Government and the Northern Ireland Office into total disrepute once again.

2.45 pm

Mr Shannon: Does Mr Gibson now hold the record for speaking on the most number of subjects in five minutes?

The Chairman: He kept to his five minutes, so he must be a very good judge of time.

Rev Trevor Kirkland: Mr Hunter, who, unfortunately, has left the Chamber, said that Mr Empey had had this leaked document — the information strategy paper — in his possession since yesterday and that he — Mr Hunter — had alluded to it on last night's 'Hearts and Minds' programme. It is remarkable, if not amazing, that the best he could do was allude to it rather than put it in the public domain at the earliest opportunity. If that is the most the Ulster Unionists can do, goodness help us all when they get information that is even more important.

This document is the amazing end-product of the process in which the Ulster Unionist Party is engaged. It begins with the supposition that there is already agreement:

"We are embarking on what in effect will be the most crucial election campaign in Northern Ireland's history."

You do not set out unless you have decided on your destination. It is amazing that the best Mr Empey could do was to allude. Of course, he could do nothing else because this despicable and corrupt process produces people like Tom Kelly.

Let us not miss the real point here: supposedly the Government, including politicians in the Northern Ireland Office, have every right to use our taxes to engage in covert manipulation — not even overt manipulation. But what are they going to manipulate? They are going to manipulate the message that goes out. It is quite clear from this document that the message is their cause. The Northern Ireland Office, in conjunction with Dublin and every political party involved in this process, has a cause separate and different from that of the people of Northern Ireland. They are intent on covertly manipulating the media — newspaper journalists and those in television and radio — at our expense. In addition, they will attempt to manipulate the masses.

In due course we will be asked to vote. But what will we be voting on? We will be voting on the manipulated message, as evidenced by the Government's new advertisement in which we are shown some rosy picture of the future. We will be asked to decide on the basis of a manipulated message. So let us be clear about what precisely is happening in Northern Ireland: we are reaping the results of this corrupt process.

But the implications are even more far-reaching. Every time a spokesperson appears on television to support the process we will have to ask "Is this a stool-pigeon or a paid lackey of the Northern Ireland Office, or is he speaking for himself?" This will be true whether it is an Ulster Unionist, an Alliance representative, Robin Eames, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church or anyone else who supports the process. How many of these stool-pigeons are being paid for by us?

We no longer have a Government who protect the Constitution; instead, we have politicians who are intent on corrupting every aspect of life in Northern Ireland. No matter what the issue, we are to focus on the future of Northern Ireland. Should you want to talk about hospitals or education you will be told "Well, in the light of the peace process ..." or "In the light of this agreement ..." or "We want to talk about the referendum". Nothing else matters to Ministers.

Let us drive the point home: it is the political parties engaged in the process who are responsible for this situation. Whether they like it or not, whether or not they want to wash their hands of it does not matter. They produced it and they are responsible for it, no matter what anybody else may say.

This is certainly the most significant document we have had this week. I hope that everyone will get a copy, no matter what the cost. People need to know about the sheer skulduggery of those who are manipulating every part of life in Northern Ireland.

Mr Carrick: I too wish to refer to the leaked document — and I make no apology for speaking on the same subject as several other Members. This information strategy paper

contains shocking revelations, and it should open people's minds to what Her Majesty's Government are doing. The Government's weasel words are in stark contrast to what they said on coming to power in May 1997. What happened to their objectives of openness, honesty and transparency?

The "Department of Dirty Tricks" — alias the Northern Ireland Office — has demonstrated its evil intent to inflict upon the population a diet of lies, half-truths and misinformation, and all with the objective of achieving a desired outcome, and all in the name of appeasement. This leaked document reveals that it is prepared to stoop to the gutter to betray the people of Northern Ireland by delivering them into the hands of Irish Republican terrorists. Just look at the dubious tactics Her Majesty's Government are employing to placate and appease Irish Republican terrorists. We are to have misinformation, the selective release of information, manipulation of the media, distortion of opinion polls, the use of spin doctors, deceit, control of church leaders, community organizations and trade unions, and the targeting of women and young people. How respectful is the Northern Ireland Office of women and young people? They are to be treated like weak vessels and worked upon.

The Office is also to create and fund artificial forums to promote its false message, and it is to co-operate with Dublin in duping people. These are tactics of the Government's dirty tricks department. This type of sordid government is not what the United Kingdom deserves.

The Government's hypocrisy has been well and truly confirmed. Many of us have long thought that this was going on behind the scenes; the document merely confirms our worst fears about Labour's standards. This exposure is timely. Light has been shed on matters which were to be hidden from us. The people of Northern Ireland will make their choice in the light of these shocking revelations. They will not be conned or easily fooled, and the Democratic Unionist Party will continue to educate Unionists. We will continue to defend the integrity of true democracy and to promote honest and open politics. The Government stand indicted for treachery.

Mr Foster: It was not my intention to speak, but I must respond to what has been said about this shameful and despicable leaked document. I am pleased that it has been exposed. Perhaps we should thank Mr Kelly. But let us not get too uptight, for it tells us nothing new. There is no need to do cart-wheels over something that we know has been happening for a long time; nor should the Democratic Unionist Party be trying to score political points.

It is significant that these days Sinn Féin and Republicanism are attacking the Ulster Unionist Party and David Trimble — not the DUP. This is because they consider the Ulster Unionists to be the greater threat. The DUP should remember that fact when it points the finger at us. The Ulster Unionist Party is in there taking a stand on behalf of its people, while, regrettably, the DUP is shouting and squirming on the touch-line.

Mr Stewart: Will the Member please give way?

Mr Foster: No.

It is very sad that the DUP is remaining aloof at a time when we need each other. By all means let us expose the Government, expose Tom Kelly, expose the deceit and the falsehood, but let us stand together. The Ulster Unionist Party is willing to be in there fighting on behalf of the Unionist people; it is not shouting from the touch-lines. We will not shirk our duty, and I am surprised that DUP members are shirking theirs.

We have nothing to hide. By being in there we can expose anything that happens. If we were not fighting, we could do nothing about it. The DUP should remember that screaming from the touch-line will get us nowhere. Its members should catch themselves on. I invite them to come in and help us to expose those who are trying to bring this state down.

Mr Poots: I was very interested to learn that Parliament voted this week to ban caning in independent schools. People send their children to independent schools precisely because they are quite happy with the system of discipline. There have been problems in state schools ever since caning was banned. There are rumours that the Government may even ban people from using corporal punishment on their own children. They are trying to dominate family life and override parents' views.

But while the Government are banning caning in schools, George Mitchell, under the Government's control, is using the cane on the talks participants by telling them that they have nine days to make their decisions and that they must stop fluffing around.

3.00 pm

Meanwhile, Bertie Ahern has been reassuring his Back Benchers that everything is all right, that there will be no deal in the North unless Sinn Féin is happy, and no deal on articles 2 and 3 unless the Government of Ireland Act is amended. Articles 2 and 3 will not stand alone; the Government of Ireland Act 1920 — the lifeblood of the Union — will have to be amended. Why? Is it an illegal document? Does it stake an illegal claim to the Irish Republic? Of course not, but some people are prepared to do a deal on it.

Mr McCarthy has been carping about what a shame it is that we are opposed to the current political process. Why is it a shame? Will it diminish the Union? I believe that it will. Will it achieve peace? I believe that it will not. So why is it a shame to be against it? Because we oppose the process, we are accused of being against peace. In fact, we oppose the process because it is a way of diminishing the Union.

The Ulster Unionists are in a flap. I do not like to criticize the Ulster Unionist Party — Mr Foster and Mr Brewster often ask us not to do so — but I want to draw attention to Mr Trimble's comment last week that the DUP had not been attacking him and that he took that as a sign that we supported his policies. I want to make it absolutely clear that I do not support his policies.

This week the Ulster Unionists started to panic about decommissioning. They have good reason to panic. When Martin Smyth said at the start that they were prepared to talk to Sinn Féin, Mr Molyneaux very quickly made the point that certain conditions would have to apply. All guns would have to be done away with, and he would consider talking with Sinn Féin after five years of peace. Mr Trimble moved the goal-posts slightly when he said "I will

stop the talks if decommissioning does not take place right away.” That was another lie. The goal-posts were moved again, and the question of decommissioning was assigned to a talks committee. This committee was supposed to ensure that decommissioning would commence at the start of the talks, continue throughout and be completed by the end. Time is ticking away. Mr Mitchell says that we have nine days to go. Well, where are the guns? The IRA has weapons stockpiled, ready to bomb and shoot the people of Northern Ireland.

This document is most interesting. It shows that Unionists can win the referendum. The Ulster Unionists have been saying “We had better get what we can out of this process, for the Government can beat us”, but the document shows that the Government are not convinced that they can beat the Unionists. They intend to target first-time voters, the young and the

“middle class, silent majority type in the east of the province.”

But the DUP will also be targeting those people, for it is they who have most to lose if there is a united Ireland. We will tell them how the Union would be diminished. We will be doing our best to get the people of the east of the province out to oppose the outcome of this process, because that outcome would diminish the Union.

Mr Shannon: I want to speak about a different issue, but one which is just as important.

On 18 March fishermen from Portavogie and Kilkeel were stopped in waters just north-east of Kilkeel by a fishing enforcement vessel from the Irish Republic which had invaded British waters. There were 14 boats from Kilkeel and Portavogie fishing seven miles within the boundary of British jurisdiction. The Republic’s enforcement boat, the Emer, sent inspectors in two rubber dinghies to board the Northern boats, check their fishing nets and find out what species they were catching.

I am angry and concerned that the crew of the Emer thought it had a right to come into British waters. When the skippers of the fishing vessels asked the inspectors what they were doing and what authority they had to check their boats they said “We have every authority. We can do what we like. We can check any vessel in the waters around Ireland.” They seem to have had a problem with map reading. The waters around Kilkeel — indeed, the whole of Northern Ireland’s coastline — are British, and the quicker they understand that the better.

If this had happened in the area just below Kilkeel, where there is room for argument about sovereignty, or just a few hundred yards inside British waters, we could think it a mistake, but the fisheries boat had steamed seven miles into British waters. If it had gone any further north it would have been in Strangford Lough and at my front door — and I would have sent its crew packing.

Mr McAlister: Does my Colleague agree that it was not just the officers’ words but also their obnoxious attitude that the skippers objected to.

Mr Shannon: I agree — they were arrogant and pompous: “We are in charge, and you are just fishermen.” I am surprised that the fishermen did not say “If you want to check the nets, get into the water.” They resisted the temptation to throw them overboard.

We used to joke that the Irish Navy was a rowing boat and its crew. It is more than that now. Perhaps financial aid from Europe has enlarged it to two or three boats.

Mr Bolton: The Celtic tiger?

Mr Shannon: What is the Celtic tiger? I sometimes wonder.

The fishermen are very angry. The Government must demand an apology from the Republic of Ireland, for it must know that it has done wrong. If a British helicopter strays over the border by mistake, or if a boat happens to stray across the line in Carlingford Lough, there is an outcry. A Sinn Féin councillor or a Republic of Ireland Minister is in uproar, even if the breach is by only a few hundred yards. These fisheries people thought they were taking over — they were seven miles north of the boundary. We must demand an apology from the Republic and an assurance that this will not happen again. The Government must make the position very clear and, if necessary, give the Republic a map showing where its waters begin and end.

There is also the matter of compensation. These boats were subjected to harassment for some time. The Republic should be asked to compensate the fishermen for the harassment and the time lost and also because its vessel had no right to stop them.

This was a very serious breach of sovereignty. International law must be observed, and the Republic of Ireland must accept that under international law it was wrong. It must be made accountable and made to understand that the waters around Northern Ireland are British. Indeed, they never belonged to the Republic, and the sooner that is acknowledged the better.

The Chairman: A copy of the Record of Debates will go to the relevant Minister, and it will be up to him to decide what, if anything, to do.

Mr Sammy Wilson: Mr Kirkland says that as I am the last Member to speak I can say whatever I like and no one will be able to come back at me.

I want to continue the theme that has been taken up by many DUP Members and by a few Ulster Unionist Members. I am a bit bemused by the varying attitudes in the information strategy paper. Some Members appear to think that this is a most serious matter, while others, like Mr Foster, who contributed to the liveliness of the debate, if nothing else, say that we should not get too concerned about it. According to Mr Foster, there is no need to do cart-wheels.

The Unionist Party is well ahead of the Democratic Unionist Party when it comes to cart-wheels, somersaults and U-turns. We have seen political gymnastics throughout this process. Whether in respect of the internationalization of the talks, decommissioning, talking with Sinn Féin or cross-border bodies, cart-wheels have been done, and the result is this

document. The Reichsminister of the Northern Ireland Office, as Mr Brewster would call him, has given us a textbook on propaganda.

The one thing about which I do agree with Mr Foster is that much of what is planned in this document has already been taking place. The irony is that until now Ulster Unionist Members have been denying it. Take the paragraph which talks about getting the media to carry out surveys that would appear to be supportive. A couple of weeks ago the Ulster Unionist Party was crowing about a BBC survey. Oddly enough, at the top of the list was one of those movers and shakers in the so-called Unionist parties who have been doing exactly what the Northern Ireland Office wants. Indeed, the opinion poll gave David Ervine a rating of 82%. He is a very important mover and shaker in the Northern Ireland Office plan, and the poll had to elevate him so that he could sell it.

If I were an Ulster Unionist I would worry about David Trimble's high rating. The implication is that, as one of the movers and shakers who lead political opinion, he is valued by those who commission polls that back up the Northern Ireland Office view. The churchmen are trotted out regularly. They are wined and dined, and then they give little homilies designed to influence people. The same applies to businessmen. The process to influence people has started.

3.15 pm

The most insidious aspect of this affair is the view that the cross-border bodies that the Government have to sell to the Unionist population are not all that obnoxious, that they could be innocuous. Last week Mr Ervine of the Progressive Unionist Party took a half page in the 'News Letter' to tell us why cross-border bodies could be desirable. I have heard members of the Ulster Unionist Party saying that if the bodies did not have executive powers — whatever that means — and depending on how they were packaged, such co-operation might be good. That just helps to prepare the Unionist population for the inevitable all-Ireland arrangements.

The process has started, and the Ulster Unionist Party must ask themselves whether by being involved in the talks they are playing a part in it. The implications of their involvement have been demonstrated by their admission that Mr Empey got this document last night — probably about the same time we did. He mentioned it in a very roundabout way on 'Hearts and Minds', but his party made no attempt to expose it immediately. When we got it we realized that it was political dynamite.

Mr Foster: This is political point-scoring.

Mr Sammy Wilson: This is not political point-scoring; it is political dynamite. *[Interruption]* Our hands were not tied behind our backs; we were not constrained by being part of the process. Mr Foster asked why we are not in the talks with his party to "expose the falsehood". The Ulster Unionists had a golden opportunity to do that last night, but their hands are tied. They are bound and corrupted by the process. This shows the strength of the parties which realize that they can only be free to expose the process if they are outside it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Forum at its rising today do adjourn until Friday 3 April 1998.

Friday 3 April 1998

The Forum was adjourned at 3.18 pm.

I am chair J. K. Gorman in the Chair.

Members observed the minutes' silence.

TRANSPORT IN RURAL AREAS

Mr McAllister: I beg to move the following motion:

That the Government should consider the provision of transport in rural areas.

I am sure that many of the members who turned up at church to find only the organist and the vicar, the minister, what he should do. The organist said "I am here, so I will play the hymns and sing the hymns and if I go to feed the chickens and only one turns up I will feed them." The vicar went ahead with the service and the sermon lasted nearly two hours. At last he said to the parishioners "Thank you for giving me the inspiration to preach today. I thought I should have been alone as what I said. When only one person turns up I do not go to feed the chickens." I am sure that many of the members who turned up at church to find only the organist and the vicar, the minister, what he should do. The organist said "I am here, so I will play the hymns and sing the hymns and if I go to feed the chickens and only one turns up I will feed them." The vicar went ahead with the service and the sermon lasted nearly two hours. At last he said to the parishioners "Thank you for giving me the inspiration to preach today. I thought I should have been alone as what I said. When only one person turns up I do not go to feed the chickens."

I do not intend to give Members the whole basket about rural transport, but I will welcome any constructive comments. It is some time since I have been to a meeting about rural transport.

The Chairman: Let me say to you, Mr McAllister, to remind Members that we are looking forward to a visit to Northern Ireland by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Through the Secretary of State I have invited him to visit the Forum. The Committee wishes to make some observations about what might be said to him.

Mr McAllister: Later.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: At a meeting of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee Mr Ingram expressed shock that the Chancellor should have been asked to consider coming to the Forum. He said "If he goes to the Forum he cannot meet the party Leaders." He has already decided to meet the party Leaders, but we must trust that he will visit the Forum as well.

The Chairman: And I hope he will meet the Chairman of the Economy Committee.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Yes. Mr McAllister will give him the whole basket.

Mr McAllister: We will be looking at that this afternoon.