

## NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 3 April 1998

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

### TRANSPORT IN RURAL AREAS

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

This Forum adopts the report by Standing Committee E on transport in rural areas.

I am reminded of the story of the minister who turned up at church to find only the organist and one parishioner. He wondered what he should do. The organist said "I am here, so I will play", and the parishioner said "If I go to feed the chickens and only one turns up I still feed it." So the minister went ahead with the service, and the sermon lasted nearly two hours. As he left he said to the parishioner "Thank you for giving me the inspiration to preach today." She replied "I should have been clearer in what I said. When only one hen turns up I do not give it the whole bucket."

I do not intend to give Members the whole bucket about rural transport, but I will welcome any constructive comments. For some this is rightly a burning issue.

**The Chairman:** Let me stop you there, Mr McAlister, 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 McAlister:** 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 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 McAlister will give him the whole bucket.

**Mr McAlister:** We will be looking at that this afternoon.



However, if the Chancellor travels by bus he may take a long time to get here. He would certainly take a long time to get from the west of the province, but he probably does not know that the west exists. If he does come he will no doubt hear all about it.

I want to thank the Committee's Vice-Chairperson, Mrs Steele, and all other members, particularly those who had to stand in at this busy time, whose contribution was most valuable. The Committee Clerk did an excellent job, as usual, and we thank him and all the other staff for their help.

On page 3 of the report there is a summary of the Committee's report on an integrated transport system for the whole United Kingdom. Several Members, especially those from the west, voiced concern that the latter did not specifically address the problems in their areas. We acknowledged their concern and undertook, at the Forum's request, to prepare a report dealing specifically with rural transport policy. I hope that we have addressed the deficit of the last document.

The Committee was a little disappointed that some Members who had been critical of the last report did not respond to verbal and written requests to give evidence. The Committee would take a very dim view of criticism from those people today.

We were delighted at the response from Mr Gibson. In fact, he supplied enough material to keep the Committee occupied for two years. His verbal submission to me was excellent. He will be speaking in this debate. We look forward to hearing him. Time did not allow us to address all the issues that he raised, but we gleaned some useful information from it.

Rev William McCrea was able to attend a couple of the Committee's meetings. His comments were valuable — in particular, those made in the discussions with Translink. The Minutes of Evidence show that he made a very strong case for the west. When someone made a comment about getting a bus he asked "What bus?" There are indeed areas where a bus is a rarity. People remember their grandparents talking about buses, but they may never have seen one.

**Rev Dr Ian Paisley:** Is the Member aware that in England vehicles called busybuses run every hour from rural districts to the nearest town or city? Would it not be a good idea to introduce a similar scheme in Northern Ireland?

**Mr McAlister:** The report mentions such schemes. We also looked at a system that would make use of school buses and other vehicles that are available at certain times of the day.

The report has several themes — the road system, public transport, freight transport, car-sharing, the rail network, environmental planning, the east/west economic corridor and road pricing. I do not intend to go into great detail, for that would leave others with nothing to say.

Before even thinking about a bus system you must be sure that there is an adequate road network. The Committee feels that there is an urgent need to upgrade many rural roads.



That may involve widening, the realignment of kerbs or removing dangerous bends. Many things could be done immediately. Lack of money limits the scope for new motorways, but there are places where new sections of road would be preferable to realignment and improvement.

We are concerned about the way in which the Department of the Environment does its business and about how money is appropriated. Let me give an illustration. About a mile from my house — and I consider the Donaghadee/Millisle area to be rural — there is a major road problem which has not been solved in nearly four years. The fault is never fixed properly and gets worse and worse, and it has been the cause of damage to car springs. Apparently there is not enough money for repairs. By mistake the Department told me and my next-door neighbour that it had money left over which would have to be spent before the end of the financial year. It wanted to realign our front hedges and construct a pavement so that people could walk an extra 30 or 40 metres in comfort. When I asked about the cost of the scheme — of course, the officials did not know who I was or of my political involvement — I was told “It is not bad; it will cost about £32,000.” To say that I went ballistic would be an understatement, and when I threatened to bring the project to the attention of the Forum it was very quickly dropped.

There are probably many similar cases throughout the country. Misspending must run into millions of pounds. What would be the point of constructing a new pavement in front of my house when there is a major pot-hole a mile up the road? There is an urgent need for an overhaul of the way in which the Government do business. If that were attended to, there might be more money for realignment and new roads.

The Government say that they want us to make more use of public transport. Let us compare a man living on the Upper Newtownards Road with one who lives in Killyman. The Upper Newtownards Road man may have to walk only 100 yards to catch a bus, and with bus lanes he could be in the centre of town in a reasonable time. For him there is merit in leaving the car at home. The person living in Killyman may have to travel a considerable distance along country roads to get to a bus route. What sane person who works five or six miles from his home would get up an hour early, risk getting soaked walking to the main road and wait 45 minutes for a packed bus? The Government must understand the rural position. They cannot force on the rural community something that works in the middle of Birmingham, London or Belfast. The rural dweller has a different way of living and a different way of doing business.

Other Members will elaborate on public transport and will comment on our exchanges with Translink. In my statement later today I shall refer to public transport. This is something on which the Chancellor can move quickly.

Let us turn to the issue of car-sharing. Everyone is convinced that this is a sensible way of commuting. People who live in rural areas share more than most.

*10.15 am*

Many people in the Ards area, particularly the peninsula, are in the building trade. You often see four or five men travelling in a car or van from Portaferry, Kircubbin or



Portavogie to a site in the Greater Belfast area. This could happen even more. It is clear from the number of cars parked near major road junctions and at motorway roundabouts that people already share. This could be encouraged in various ways. For example, the Department of the Environment could provide secure free parking for people from rural areas who share. Another measure would be to allow high-occupancy vehicles to travel in the bus lanes. This would speed the journeys of those from west Tyrone who have not benefited from improvements to the M1.

I come now to the rail network. Sadly, the railways, especially in the west of the province, were allowed to go to ruin many years ago. Because of the costs we will never see their like again. If the network had been maintained, it would now be of real benefit to the west. We welcome the announcement about the reopening of the line between Antrim and Belfast but would like an investigation into the possibility of links to rural areas and ports where these would be economically viable. Such a study would lay the ghost of the railways.

It is on environmental and planning issues that the Committee is most critical. In Forum debates on subjects such as health and education a recurring theme is the lack of proper co-ordination between Departments and agencies. The same is true of transportation and associated environmental and planning issues.

The Northern Ireland Office and the other Departments involved in co-ordination may say that there is adequate interaction. If so, they are making a dreadful mess of it. It is obvious that they are not all singing from the same hymn sheet. I hope to refer this afternoon to a budget issue which could help to resolve the situation. There is an urgent need for better co-ordination between all the economic, social, health and education structures. This happens in bigger places, so why not in Northern Ireland?

It is a part of the democratic deficit that for too long matters have been left to civil servants. This is a criticism of Departments like the Northern Ireland Office. The people of Northern Ireland need a change — and sooner rather than later.

The east/west aspect is vital. Here I refer not just to communications within Northern Ireland but also to access to markets in Great Britain and the rest of the European Union. Without proper transport structures to support business, there will be little development in the west of the province. Industry will obviously develop in those areas that are nearest to ports and have adequate transport facilities. It is a catch-22 situation. Economic development in the west will require fast connections.

My party is still convinced that road pricing is inappropriate to Northern Ireland and should not be considered here.

I trust that this report, together with the original one, will be considered a useful starting-point for the future.

**Mrs Steele:** Mr McAlister has given us nearly the full bucket. He has covered the subject very well.



I too commend this report to the Forum. I thank all those who gave evidence, the Committee Clerk and the typists, and I am grateful to Mr McAlister and the rest of the Committee for the harmonious way in which they worked to produce this report which could have been called 'Transport in Northern Ireland'. Rural roads connect built-up areas, and they affect the traffic in towns and cities.

Section 3 of the report addresses the need to upgrade the road system. Paragraph 3.1 says

"The Committee considers that there is an urgent need for upgrading and improvement of many roads throughout Northern Ireland, and while resource implications probably rule out the building of any more motorways, a need does exist in some areas for lengths of additional high-quality roads to be built — for example, to facilitate the development of the East/West economic corridor. With the ongoing development of out-of-town shopping centres a system of feeder roads to those centres should also be introduced."

Paragraph 3.2 highlights the inadequacy of rural roads west of the Bann, and paragraph 3.3 draws attention to the worst bottle-necks and to roads which need upgrading.

Northern Ireland has an excellent network of A and B roads, but many are in urgent need of upgrading. Appendix B lists those that are most important because of the volume of traffic. Members will know of others in their areas, but the Committee considers those listed to be the major causes of delay and danger.

The Committee looked first at the significance of road transport for the Northern Ireland economy. As mostly pro-Union politicians, we were anxious to maintain easy access to markets in the rest of the United Kingdom and Europe. Ease of passage to Belfast and Larne harbours from every part of the province is essential. That is why we recommended that the Belfast approach roads be improved.

For instance, the Belfast-Carrickfergus road — the A2 — is totally inadequate for peak-hour traffic, as is the A6 from Belfast to Londonderry, which continues the M2 route. The Saintfield-Belfast road is disgracefully overused, and the situation gets worse every day with all the building that is going on. As for the Westlink, anyone approaching the Broadway roundabout from any direction any day knows the problems there. Then there is the notorious Belfast-Larne road — the A8 — with the highly dangerous Sandyknowes roundabout and about 15 miles of single carriageway, with heavy vehicles thundering to and from Larne harbour at all hours of the day and night.

I have serious reservations about taking trade away from town centres, but most areas now have out-of-town shopping centres, and in some places the inadequacy of the feeder roads is causing problems, including difficulties for peak-hour traffic on other roads and motorways. We are very dependent on roads, whether we travel by car, bus or other vehicle, but we want to protect the environment and save fuel by minimizing the time we spend on the move. Good roads are essential.

If the Chancellor visits the Forum — and I hope he will — I shall ask him to consider spending on Northern Ireland's worst roads more of the millions of pounds that people in Northern Ireland pay in car and fuel tax every year.



I commend the report to the Forum.

**Mr Carrick:** The subject of transport in rural areas brings into sharp focus what Mr McAlister referred to as the fundamental difference between urban and rural areas in terms of needs and expectations, and it is vital that there should be no confusion. Urban and rural areas complement each other, but we must not lose sight of the need to cater for separate support structures. The summary of the Committee's recommendations highlights the vital link between transport and all aspects of rural life.

The rural economy is very important. In saying so, I am referring not just to agriculture, which has many support industries, but also to commercial life, the level of commuting to urban areas and environmental issues.

It is vital to have adequate arterial routes into the heartland of Ulster. Such is the volume of traffic coming off the M1 and going on to the M12 to Armagh that the Northway — the link from the M12 to the A3 leading to Armagh and Monaghan — gets completely congested at certain times. Urgent attention should be given to upgrading the section of this transnational artery that bypasses Portadown to make it a fast and efficient alternative route to the South of Ireland.

It cannot be over-emphasised that the whole country depends on an adequate transport network — modes and routes. To develop and maintain a vibrant rural economy with stable structures for industrial and commercial enterprises we must provide easy access. In a highly competitive world the movement of goods and the provision of services is the lifeline of rural society. Over the years the Government have clearly neglected the maintenance of an inadequate network and have failed to invest in the rural infrastructure.

*10.30 am*

The amount provided by the Chancellor for transport — a figure substantially reduced in real terms over the last few years — has been allocated largely to the two main urban areas. Investment in urban areas is necessary, but it has been at the expense of failure to maintain and improve roads in rural areas. These have not had a fair share of the limited money available.

Support for the rural economy is vital, but there is another feature of rural life which is equally important. I refer to social structure. Unquestionably, the way of life of the Ulster rural dweller is inextricably linked to his ability to move about. He is more dependent on transport than is the townsman. The future of country schools, churches and support groups — indeed, rural culture itself — could be jeopardized by continued unwillingness to recognize the weakness in the transport infrastructure and the need to invest in a programme of upgrading, not for the purpose of giving advantage to the rural dweller but to provide fairness and stem the haemorrhage of young people to urban centres.

We want to keep young people in rural Ulster, and it is essential that they have the choice to stay. We can achieve this only by strengthening the social structure, and an important element of that is a good public-transport system. An inadequate, substandard transportation network discourages enterprise and investment, and this denudes rural areas



and contributes to the demise of country schools, the closure of churches and the decay of community life.

The rural malaise which is evident in many parts of Ulster can only be corrected by the provision of quality links which will allow easy access and will support all aspects of rural life. Churches, schools, the rural economy — indeed, the very fabric of rural society — depend completely on an adequate transport system.

**Mr Robert John White:** The story comes to mind of two brothers, one of whom talked all the time. When he had said it all, the other one just looked glum and said “Ditto.” I could say “Ditto” and probably not add to or take away from the debate. Mrs Steele has already congratulated everyone involved. Rather than go over that again, I will just say “Ditto.”

**The Chairman:** This is going to be the shortest speech you have ever made.

**Mr Robert John White:** I intend to bore you for a minute or two longer.

Paragraph 2.4 of the report refers to the earlier recommendation that a smart-card payment system be developed. It is a good idea. The word “subsidize”, in its normal sense, is not exactly what the Committee intends in paragraph 3.5, but it seemed the best one to use. What we had in mind was putting money into routes that operate at a loss at certain times.

The proverbial Willie John was going to see his mate Paddy Joe. He hitched the ass and cart and headed off, on a winter’s night, from Dunseverick to Liscolman. There was no public transport for Willie John’s journey, but that does not matter, for I am thinking about journeys that could be made profitable through the provision of some public money for a time.

The Chancellor — in his wisdom, or otherwise — targeted the modern equivalent of Willie John’s form of transport when he increased the duty on petrol, thus making it more expensive for rural dwellers to make those journeys that will never be covered by public transport; he also made the public transport that is available more expensive — a double whammy for rural dwellers.

In spite of the fact that those two gentlemen and the donkey are hardly likely ever to get on to the Westlink, that road figures very briefly in the report. I hope we will be forgiven for mentioning it in a report on rural transport.

The word “sticks” has cropped up now and again. Some Members, especially those who come from Fermanagh, do not like it, but no disrespect was meant. This report is about public transport in rural areas. The city and the large towns are very important in their way, but this is not about them. We need to be aware of the traffic problems in Belfast, but we forget Dunseverick at our peril.

**The Chairman:** You were very close to ditto.



**Mr Gibson:** I had hoped to see evidence of pious platitudes becoming practical provision, but I do appreciate very much the recognition that the rural areas need a roads infrastructure. I realize that the Committee devoted a good deal of time to this topic, but those of us who were critical of the first report are annoyed that evidence was taken from just one quarter.

I should like to make one or two suggestions. Paragraph 4.11 talks about the "East/West economic corridor". I suggest that the word should be "corridors". There seems to be an assumption that everything starts at the Westlink and ends at the Dungannon bypass. This morning someone said that the motorway should not be extended to the Ballygawley roundabout but that a branch should continue to Enniskillen and then sweep northwards to Londonderry. Why should one part of the province be favoured while the rest is ignored? Are the bad roads in the west being used as a new form of traffic-calming measure? Is this a means of slowing down people from the east so that they have time to enjoy the excellent scenery? Those of us who have to work there for a living do not have time to enjoy the scenery. We need a proper road system in the west.

*10.45 am*

The report does mention the road from Dungannon to Enniskillen (the A4), but we need more recognition of the fact that life does not stop at the Dungannon bypass. School buses used by the Western Education and Library Board wear out three years earlier than those in the east of the province, and ambulances used by the Western Health and Social Services Board wear out four years earlier — and all because of the condition of the roads. There is therefore an economic perspective. By maintaining a good road structure you save on transport costs — maintenance and fuel. At the moment we use more fuel because we have to change into a lower gear to avoid the pot-holes.

The Omagh-Enniskillen road is mentioned. Life does not stop there, as the Department of the Environment seems to think. In its stupidity it failed to recognize that the road from the Castledawson roundabout, which bypasses Magherafelt and goes on to Cookstown, Omagh and Enniskillen, needs upgrading. If people are to use the international airport or Larne harbour — through which most of our freight still travels — that road must be brought up to standard. Any improvements to the Omagh-Enniskillen line — the A32 — should include the A505, which continues to the Castledawson roundabout.

I thank the Committee for recognizing that Omagh needs stage three of its bypass, but I want to give the Forum some basic facts. In 1992 it was estimated that the road improvements needed in the western region would cost £35 million. And that amount would only have brought the roads in Tyrone and Fermanagh up to E class. According to present-day estimates, improvements to the road from Londonderry to the Ballygawley roundabout would cost £52 million.

People in the rural areas are, in effect, paying a second road tax through extra fuel consumption, and they deserve some benefits by way of compensation. Our infrastructure has been suffering from long-term Government neglect.



In the 1960s and early 1970s we could boast that our infrastructure put us in a much more competitive position than many other parts of the British Isles. Unfortunately, neglect has produced all over Northern Ireland a state of what, on the basis of the Robson index, would be regarded as deprivation. Roads provision and deprivation are directly linked. There must be positive discrimination in favour of rural areas to correct the situation. And the backlog of work must be dealt with speedily, for the longer the delay the more expensive it will be.

We talk about developing tourism, but how can we promote the beautiful golden Sperrins when a tourist in his new-age Vauxhall Astra has to compete with a John Deere, tonnes of silage and a road that has no cat's-eyes and is nothing but a long line of potholes? No one has considered asking Translink or the Department of the Environment to provide simple lay-bys on roads such as the A4 or the A5 to allow buses to pull in and let traffic pass. That could be done immediately. We must move from pious platitudes about the west to practical provision, and we cannot do so soon enough.

**Mr Foster:** I was not aware that the Committee was examining the transport system again. There must have been a breakdown of communications somewhere. I hope that if I am a little critical here and there Members will realize why.

When Standing Committee E responded to 'Developing an Integrated Transport Policy' in November 1997 I warned against forgetting the west of the province. This report should refer more to the west. Northern Ireland means all of Northern Ireland, and I therefore thank Mr Gibson for his reference to Enniskillen — he has not forgotten those of us who live in the western and south-western parts. An attempt has been made to redress that omission. I compliment the Committee on its presentation on the Northern Ireland economy, but I am not satisfied that the report's content is sufficiently detailed to make a substantial impact.

I had asked that any subsequent report highlight the need for a southern bypass for the bustling, progressive town of Enniskillen. Much to my disappointment, that has been overlooked. I respect the interests, the dedication and the integrity of all the Committee members, but, as none of them comes from anywhere near the west or south-west of the province, all the thrust is towards the east.

Appendix B refers to roads which need upgrading and improvement. These include the A4 (Dungannon to Enniskillen) and the A32 (Omagh to Enniskillen). But it is a fleeting mention, and not nearly strong enough. Fermanagh is the lakeland Mecca of Northern Ireland, and Enniskillen is the gateway to the west. The county's roads are totally inadequate to cope with the swell in the population during the tourist season or even to meet the commercial needs of locals throughout the year.

There is no rail link to Enniskillen. Paragraph 4.8 says

"An examination should be undertaken of the potential to move freight from the roads onto the railways by extending the rail links into the ports."

That may be all right for some parts of the province, but there has not been a railway in Fermanagh for the last 40 years. The imbalance between the roads infrastructure and the



public-transport services in the east of the province and those in the more rural, peripheral regions, predominantly in the west, must be corrected urgently. Only through an improved transport infrastructure will the social and economic needs of the rural community be met.

It is worth noting — perhaps this could have been included in the report — that the current expenditure on roads in Northern Ireland, at £66 per head, is significantly lower than the figures for England (£102), Scotland (£92) and Wales (£94). This underinvestment must be addressed. Additional revenue must be provided to facilitate social and economic growth.

In a rural county such as Fermanagh the importance of improving the roads cannot be over-emphasized. It is a large county. The lack of adequate public transport, the dispersed rural population and distances to hospitals, places of work and schools all point to the need for an adequate road structure. The A4 and the A32 are particularly important and are in urgent need of planned development. At present, the inadequacy of these arteries acts as a barrier to economic growth. Priority must be given to the southern bypass and the Cherrymount link to ease traffic congestion in Enniskillen. Furthermore, when determining future resource allocation the Department should take account of the significant increase in the number of road users during the tourist season.

I agree with the Government that an integrated transport policy is essential socially, economically and environmentally. However, such a policy must reflect local sensitivities and must redress underinvestment, inequity, peripherality, lack of choice and inadequate infrastructure. Blanket policies will only underline these difficulties and compound the infrastructure pressures in the west. And the Department must examine and support partnership initiatives for transport, as these might help to alleviate some of the problems associated with living in a rural area, including social exclusion.

I accept the report, but I would be less than honest if I did not voice disappointment at the omissions I have referred to. Perhaps amendments could be made.

**Mr Morrow:** There are aspects of this report that disappoint me. It does not go far enough. Maybe there are good reasons for this — perhaps lack of time or of resources — but some matters should have been teased out a little.

Paragraph 4.2 says

“The Government should consider subsidizing rural bus services and utilizing school buses on rural public service routes.”

This recognizes the fact that many school buses are idle for most of the day. The powers that be ought to be considering how best to use them for the benefit of the people.. These fleets could be used to the advantage of the rural community in particular. I urge the Committee to take this point on board.

But I want to focus on the A4. Mr Foster and Mr Gibson have mentioned this road. I want to deal with the section from Dungannon to the Ballygawley roundabout. The A4 is listed in appendix B, which is headed ‘Roads Requiring Upgrading and Improvement’. No one here, and in particular no MP, needs to be reminded that the Conservative Government



built no major roads in Northern Ireland — and certainly not in rural Northern Ireland — during their 18 years in office. That is a tragedy, but regrettably the new Government's long-term proposals seem to indicate that nothing will be very different.

*11.00 am*

During a visit to Dungannon a former Minister, Don Concannon, had the A4 brought to his attention. This is what he said:

"I reckon that a goat track would be sufficient to carry the traffic on the A4."

That was a Minister totally out of touch with reality. He probably comes from an inner-city —

**Mr Shannon:** He is out of office now.

**Mr Morrow:** Yes, and we will shed no tears about that.

Mr Concannon's response showed just how out of touch these people are. I hope that the new Minister will not make such utterances about the A4.

I want to bring to the attention of the Forum some very relevant statistics. The A4 is part of Northern Ireland's strategic route network. It is also part of the trans-European network. The section from the Stangmore roundabout to the Ballygawley roundabout is about 13 miles long. From January 1994 to July 1997 there were 116 accidents — some of them horrendous — on that stretch. It is one of the province's accident blackspots.

**Mr Foster:** The Member refers to the terrible death rate on the stretch from Dungannon to Ballygawley. But the A4 goes on to Enniskillen. Between the Ballygawley roundabout and Augher, there is a snake-like track which needs to be rectified.

**Mr Morrow:** I take that point. Indeed, I said at the outset that the A4 goes from Dungannon to Enniskillen. I do not want to diminish the importance of the stretch from the Ballygawley roundabout to Enniskillen.

**Mr Gibson:** Or to Omagh.

**Mr Morrow:** Or to Omagh. Those sections too need upgrading, but I want to deal with the stretch from Dungannon to Ballygawley.

From 1986 to 1988 the average traffic flow both ways was 7,148 vehicles per day, and the average number of accidents per year was 23. Between 1994 and 1996 average flow went up to just under 11,000, and the average number of accidents increased to 33. Improvements have been carried out, primarily because of pressure from Dungannon District Council as a result of terrible tragedies, but because, we are told, of what it would cost we have not yet had a long-term strategy.



**Mr Gibson:** Does the Member accept that the Government spend £300 million a year repairing people injured in road accidents? They must get their priorities right.

**Mr Morrow:** That is an interesting point. Perhaps if more money were spent on the roads the Health Service would have to spend less on treatment of the injured.

We need a long-term strategy. The report draws attention to the need to upgrade and improve roads, but it should have gone deeper. Unfortunately much of it is to do with Belfast. Some people seem to think that Northern Ireland ends at Dunmurry. We in the west are just as entitled to expenditure as are the people of Belfast and Dunmurry. I have nothing against the people of Belfast, but at times they do not have much consideration for those, like me, who live in Dungannon or for the likes of Mr Foster, who live far beyond that.

We need a dual carriageway from Dungannon to Ballygawley. The cost would be phenomenal — £74 million. As a realist I do not believe that that will happen during my lifetime — I hope to live a few more years — but other options could be considered. It would cost approximately £16 million to construct a section of dual carriageway six to seven miles long, or approximately £28 million to construct a wide two-lane carriageway of approximately 18.5 km. Consideration could also be given to the reconstruction of major junctions and to the provision of roundabouts — for instance, at Moygashel. The Granville industrial estate is now practically full, and attempts are being made to acquire land to expand. There is also the very dangerous junction that takes you off in the Caledon/Eglish direction.

Such measures are needed to ensure greater safety on that road. But better warning of the end of the motorway/dual carriageway should be provided immediately, and drivers should be given advance notice of, for instance, climbing lanes. If we are not to get a long-term solution to the A4 problems — either a dual carriageway or an extension of the M1 — such steps must be taken.

**Rev William McCrea:** I was glad to be able to join the Economy Committee for two of its evidence-taking meetings but especially for the visit of Mr Hesketh and Mr Watt. I congratulate Mr McAlister, Mrs Steele and the other members for their work on issues relating to the rural transport network.

As the report shows, I drew attention to the fact that very few members of the Committee are from the west of the province. I realize, of course, that that is not by design. The purpose of Standing Committee E is to look at the economy in general rather than at any particular area. However, the tremendous problems in the west of the province must be given serious consideration.

Patrick Mayhew, when he was Secretary of State, went round the councils. Of course, these visits were just photo opportunities. Ministers are photographed eating fish and chips so that people can see how ordinary they are. But we see from their behaviour at times how ordinary they are, and such publicity exercises do nothing to help.

At a meeting in Cookstown, which was attended by industrialists and by people from the council and from the different schools, Patrick Mayhew asked



"What is the major need in this area? If you were given the opportunity to have one thing for Cookstown, what would it be?"

Unanimously they said they wanted a bypass to enable industrialists to move their wares easily to the ports and the airport. Many believed that something was going to be done, only to be disappointed. They went to the expense of providing a big meal in the Glenavon House Hotel, but nothing was given in return.

The people of the west have a right to a level playing-field. Do those who talk about bus lanes for Belfast know how much it costs to get from Enniskillen or Omagh to Belfast in the first place? We are looking for equality in the distribution of finance. The people in the rural parts of the province have little or no choice.

Mr Foster has identified the problems in getting to Enniskillen; Mr Morrow has told us what is needed for the road from Dungannon to the Ballygawley roundabout; Mr Gibson has talked about the road from the Ballygawley roundabout to Omagh; and I want to draw attention to the road from the M2 to Toomebridge — an appalling bottle-neck that prevents free movement from the west to the east — and the need for bypasses at Magherafelt and Cookstown. There is a litany of neglect. What Mr Foster, Mr Morrow, Mr Gibson and I are talking about is the lack of provision for the construction and maintenance of roads in the west of the province.

**Rev Trevor Kirkland:** Does the Member accept that there is something wrong when a Government lifts £25 billion in road tax but spends £5 billion on roads?

**Rev William McCrea:** We are faced with a litany of problems that has built up over years because money was not spent when it was available and because any money that was spent was not evenly distributed between the east and the west. But we will not accept this any more. There must be a major injection of finance in the west.

*11.15 am*

It is not that there has been no money. For years people have been milked with ever-increasing road tax. The Chancellor has said that there will be a decrease for small cars. Where is the money going? It is certainly not being spent on the roads. The condition of the roads has been deteriorating, and we now have the additional burden of an increase in the cost of petrol. The report mentions 'Shaping Our Future'. That document is full of wonderful ideas, but the money spent on its production could have been used to improve the roads. Or perhaps pot-holes could have been filled with copies.

Departments seem to have no vision. Look at the deteriorating roads in the west. What kind of vision is that? The only thing that the Government have done for the west recently is close things. They have closed the rates office — they say that the service must be centralized — and they will close the hospitals if they can get away with it. What kind of vision for the twenty-first century is that? The people of Northern Ireland should stand up to the Government and tell them that they will not tolerate any further erosion of their services. As British citizens we demand our rights. Ministers will throw money at any scheme — no



matter how foolish — provided that it has a “community” label, but they have difficulty in funding facilities, like roads, which are of benefit to the entire community.

The Government talk about weaning people away from cars and encouraging them to use buses or trains. What trains? There are no trains to the west. What buses? A bus goes down the road once in a while and is gone before you can catch it.

We have been robbed. There is no vision. It is time for elected representatives to bring the Government to heel and demand that money be spent wisely for all of the people and not just one section.

**Mr Speers:** Mr Chairman, please accept my apologies. I have only just arrived, having been stuck on the Westlink for three quarters of an hour. It is chock-a-block. I found myself wandering around the Falls Road and all sorts of other places because of the traffic.

**Rev William McCrea:** Something to do with the talks process?

**Mr Speers:** I think not. It has to do with the blockage on the Westlink.

With regard to the report, I was more than a little disappointed when I read appendix B, which is entitled ‘Roads Requiring Upgrading and Improvement’. As one who comes from Armagh, I take particular exception to the fact that there is not a proper road to what I maintain is the province’s first city. Armagh is the primatial city, the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland.

I understand that reference has been made to the road from Armagh to Portadown. Members who are not fortunate enough to travel to Armagh regularly may not be aware that the Portadown road was deemed to be one of the most important in the province in the years immediately after the Second World War. Indeed, it was one of the first to be improved in the 1950s. But a standard that was acceptable then is totally unacceptable today.

This is one of the most frustrating roads, as I know to my cost. On the return journey from Belfast I used to be able to get easily to the roundabout at the railway station in Portadown, but now it is chock-a-block from the roundabout at the end of the M12 all the way through Portadown. It takes about 15 minutes longer to get from the outskirts of Portadown to Armagh than from Portadown to Belfast. This undoubtedly has a major effect on infrastructure development in Armagh and the surrounding area. Such an important city warrants its own connection to the motorway.

Locally there is a great deal of debate about the Portadown road. Upgrading that road, while essential, will not by itself relieve the traffic congestion around Portadown. The Committee should consider recommending upgrading the one from the Loughgall intersection to Armagh. This would improve the traffic situation and boost the infrastructure of the city of Armagh.

**Mr Carrick:** Does the Member accept that adequate investment to upgrade the Northway, which brings the M12 on to the A3, would alleviate many of the problems around Portadown? The Northway bypasses the town.



**Mr Speers:** I accept that point to a certain extent. The relatively new Northway was built to bypass Portadown, but it is totally inadequate. It takes about 25 minutes to get from here to the end of the motorway, but because of heavy traffic the journey from there to Armagh takes approximately three quarters of an hour.

I am not dismissing Mr Carrick's point when I say that upgrading the road as far as the Loughgall interchange — a distance of three or four miles — would alleviate many of the problems in and around Portadown and, more important, would be better for Armagh.

It is true that there are not many cities in the west and south of the province, but neither are there any railways. Armagh is probably the only city in Europe that does not have a railway station. I remember the last train. It left about 1956. *[Interruption]*

**Mr Speers:** The Gentleman also remembers.

**Mr Morrow:** I certainly do not.

**Mr Speers:** But only because of a bad memory.

This situation must be addressed as an aspect of the province's infrastructure development. European Union money is available for the railways, and there has been expenditure on some parts of the network. Armagh is a city of some importance, and it is inappropriate for it to be the only city in Europe without a railway. The Government should address this matter without delay.

Rural communities are losing their bus services. Fewer people use buses because services are often non-viable in many respects. This is a sore point in outlying parts of my area and, no doubt, in other places. Owing to the lack of public transport, people are cut off from the major centres of population and business. This has come about because funding for Ulsterbus has been steadily reduced.

**Mr Bolton:** I welcome the fact that Committee E has been considering transport in rural areas. Like other Members, I was not aware of the project, but that may be the fault of Mr Gibson, who has kept us involved in other issues during the last couple of weeks — maybe as a tactic in his campaign for better roads in the west. Had I known about the investigation, I would have made a case for the area I represent — the Coleraine triangle. Coleraine, Ballymoney and Moyle are served by the A26. I wonder how it came to be described as an "A" road. That may have been its standard 50 years ago, but certainly not now.

**Mr Morrow:** Perhaps the "A" stands for "atrocious".

**Mr Bolton:** It certainly is atrocious. Crossing it, especially the section in the Ballymoney/Coleraine area, at peak times is impossible.

Approximately 100,000 people live in the Ballymoney, Coleraine and Moyle areas. This used to be regarded as an affluent region, but, with the exception of certain parts, that is



no longer the case. Levels of unemployment are high, and anyone trying to bring employment would be wasting his time because there is no transport corridor to speak of. It should be a premier tourist area, but it is impossible to bring tourists to a place that is not served by twentieth-century or twenty-first-century transport.

Another issue that I want to mention was adequately and passionately dealt with by my Colleague Mr Carrick. I refer to the question of disadvantaged and isolated rural communities. Mr Carrick made a very good case, but his part of the world must be very different from mine, for it has schools and shops. In parts of East Londonderry the schools have long gone, the shops have gone and employment has gone, and there is a dire lack of transport services.

*11.30 am*

A report on rural transport might have referred to the scandalous fact that in winter many children in rural areas are bussed to school along roads which have not been salted.

**Mr Shannon:** Members from the west may find it hard to believe that we in the east have roads that need attention. Indeed, some have been in a poor state for 30 years. Our western Colleagues, who have made a very good case, have my wholehearted support, but I must emphasize that the east, which is where the majority of the population live, does not have roads that are paved with gold. We have many narrow, twisty roads and many pot-holes.

The shock of the budget increase of 25p per gallon in the cost of fuel has now sunk into the minds of people in rural areas. Will the money that is raised be used to improve the roads infrastructure in the areas where traffic is heaviest? Those who are contributing most by way of taxes, including fuel duty, are entitled to better treatment.

In page 6 of the report there is a reference to a co-ordinated strategy to address the large and ever growing list of bypasses and main roads requiring improvement and upgrading. For 30 years we have been waiting for a bypass to relieve the traffic congestion in Comber. Despite frequent meetings with Ministers, we are no nearer having one started, never mind completed. Population increases in the Comber and Ards areas have resulted in volumes of traffic with which the roads were not designed to cope. Between eight o'clock and half past nine in the morning and between 4.00 pm and 5.30 pm it takes 20 to 30 minutes, sometimes longer, to drive through Comber. Anyone who regards the situation as satisfactory would have his opinion changed if he were stuck in the town during one of those periods. This 30-year-old problem, which is getting more serious by the day, must be tackled. Indeed, the situation should have been dealt with long ago.

**Mr Weir:** Does the Member agree that several of the province's most twisting, narrow and dangerous roads are in the east? Examples are the road to Kilkeel and several in the Ards Peninsula.

**Mr Shannon:** I agree. As a Forum Member for the Strangford constituency and a member of Ards Borough Council, I am very aware of the situation. Perhaps we should invite Members from the west to see for themselves the state of the roads in that scenic area.



It is such that low driving speeds would ensure that there was plenty of time for a good look. A trip to Kilkeel might take an extra day.

I support the recommendation that the Government should consider subsidizing rural bus services and making full use of school buses in rural areas. Why not use community and voluntary transport to bridge the mobility gap?

In the last budget, £1 million was provided for public transport in rural parts of Northern Ireland. This is a pinprick in the context of the importance of a regular bus service. Last week, at the launch of the Ards economic development strategy, the manager of Ulsterbus told me that in the Ards borough alone it would take £1 million to upgrade the bus service to the standard that the Government would like. The Administration's efforts are totally unsatisfactory.

**Rev William McCrea:** Cosmetic.

**Mr Shannon:** Indeed.

I do not know what they hope to achieve with £1 million. It is just a token gesture.

Any council economic development strategy, such as the one launched in Ards on Tuesday of last week, must stress the great importance of a coherent transport policy. In this respect the Ards Borough Council's priorities are the Comber bypass and a link from the floodgates on the Portaferry Road to the Comber Road.

**Mr McAlister:** I should begin by saying that I do not mind constructive criticism. Indeed, at the beginning of the debate I said that such comment would be welcome. However, only Mr Gibson, who gave me a pile of literature, and Mr Taylor, from whom we received a letter, took up the invitation to make a verbal or written submission. We cannot be expected to accept criticism that is not justified.

We debated long and hard about whether there should be an appendix B, for it was clear that, no matter what the list contained, someone would say "You forgot about the road at the back of my house." We could have ended up with a document about three times the size of 'War and Peace'. What we have produced gives the flavour of what is required. We would have liked to deal with every rural road, but that was not possible. None the less, I appreciate Members' comments.

Mr Carrick dealt very well with what he described as the social and economic fabric of rural areas. We are talking about lives — not just bits of concrete. We are talking about people's social and economic future.

It was my intention to deal with a matter that Mr Morrow raised — the opportunity to do something innovative. Mr Hesketh said

"In Northern Ireland the boards also have their own fleets — about 700 buses. I said earlier that we have the hardware but that we could perhaps make better use of it. It is not up to me to talk about the board's buses, but I assume that the same argument applies. This may be something for the future. Closer co-operation between the public sector and voluntary transport groups is to be encouraged."



Indeed it is. In a statement later today I shall refer to the Chancellor's policies — in particular, with regard to transport in rural areas. I do not want to pre-empt that statement.

Rev William McCrea, who made several valuable contributions to the Committee's work, talked about proper distribution of funds. This is a matter to which I referred in the context of overall planning. There is a lack of co-ordination, an absence of vision. People seem content to do their own thing. If we are to have the whole picture, that will have to stop. Mr McCrea talked about "a litany of neglect". To be convinced, one need only drive round the province. We are treated as second-class citizens.

I do not intend to refer to every point that has been raised in this debate. Suffice it to say that there was merit in every contribution. But whether our reports are good, bad or indifferent, it is up to the Government to move. We have a responsibility to keep the pressure on them, however, and I hope that in the limited time left to us we will do just that. Of course, there are Members who are also councillors or Members of Parliament.

**Mr Neeson:** I accept these points, but would it not be much better if men and women from Northern Ireland were making all the decisions in a Northern Ireland Assembly?

**Mr McAlister:** The Member must have been reading my speech, for I am coming to that.

We have been deprived of political power for too long. But I would not be surprised at a Northern Ireland Office statement that the right peace accord would improve the roads. It is time for the Government to come clean and admit that they have been treating the people of Northern Ireland — all the people — as second-class citizens.

Mr Shannon talked about problems in the area in which he is an alderman. All rural areas, including those in the west, have difficulties. The Government must tell us what it would cost to bring Northern Ireland up to standard in, say, five years. Let us have a five-year plan. Let the proceeds from road tax paid in the province be spent in the province.

I hope that the Forum will wholeheartedly support the report.

*11.45 am*

**Mr Coulter:** Mr McAlister has quoted only DUP Members. Does that mean that nobody else made any worthwhile points?

**Mr McAlister:** Maybe I am a bit thick, but I do not understand the question.

**The Chairman:** Mr Coulter says that you have referred to comments by DUP Members. I do not remember whether you mentioned any others.

**Mr McAlister:** I am still at a loss to know what I am supposed to be answerable for, so I will carry on.



**Mr Coulter:** I am talking about the bias of the summing-up.

**Mr Foster:** May I make a point for clarification?

**The Chairman:** We are at the winding-up stage.

**Mr McAlister:** Any Member who disagrees with my summing-up can speak on the Adjournment or talk to me personally. I do not understand the question. Perhaps if it is explained to me I will be able to answer correctly.

I ask the Forum to support the report.

**Mr Foster:** I might as well have been listening to a party political broadcast. Let me make it clear that I did not know that the Committee was dealing with transport at this time.

Will my points about the need for a southern bypass of Enniskillen and about the Cherrymount link be included? I also made the very important point that roads expenditure per head of population is much lower in Northern Ireland than in England, Scotland or Wales. The Committee Chairman failed to mention this matter. I think that it should be included in the report.

**The Chairman:** We are getting into a new debate, and I am calling it to a halt now.

**Mr Speers:** I made a couple of points about the roads infrastructure in my area. Is it possible for the Committee to include these in the report? It is accepted by most independent observers that the question of roads in the Armagh/Portadown area needs to be addressed.

**The Chairman:** Members have made their points, Mr McAlister has summed up, and the debate is over.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

This Forum adopts the report by Standing Committee E on transport in rural areas.

*The meeting was suspended at 11.49 and resumed at 12.02 pm.*



## PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: VOTING SYSTEM

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

This Forum adopts the report by the Committee on Electoral Reform on the electoral system for Westminster elections and agrees to forward it to the Independent Commission on the Voting System.

It gives me great pleasure to present this report to the Forum. In doing so I want, first, to thank the Committee Clerk, Ms McKibbin. Once again she has worked at great speed, and it is a tribute to her that we are able to present the report today. I also want to thank the Vice-Chairman, Mr Gardiner, and all the other members of the Committee for their efforts.

The report deals with systems for Westminster elections. I welcome the establishment of the Independent Commission. There are anomalies in the system, as the results of the 1992 general election illustrate. On that occasion the Conservative Party, with 41·9% of the total vote, took 51·6% of the seats, and Labour, with 34·4% of the vote, took 41·6% of the seats. The real problem came with the Liberal Democrats, who got 17·8% of the vote but only 3·1% of the seats. Similarly, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru got 3·5% of the vote but only 1·1% of the seats. These anomalies will have to be addressed.

The Jenkins Commission has been established to investigate electoral systems throughout the United Kingdom. A few weeks ago I had an opportunity to meet with Lord Jenkins when he visited Belfast, and I told him about the work of the Electoral Reform Committee. The Commission's terms of reference say

"The Commission shall be free to consider and recommend any appropriate system or combination of systems in recommending an alternative" —

that is the important word —

"to the present system for Parliamentary elections to be put before the people in the Government's referendum.

The Commission shall observe the requirement for broad proportionality, the need for stable government, an extension of voter choice and the maintenance of a link between MPs and geographical constituencies."

It is important to consider this report in conjunction with the earlier one, entitled 'Electoral System for a Northern Ireland Assembly', which dealt with the important values that need to be identified when an electoral system is being devised. What is required for Westminster may be different from what we should have for a Northern Ireland Assembly. Dr Sydney Elliott explained to the Committee the importance of this matter.

In this case too a majority of Committee members agreed on what the values should be. The only dissenting voice was that of the Ulster Unionist Party. I am sure that its members will give their reasons. A majority on the Committee agreed that there should be a relationship between the number of seats held and the number of votes received; that the link between an elected Member and his constituency is important; that voters should have a real



choice on the ballot-paper; that the system should be simple enough for voters to understand; and that there is a need for stable government.

With regard to electoral systems, no party proposed proportional representation with a list system. We were restricted to three systems — the single transferable vote (STV), the additional member and the alternative vote. A majority agreed that the core values identified by the Committee would best be addressed by the single transferable vote system, using a small number of constituencies. Therefore we recommend STV as an alternative to the system currently used.

If the Forum agrees, the report will be forwarded to the Jenkins Commission.

Next Monday the Committee will meet with the Secretary of State at Parliament Buildings to present her with a copy of the report 'Electoral System for a Northern Ireland Assembly'. Our time will be limited, but it is important that we take the opportunity to make the Government aware of the views of all the parties in the Forum.

Recently the Northern Ireland Select Committee produced a report on electoral fraud. Like other members of my Committee, I welcome that report, but we may have a referendum next month and elections to an Assembly in June. The Select Committee's report has been widely accepted, but the worrying problem of fraudulent voting — absent voting and false identity papers — remains. At this the eleventh hour I appeal to the Government to deal with the issues that can be dealt with without new legislation. The necessary resources should be provided.

As this is probably the last report of the Committee on Electoral Reform, I want to put on record my thanks to all the members for having dealt with these issues in a very constructive and good-humoured way. We did not always agree, but when necessary we agreed to disagree. That reflects our positive approach.

I want to put on record once again my thanks for the excellent work done by Ms McKibbin, the Committee Clerk, who even gave up some weekends to prepare drafts.

**Mr Weir:** I want to associate the Ulster Unionist Party with Mr Neeson's remarks about electoral abuse. The practice has a long history in this country, and the Government's lack of action is a disgrace. We must ensure that resources are provided for action to ensure fairness.

I am not a member of the Electoral Reform Committee, but I attended two of its meetings, and it is very clear that a great deal of work has been put into this report by the Committee's Chairman and other members and in particular Ms McKibbin. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party I congratulate them all.

As Mr Neeson has said, the Ulster Unionist Party took a different view on an electoral system for Westminster elections. However, while we did not agree with some of the ideas put forward by other parties, we endorse the report. We have had differences of opinion or reservations, but the report fairly reflects the Ulster Unionist position, and we have no problem at all in supporting it.



With regard to Westminster elections, we support the current system of first past the post, which has served the United Kingdom well down the years. Our second choice (and it was very much a second choice) — an alternative-vote mechanism by way of either a second ballot or a second count — was the closest we could get to first past the post.

The party has never supported proportional representation at Westminster level. Indeed, in 1929, when Ulster Unionists were in charge at Stormont, they dropped proportional representation and introduced single-member constituencies. Parties on the mainland have been debating the merits of the present system, but their concern is not reflected widely among the British public — it is very much a politicians' exercise. The first-past-the-post system has broad public support. This may be put to the test if the Commission's findings are subjected to a referendum.

*12.15 pm*

The current system has several advantages. It is easy to understand, and it provides the most direct link between a Member and his constituency. The Ulster Unionist Party's principal problem with the recommended values arises from their belief that the key criterion for any electoral system should be that direct link. A constituency should have between 60,000 and 70,000 people, rather than 250,000 or 300,000. With a very large electorate the link is diluted.

Countries that use proportional representation have not enjoyed the same level of stability as the United Kingdom. For example, in Italy there have been more than 50 elections since the Second World War, producing unstable Government after unstable Government. The Ulster Unionist Party wants stable government in the United Kingdom. The current system offers a clear-cut choice, largely between Labour and Conservative, and in most cases it produces a majority Government.

The first-past-the-post system has the advantage of keeping out extremists, except, unfortunately, in Northern Ireland, where two members of a violent terrorist party have been elected. Unlike many parts of Europe, we do not have Communist or neo-Fascist Members. Our system has kept such people out of Parliament.

We particularly want to keep the link between a Member and his constituency, for we believe that that is good for democracy. Many Members of Parliament help people who voted against them. For example, Rev William McCrea provided a good service to all his constituents, irrespective of their political beliefs. This is something that we should cherish. The danger of moving to the single transferable vote for Westminster elections is that in a constituency of 250,000 or 300,000 people there would be a tendency for individuals to go only to a Member of their own political persuasion. This would distance Members from the people who had not voted for them. The first-past-the-post system has the advantage of allowing a Member to represent all his constituents and deal with them equally, and Northern Ireland has had a good record of that kind of representation.

As I have indicated, the Ulster Unionist Party has problems with the main recommendation, favoured by a majority of the Committee, that we move to some form of



proportional representation. However, the report covers the issues very thoroughly, and I am perfectly happy that the Ulster Unionists' position is properly reflected.

Finally, it is essential that whatever system is agreed be introduced right across the United Kingdom. We do not want Northern Ireland to be again subjected to some sort of experiment. In the Forum election we were used as guinea-pigs. We want the same standards to be applied and the same system adopted throughout the United Kingdom.

I am very happy to endorse the report, and I urge the Forum to do likewise.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** I would like to associate myself with the remarks of the Committee Chairman about the excellent work that was done by Committee Clerk, Ms McKibbin. She served the Committee extremely well, putting in very long hours. We very much appreciate her immense effort.

The discovery of a huge car bomb yesterday focuses our minds yet again on the fact that democracy in Northern Ireland is under sustained attack. Therefore it is essential that the systems that underpin democracy operate properly and in the interests of all who are democrats.

The so-called peace process will fail to deliver genuine peace because it does not have a genuine basis. The report deals with the issue of promoting, developing and sustaining genuine democracy, and I hope that the Forum will back it in its entirety and ensure that when it is delivered to the Government they will begin to recognize the needs of us all.

This is the Electoral Reform Committee's third report. This time we have been able to move beyond general agreement on the values that must be held dear at elections and closer to an agreed system. There are caveats, but the report focuses minds in a way that the previous one did not.

The Committee made steady progress. It was tasked to monitor the Government's review of electoral reform in Northern Ireland. Indeed, that is what we have been doing and will continue to do when the Committee has ceased to exist. Secondly, it was asked to make a contribution to the Government's review of the system used for parliamentary elections. That is what we are doing today, and we have already considered and recommended an appropriate system for any future election in Northern Ireland.

I agree with this point that was made by Robert Blackburn.

"First-past-the-post voting is peculiarly disproportionate in its translation of votes into parliamentary seats, and this has a number of highly significant ramifications with regard to the composition and operation of Britain's Parliament with political leadership in government."

The Chairman of the Committee made the point that the number of votes cast for a party is not always reflected in the number of seats won. It is not only the Conservative, Liberal Democratic and Labour parties that are affected. There are parties in Northern Ireland that could have more bottoms on seats in the House of Commons but for the unsatisfactory



system. Unlike Mr Weir, I believe that certain aspects of the current system are not satisfactory. We need to identify these and deal honestly with the issues involved.

The Labour Party, in its manifesto, promised to establish an independent commission to look at voting systems. Now that it is in government, it is maybe a little reluctant to move. The changes could be massive. When the Jenkins Commission makes its recommendations we will see whether the Government are genuinely committed to reforming the electoral system.

I regret that when the Jenkins Commission came to Northern Ireland it treated the Committee rather shabbily. It was aware of the work we were doing. In fact, we had contacted it on previous occasions and indicated our interest in its work. It is unfortunate that the Chairman had to put issues to Mr Jenkins at the last minute. We ought to have been treated much more courteously.

The Commission has four core values, which have been identified by other Members, and in this report the Committee has recommended a series of values. These relate to proportionality, the link between a Member and his constituency, the need for choice and for simplicity so that voters understand the voting system, and the need for stable government. The report adds

“With regard to the value identifying the need for stable government, the Committee, however, noted that not all the parties that could form a Government in the United Kingdom stand for election in Northern Ireland.”

The fact that Northern Ireland is consistently treated differently weakens the argument for a uniform system across the whole United Kingdom and damages the process and the people here. The main parties in Great Britain should organize in the province if they truly believe that it is a part of the United Kingdom. They should be as committed to standing for election here as they are in Great Britain.

Sections 4 and 5 of the report deal with the issues of uniformity and familiarity. I agree entirely with Mr Weir that there should be a uniform system for elections to the United Kingdom Parliament. Indeed, we all agree about that.

We are familiar with the single transferable vote, and I am glad that the Committee was able this time to recommend that system. This week I was surprised by the comments of some parties about electoral systems. The Ulster Democratic Party, the Women's Coalition and several other fringe parties expressed concern that they were being frozen out of elections. Well, the report notes that no response was received from Labour or the Ulster Democratic Party. That probably reflects a lack of ambition on their part to get to Westminster.

The Women's Coalition made a number of contradictory proposals. Unfortunately, its Members are not here to answer these points. On a previous occasion they proposed a certain system for a Northern Ireland Assembly, and this week in the talks they suggested something entirely different. During the Committee's deliberations they put forward yet another system but eventually agreed to the one recommended in the report.



Paragraph 5.16 says

"The majority of the Committee concludes that the required core values identified by the Committee are best addressed by the Single Transferable Vote based on a small number of constituencies and therefore recommends STV as an alternative to the present system for parliamentary elections."

An essential point is made in paragraph 5.17:

"political parties should be fully consulted about the grouping of constituencies or the drawing up of new constituencies."

This is a conclusive document. It goes much further than any of the Committee's previous reports. It makes solid proposals and emphasizes the core values, which the Committee worked hard to identify. One or two parties are a little confused about what they believe, but most have identified core values and a system that, while it does not give them everything they want, they are prepared to accept.

I am more than happy to commend the motion to the Forum.

12.30 pm

**Mr Coulter:** I too support the motion. I wish to be associated with Members' commendation of Ms McKibbin's support. She managed to produce a cohesive report, which, given the mountain of paperwork involved, was extremely difficult.

I also pay tribute to the leadership of the Committee's Chairman and Vice-Chairman, who guided and encouraged us along what was not an easy path. The Committee worked extremely well together. In spite of some areas of disagreement, we always maintained a sense of purpose. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party I thank those who agreed to include its different perspective in the report.

There are not many things that we cannot get round. The main point that my Colleague Mr Weir made is that whatever system is agreed must be for the whole United Kingdom. Northern Ireland must not be treated as a guinea-pig to be manipulated for the purposes of people with a narrow, political-party view.

One of our problems concerns the single transferable vote (STV) system. I am glad that the report's recommendation is that political parties should be fully consulted about the boundaries of any new constituencies. We here know how easy it is to manipulate or gerrymander. With STV, several single-member constituencies would be grouped to give what is supposed to be a wider choice. It would be as easy to keep people out as to bring them in. We must ensure that there is no manipulation to produce certain results in certain areas.

It is important that we ever keep before us the need for stable government, which is vital in a democracy. This report highlights that need and calls for democracy in its best and truest form.

I recommend it to the Forum.



**Rev William McCrea:** I join those who have expressed appreciation of an excellent Committee Clerk. Ms McKibbin deserves congratulations for the manner in which she carried out her duties. I would like also to thank the Chairman and Vice-Chairman for their guidance. I trust that the Committee's hard work will be acknowledged. It did not simply look at values but came up with solid proposals.

Democracy has been under sustained attack here for a considerable time. It is undermined when the Secretary of State seems to take more account of the views of the men of violence than of the verdict of the ballot-box.

Neither is democracy enhanced by a system that permits systematic fraud and thereby denies people proper representation at Westminster. I wholeheartedly support Mr Weir's demand for a level playing-field — something that the people of Mid Ulster would have been delighted to have in the last election. The Secretary of State owes it to the people of that constituency and the rest of Northern Ireland to address this problem urgently.

The Committee's deliberations were guided by the values that are set out in the terms of reference of the Independent Commission, of which there are four: the need for the number of seats to reflect the number of votes cast; the need for stable government; the need for wide voter choice; and the need to keep the link between MPs and their geographical constituencies.

It is said that what the United Kingdom has at present provides stable government, but there is something wrong with an electoral system which gave the Conservative Party a majority when it received only 43% of the vote. I do not know what the Labour Party's percentage of the vote in the last election was, but it certainly was not so high as to warrant a majority of 176. Such is their majority that the Government can afford to tell many Members to go back to their constituencies. Does that system serve the people well or meet the requirement that the number of seats a party gets should reflect the number of votes cast for it? A majority on the Committee did not believe so. That is why they came down in favour of the single transferable vote.

The Committee concluded that it is desirable to have the same electoral system throughout the United Kingdom. I just hope that by the time any new system comes into operation we will still be in the United Kingdom. That could be doubtful if Bertie Ahern and others get their way. The last few days of the negotiations will be interesting.

This report makes a serious attempt to address the situation. We accept the need for stable government, a simple system which the voters can understand and a link between a Member and his constituency. Having different systems for different elections is a recipe for confusion, especially in the case of the elderly.

The Committee has done its best to marry its values with the Independent Commission's terms of reference to produce a positive result. I trust that the Government and the Commission will seriously consider this report, which I wholeheartedly commend to the Forum.



**Mr Neeson:** I thank Members for their contributions.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr made the point that the first-past-the-post system disadvantages some parties — in particular the DUP and Alliance. The people who gain most from it are the Ulster Unionists. That is why they are so much in favour of it.

I sincerely hope that this document will receive the same recognition as the Committee's previous reports, for they must be considered together. I trust that Members will give it their full support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

This Forum adopts the report by the Committee on Electoral Reform on the electoral system for Westminster elections and agrees to forward this to the Independent Commission on the Voting System.

*The meeting was suspended at 12.44 pm and resumed at 2.17 pm.*

## ORGANOPHOSPHATE INSECTICIDES

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

This Forum adopts the report by Standing Committee D 'Organophosphate Insecticides — Their Use by the Farming Community'.

It is a tragedy when any person falls ill; it is a double tragedy when the disease or disability is largely incurable and no effective treatment is available; it is a triple tragedy when the disease or disability arises from the sufferer's work or from following the regulations that relate to his work. And the tragedy is further compounded — indeed, it is an outrage — when people who know that they are ill and know what caused them to be ill are told by their doctor, the Government or the relevant authorities that the condition is not considered serious or even recognized as an ailment.

Dozens of Northern Ireland people who suffer from organophosphorus poisoning have formed an association to raise public awareness of their plight. They came to the Forum to seek recognition, and Committee D gave them that recognition. Some members of the association are with us today. The sterling evidence that they gave to the Committee is included in the report.

The use of organophosphorus compounds is and has been widespread in agriculture. They are used principally as insecticides for the treatment of vegetables and animals. Indeed, under the Sheep Scab (Northern Ireland) Order 1970, sheep farmers were required to dip their animals each year, using an approved product. The Government-approved product was an organophosphorus substance. Later, sheep dipping was required twice a year. That requirement was withdrawn in Great Britain in 1992 and in Northern Ireland shortly



afterwards. The very important fact that farmers throughout the United Kingdom were required by law to use these compounds underpins this report.

The effects of organophosphorus poisoning — whether the compounds were used properly or improperly — occur mainly in the nervous system. The symptoms, which are listed on page 6 of the report, range from chronic breathing problems, impaired co-ordination, weakness, headaches, nausea, diarrhoea and blurred vision to occasional uncontrollable rage, lack of concentration and memory impairment. When these are at an advanced stage the sufferer is unable to work or do even the most basic tasks.

Organophosphorus compounds are licensed by the Government for use under certain conditions, but the Committee is most concerned that the authority which licenses them is also responsible for monitoring their effects. The Committee feels that it is totally wrong to have the same organization both approving products and policing their use. That ought to be changed.

The organophosphorus sufferers in Northern Ireland have been treated particularly poorly. Their claims and ailments have not been taken seriously. Indeed, someone in Northern Ireland who wants to have his condition properly diagnosed has to travel to the diagnostic centre in Glasgow. Members will be shocked to learn that those seeking a consultation have to wait more than three years. The Committee regards this as extremely worrying. However, we are pleased to report that, following representations to the Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland — indeed, Dr Campbell was here — the Government have agreed to establish a diagnostic centre in the province. That is an important development, but we want the Government to go a little further and incorporate a detoxification unit. The report calls for the necessary resources to be made available.

During the past few months we have noticed a distinct change in the Government's attitude. Perhaps this is because the Labour Party took this issue seriously when in opposition. A BBC programme has revealed that doctors were recently issued with a new booklet on chemical poisoning, and farmers now have to obtain a certificate of competence before they are allowed to purchase sheep-dip formulations. In effect, this puts the burden for safe use on them only. Dipping is no longer compulsory, and medical companies are starting to develop more non-organophosphorus-based compounds and other alternatives.

To campaigners and those suffering from organophosphate poisoning it looks as though the Government are trying to move away from the use of these chemicals because of the damage that they cause, while continuing to deny responsibility for the widespread use of what is an extremely dangerous substance. If they were to acknowledge the problem formally the compensation claims could be crippling, so they say that they remain to be convinced.

In October 1995 the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh was awarded £500,000 for research into the possible long-term effects on human health of organophosphorus sheep-dips. This is to be completed by April 1999. In addition, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has announced two major research projects, worth £1.2 million over three years, on a new approach to the development of a suitable vaccine for sheep-scab, which would not be based on organophosphates. These are



encouraging signs, but much remains to be done. Unfortunately for many of the sufferers, it appears to be being done only grudgingly as a last resort or as the result of legal action.

Many Members will be aware that this issue came to prominence when Gulf War veterans expressed concern that they had contracted what is now termed Gulf War syndrome because of the use of organophosphorus compounds during that conflict. People who, unfortunately, suffer from Gulf War syndrome are in the Chamber today to add their weight to the campaign of the Organophosphorus Sufferers' Association. We welcome our guests but, of course, regret that they come in such circumstances.

In commending this report to the Forum I want to highlight some of its recommendations. Other members of the Committee will develop them.

Standing Committee D and, I hope, the Forum are convinced that there is a clear link between the use of organophosphorus compounds and many disabilities and ailments throughout the United Kingdom. It is estimated that some 500 farmers have been diagnosed. We believe that there are many more who do not know what they are suffering from. We cannot get clear figures from the Government, but we know from the Organophosphorus Sufferers' Association that the numbers are significant. We recommend that a review of all aspects of the use of these compounds, such as how they are licensed and the conditions of use, be undertaken without delay. There must also be a review of the effects of the poisoning. This must include consideration of the possibility of genetic transmission, for we took very moving testimony from sufferers who are convinced that their ailments or disabilities have been passed on to their children.

Pending completion of this review, and acknowledging the advice of the leading expert in organophosphate poisoning — Dr Goran Jamal, who runs the diagnostic clinic in Glasgow and feels that organophosphorus users could be at even greater risk than was previously thought — we recommend a moratorium on the use of these compounds. We also recommend that the Government take action to raise public awareness of the problem and to ensure that information on organophosphate usage and poisoning is made freely available to all concerned. It was with alarm that we discovered that many of the fact sheets and information bulletins have to be paid for. Information should be freely available to those who are or may be suffering from this disease.

As I have said, we recommend that the diagnostic centre, which we hope will be located in Belfast, be expanded to include a detoxification unit. We have not yet got a firm commitment, but we have asked that the matter be proceeded with without delay. Additional resources must be made available so that no other part of the Health Service will suffer. The resources must be additional, for this is clearly an additional problem.

Perhaps our most important recommendation is that the Government, through the regional Chief Medical Officers, institute a programme of education in toxicology to ensure that GPs can recognize organophosphate poisoning and take their patients seriously. Nothing could be more hurtful or more damaging to a patient's confidence in his doctor than being told, despite knowing that he is suffering from some condition and knowing how he got it, that there is nothing wrong with him and that he should catch himself on. That is scandalous and most hurtful. We appeal to doctors in particular, but also to farmers' representatives and



unions, to the wider community and to politicians at all levels to address this issue seriously. The problem is going to grow and grow.

I believe that the Government are frightened to deal with the issue. It undoubtedly frightens the product manufacturers, for we could be dealing with something much worse than the asbestosis claims or the claims against tobacco companies — something that could cost billions of pounds. The sooner the Government recognize the problem and respect and compensate those who have suffered years of anguish as a result of it, the better.

I present the report to the Forum with these convictions, and I hope that it will be adopted.

2.30 pm

**Mr Shannon:** I endorse Mr Campbell's comments.

Two or three years ago, if you had asked a member of the public what organophosphates were and how they affected people, he would have looked at you blankly and said that he had no idea. One of the people in the Gallery today started the ball rolling in order to heighten public awareness of the problems associated with organophosphorus poisoning. He has been a sufferer for 30 years, so he has a wealth of experience. But he is just one of many. The report's recommendations are meant to highlight the problems faced by sufferers and, at the same time, suggest how the Government might help them. They need recognition as well as consideration from the powers that be.

As a result of the work done by Committee D, the dangers of organophosphates have been exposed. I know that, like myself, members of the sufferers' organization appreciate all the hard work that Mr Barnes and his staff have put into compiling this excellent report, which I hope will be a blueprint for many years.

People who have suffered for a long time are glad to know that they are not on their own. We now know that as many as 500 — farmers and others who have come into contact with organophosphates — are affected. Some have suffered for 30 years, unable to convince their doctors.

The Health and Safety Executive, the National Office for Animal Health and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food recommend different methods of protection in cases of long-term contact. One document states that gloves must be worn, another that gloves may be worn, and yet another that gloves are not required. That does not make sense. How are people to know what to do?

The Committee feels that the Government have not disseminated the relevant information and that the guidelines they have issued are woefully inadequate. A BBC fact sheet for the programme "Disaster — The Chemical Scythe" indicated that crucial medical and health-and-safety information had been withheld or was not available. It is extremely important that all the relevant information be made available to all those who come in contact with organophosphates so that they can take the necessary precautions.



We welcome the announcement that a detoxification centre is to be set up to treat those who suffer chronic organophosphate poisoning, and we urge the Forum to press for its establishment as soon as possible.

Much has been said about Gulf War syndrome. There are several sufferers in the Gallery today. Everyone is aware of this malady and has heard about people who have died from it. The victims suffer from severe depression. Their emotionally disturbed state results in bad temper, flare-up, depression and tiredness — symptoms very similar to those of organophosphate poisoning.

In England a shepherd received compensation of £80,000, but before he could catch his breath the Government took £40,000 to recoup disability and sickness payments. That was grossly unfair. There have also been successful cases in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and other parts of the world. The condition is not peculiar to the United Kingdom.

A very disturbing aspect of this matter was highlighted in the evidence of a lady sufferer. She is worried about the possibility of the effects of organophosphate poisoning being passed from parent to child — in her case, to a seven-year-old daughter. She feels that this is worthy of further research. We agree that there may well be a danger of hereditary transmission.

One of the people in the Gallery today has a grandchild who was born with deformed hands and feet. When the child was one month old a sample of his hair was sent to a homoeopathic expert in Canada. Tests revealed that there was poison in the child's body. He is now one year old, and, following treatment, his hands and feet have loosened — if that is the correct term. The child's grandfather sent a sample of his hair to be tested, and it seems that he too has a trace of poison. It is too early to say whether there is a match, but until all the questions are answered we must take the matter seriously.

All relevant information must be made available to farmers, contractors, vets, doctors and the general public, and there should be no charge. Time and money would be well spent on a campaign to draw attention to the dangers of organophosphates.

Many people who are involved in farming, directly or indirectly, have come into contact with organophosphates. Some of us own sheep or help neighbours to dip theirs and have often been soaked in the process. But we were not aware of the danger. Genetic make-up may have something to do with whether a person becomes ill.

A programme of toxicological education of doctors should be set up. It is important that GPs learn to recognize the symptoms of the effects of exposure and ensure that victims are treated. And those who handle organophosphates must protect themselves by obeying the new health and safety instructions.

The Department of Health and Social Services should monitor the research of the local company Radox Laboratories Limited into Gulf War syndrome and should act on any information that emerges.



This report should be sent to the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Health and Social Services and the Health and Safety Executive. It does not overstate the problems, and the Departments responsible for these issues need to be made aware of the dangers.

**Mr McCarthy:** I support this report, and I pay tribute to the Committee's Chairman and other members and to Mr Barnes and his staff for all their excellent work. I also thank all those who gave evidence.

The report reveals some startling facts. Many people are probably hearing about this very serious problem for the first time. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I offer sympathy and support to all those who are suffering as a result of having used these compounds. I was very distressed by the sufferers' evidence. For a long time they got very little sympathy from anybody, including medical people. The association will be able to highlight their problems, and something may now be done to help them.

In bringing this very detailed report to the Forum, the Committee is playing its part, and it will continue to do so. As the Committee Chairman said, the Chief Medical Officer's announcement that a local diagnostic centre is to be set up is very important. This facility will be of enormous benefit to sufferers.

The report contains more than a dozen recommendations. I hope that Members will endorse them and that this dreadful problem will be overcome as quickly as possible.

I fully support the report.

**Mr Junkin:** Organophosphorus insecticides have been taken for granted by the farming industry for far too long. On the advice of the Government and the manufacturers, vast amounts were used by farm workers to control the bugs responsible for sheep-scab, cabbage root-flies and lesser-known insects such as litter-beetles. These parasites cannot be left to proliferate. They really thrive on healthy stock and plants and, in return, bring disease, discomfort and economic disaster. Organophosphorus compounds have been around for a very long time, being considered the most economical means of controlling certain parasites. In my younger days they appeared to be safe to use, in spite of the obnoxious smell. But country people here and across the water have become more affluent. Rural electrification has had a major effect on communication in the countryside.

Television has helped to relieve the relative isolation of farmers and their families. I remember the programme about Hannah Hauxwell, who lived a very isolated life in Yorkshire. Favourite programmes have done much to highlight the good and the bad in British farming practice. It was through the BBC's long-running Sunday farming programme that I became aware that organophosphorus had hidden dangers. Like thousands of others who watched that programme every week, I learnt that the products I was handling, spraying and sometimes, as Mr Shannon said, falling into were much more dangerous than I had been led to believe.



*2.45 pm*

Mystery illnesses, particularly among those who handle sheep dipped in organophosphorus products, became more apparent and too numerous to be coincidental. Men and women in the industry have symptoms of serious problems with the central nervous system and suffer from all sorts of other physically debilitating conditions. Over the years television pictures from all parts of the country — the Orkneys, the Yorkshire Dales, the West Country, Wales and even Ulster — have made us aware that organophosphate products may do more harm to farmers' health than was previously realized.

As Mr Shannon has said, the membership of the Committee does not include doctors or other medical experts, but it does include sheep, cattle and poultry farmers, as well as growers. Between us we have a good working knowledge of the biology of living things. We understand the effects of stress on stock. We know how uneasiness affects the animals we care for, and we compete with each other to produce the best and safest food in Europe. Thus we spot problems early — well before they can overwhelm stock. And over the years we were noticing a growing problem — one that affected not sheep or poultry but our own kith and kin who were using organophosphorus products.

This major report deals with ailments, with safety codes and current research and treatment. I believe the central nervous system to be the most important part of the human anatomy. It controls taste, smell, sight, hearing and feeling — virtually everything. I may need a second opinion, but my central nervous system seems to be OK. I cannot bear to think of losing my good health. I cannot bear to think of damage to my central nervous system. But that is what has happened to many people, some of whom are in this Chamber today. We need new research and new health care. We also need a change in the Government's attitude to those who suffer from ailments related to organophosphate poisoning — people whose lives were wrecked as they worked to provide cheaper food for the supermarkets.

The report calls for action. That is why I support the motion.

**Mr Stewart:** We have heard about how people are affected by these substances. I want to thank all those who gave evidence and especially the people who are in the Gallery today. I also want to thank Mr Barnes for the work that he put into the report.

The only lady who gave evidence — Mrs Cherry — has suffered for more than 10 years. She can walk only a short distance and has had to give up swimming. She cannot enjoy family life with her husband. It is very sad. And, as Mr Shannon pointed out, her seven-year-old daughter is affected. What that family is going through.

I appreciate the work that the Organophosphorus Sufferers' Association is doing through Mr Patterson.

The Committee recommends that the Government take action to ensure that information about the effects of organophosphate poisoning is made available free of charge to those concerned.

I support the motion.



**Mr David Campbell:** I failed to mention earlier that an all-party parliamentary working group has been set up and has been meeting over the past few weeks. It includes some Members of the Forum. May I add to Mr Shannon's recommendation by suggesting that a copy of this report be sent to the working group.

I am grateful to all Members for their comments and support.

**The Chairman:** My attention having been drawn to the absence of a quorum, I shall suspend the meeting briefly.

*The meeting was suspended at 2.53 pm and resumed at 2.57 pm.*

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

This Forum adopts the report by Standing Committee D 'Organophosphate Insecticides — Their Use by the Farming Community'.

**The Chairman:** I want to say a few words to those in the Gallery who represent the Organophosphorus Sufferers' Association.

All Forum Members, including myself, wish you well. We have the deepest sympathy for you and for those whom you represent, who have gone through this appalling trauma. As a former soldier I appreciate that there were some who regarded Gulf War syndrome as a product of the imagination. Having read this report and considered all the evidence that is piling up, I do not believe that that was the right attitude to take then, and I am sure that it will not be taken in the future. Good luck to you, and thank you for your attention.

#### FORUM SUBMISSION TO CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER

**Mr McAlister:** Mr Chairman, as we may have an opportunity to speak to the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he visits the province, you asked the Economy Committee to prepare a list of requests. What we have produced is not a list of everything we want, for that would not be productive. It reflects the principles set out in the budget and takes into account the special circumstances in Northern Ireland. There are many things that people everywhere would like to have, but here we are looking at matters that are peculiar to Northern Ireland.

Our first list included matters in the following areas: the agricultural sector; petrol retailing, with particular reference to the border areas; the strength of sterling; public transport; tourism; research and development; free-trade areas; training and information



technology; the manufacturing sector, with emphasis on exports; tax incentives for specialist sectors, such as the film industry; rural craft; and farm diversification. That long and varied list was cut to four items about which we consider it appropriate to talk to the Chancellor. I will explain why we feel justified in asking for particular assistance for Northern Ireland in these areas.

Let us look first at agriculture. We fully support all that the Forum's Agriculture Committee is seeking to do for that industry, but we need a top-to-bottom review because of the effects of BSE, the change in status in the European Union and the changes in world trade that will take place in the next few years. The list is endless. We support in principle a retirement scheme for farmers but have not gone into specifics. We felt that the subject had not yet been considered in sufficient detail. Anyway, it is not peculiar to Northern Ireland.

However, there are two areas of the agriculture industry where we can justifiably claim to be in a special position and to need help. I refer to the remarketing of beef for export and to the improvements that are necessary to bring local producers up to the standards required by the supermarket chains.

3.00 pm

We feel justified in asking for special help because of the beef industry's high level of dependence on exports, the effects of the BSE crisis and the importance of farming, particularly the beef sector, to the Northern Ireland economy. I want to read a statement that I have prepared in consultation with the beef industry:

"The beef export ban has had a disproportionate impact in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the United Kingdom. Our very success (and 80% dependence) in exports was also our downfall. It has not been possible to replace this lost business with new customers in Great Britain, so the economic impact on the meat processors and farmers has been more acute here. This has led to a loss of confidence and investment at farm and factory level. Clear signs of recognition of this from Government will be important."

**Mr Bolton:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McAlister:** I would prefer to continue. Members may comment afterwards.

**The Chairman:** When Mr McAlister has finished I will call anyone who wishes to make a contribution.

**Mr McAlister:** The beef industry has a few more hurdles to get over. It is clear that there will be a big problem in remarketing what is a first-class, a world-class, product with the aim of regaining the position it held prior to BSE. I believe, and the beef industry believes, that it can be done. However, it will require a special effort. The Chancellor could give a grant for a set period to help exporters with promotion and anything else they need to get back into the markets. We are asking the Chancellor to consider either grant-aiding or giving tax incentives to the beef industry. It would be a short-term measure — maybe one or two years — for a specialist area.

**Mr Hussey:** On a point of order, Mr Chairman. I have been checking with Ulster Unionist members of the Committee. They feel that this is perhaps going beyond a statement



and beginning to look like the introduction of a report which, I understand, is to be dealt with next week.

**Mr Robert John White:** I understood that this was to be a short statement, though I must admit that I have not been giving it my full attention. If this is adumbration, Heaven help us when the report is being presented.

**The Chairman:** I understood that you wished to make four points, Mr McAlister. Is it correct to say that you are still adumbrating them?

**Mr McAlister:** How long is a piece of string? I could present this in synopsis form in one minute, but Members would probably say that I had not given enough detail. I have shortened what was discussed in the Committee and am explaining what we are asking for and why.

**The Chairman:** Presumably with the approval of the Committee.

**Mr McAlister:** Yes. I could have put it all on one page, but Members would have wondered what we had been doing for the last 10 days.

The other area in this sector that needs special consideration is the agri-food industry. It is quite apparent that there is now a ground swell of support among consumers for the sourcing of local produce by supermarket chains. This week Sainsbury's announced that it has increased the number of local suppliers from 10 to 68 and that it is looking for more. To this end it hopes soon to hold a one-day or two-day show in Newry to explain what it wants from suppliers.

The Northern Ireland agri-food industry deserves special help because it is starting from a lower base. Supermarket chains have been operating in the rest of the United Kingdom for quite some time. Producers there have had years to get ahead of us. We are asking for a level playing-field. The Chancellor could really help local producers to achieve the standards required by the supermarkets.

I need not go into much detail about the petrol retailers. Everyone knows about the border situation. Retailers throughout Northern Ireland now have the additional problem of sales of illegal fuel. The owner of a border petrol station told us that a Lisburn haulier now employs a man to drive his lorries down once a week for filling. He can pay the driver's wages and still make money. That is business, and there is nothing wrong with it, but it shows that the problem is not confined to the border areas.

The duty on unleaded petrol is 43·99p in the United Kingdom and 24·54p sterling in the Republic. In the case of diesel the corresponding amounts are 44·99p and 21·35p. The differences are considerable.

**Mr Speers:** May I make a small point in that connection?

**The Chairman:** When Mr McAlister has finished I will call other Members. That is what was agreed.



**Mr McAlister:** In its discussions with the Petrol Retailers' Association the Committee agreed to ask the Chancellor to consider the following: the establishment of a working group to assess the loss to the United Kingdom Government; the establishment of a working group to define the risks of public safety from dispensing fuels illegally; meaningful discussions with the Eire Government to address the evasion of duty and VAT on both sides of the border; the introduction of a short-term concession for people in border areas (something that the Chancellor could do very quickly); and agreement with the Irish Government on harmonizing fuel taxation immediately and on continuing that arrangement in the long term.

Prompt action is needed desperately. The figures are staggering. One estimate from an oil distributor puts the loss to the Exchequer at between £60 million and £100 million a year. Then there are the job losses, the drop in shop sales, and so on. The figures are unknown, but it is clear that the amount of money involved is considerable. The Chancellor could do something about this now.

**The Chairman:** Is that your last point?

**Mr McAlister:** No. I am coming to my last two points, Mr Chairman.

**The Chairman:** This is stretching out a bit.

**Mr McAlister:** OK: we want help with public transport and with research and development — end of story.

**The Chairman:** That is fine.

The 14 or 15 points that the Committee might have mentioned were reduced to four generic items, and the Committee Chairman has given some quite detailed information. Any point that a Member makes must be about something that is peculiar to Northern Ireland.

**Mr Bolton:** I want to make a point about the reform of the common agricultural policy under Agenda 2000. A high percentage of help for agriculture will be put into a national envelope, which the Government do not have to open. The Committee should make a very strong case for that envelope to be opened to Northern Ireland farmers.

**Mr Hussey:** I totally agree with a point that Mr McAlister made. Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom that borders a foreign state. Will the Committee consider the effect of increased fuel costs on delivery prices, particularly in the west, which depends entirely on roads?

**Mr Sammy Wilson:** With regard to the Petrol Retailers' Association, Mr McAlister said that there would have to be discussions with the Dublin Government. I trust that this will not entail the setting up of a cross-border body with executive powers.

**Mr Speers:** I understand that in my area there are 10 or 12 illegal outlets for fuel imported, apparently illegally, from the Irish Republic. Apparently some added ingredient



alters the quality. It is not detectable in performance for some time, but eventually the vehicle is damaged. Can the Committee look into this matter? There is the adverse effect on petrol outlets in my part of the country, but car owners too, while probably gaining in the short term, will be major losers in the long term. Is the DUP, including Mr Wilson, coming to the conclusion that there is a need for cross-border bodies?

3.15 pm

**The Chairman:** We shall have to fight to get the Chancellor here. He will not come if we send him a raft of things. Mr McAlister has done his best to winnow out all but fundamental matters. The Forum should encourage him. We want something succinct that we can put to the Chancellor, through the usual channels, before he comes to Northern Ireland.

**Mr Foster:** A matter that could be taken up with the Chancellor is the deplorably high cost of air travel between Northern Ireland and the mainland. Many people take cheaper flights from Dublin, and our economy is losing out. The chairman of British Midland said this morning that air travel between here and the mainland is among the cheapest in the United Kingdom. My experience is that it is extremely costly. People flying from Liverpool and Manchester to Dublin are offered low fares. This benefits tourism in the Republic. Something similar should be done to boost the tourist trade in Northern Ireland. Excessive fares are destroying the economy.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** Mr Chairman, I want to emphasize your point that it is essential for the Committee to focus solely on issues which are peculiar to this province. The Chancellor has made it clear that Northern Ireland will not get any special money, that there will be no special deal. However, he should be prepared to consider special tax initiatives because of our unique position in the United Kingdom in that we have a land border with another nation. Northern Ireland has a disproportionately high rural population. The Committee would do very well to focus on regional peculiarities, which could prove irresistible to the Chancellor.

**Mr McAlister:** The Committee has discussed all these matters. In fact, the Vice-Chairperson went yesterday to a special meeting on air fares and will report to the Committee next week, as I would have explained if I had been given a few more minutes. As Mr Paisley has said, there would have been no point in drawing up a shopping list that would get us nowhere. We therefore looked at specific items.

Finally, may I seek the Forum's permission to condense this into a concise paper for next week, taking on board Members' comments today? We can present it to the Chancellor in person if he comes here, or write to him if he does not.

**The Chairman:** There is an old saying: "Sometimes the best is the enemy of the good." I am firmly of the view that unless the Forum issues something soon — within the next few days — we may forget about it. We must get something to the Chancellor quickly, via the usual channels, without further debate.



**Mr McAlister:** That is why I seek Members' permission. We could have a concise letter prepared by Monday.

**Mr Calvert:** I deplore the fact that Mr McAlister was not given a proper opportunity to make his points.

Although not a member of the Economy Committee, I would like to draw the Forum's attention to the cost of flying to the Isle of Man. I go to the TT races there every year, *Deo volente*, and the fare has jumped from £79 to £160. It is a disgrace.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** The cheapest way to get to the mainland — one that I highly recommend — is by boat from Ballycastle to Campbeltown. Mr Calvert could go that way.

### SPECIAL DEBATE (RULE 10(5))

#### *Motion made and Question proposed:*

That this House at its rising today do adjourn until Friday 10 April 1998. — [*The Chairman*]

**Mr Shannon:** I want to make some comments about the Maze inquiry and the Narey Report. It is important that we put down a marker. What did the Government's Maze inquiry achieve? Not what we wanted: a clear, concise account of what had happened. Neither did it convince those of us who had doubts about it that it had any integrity.

We asked for an independent inquiry, but that is not what this was. It was a Government inquiry. Numerous people have said that they are unhappy with it. The Government have failed to address the real concern about the murder of Billy Wright. The report describes as a red herring the absence of any officer in the tower overlooking the LVF and INLA compounds. It is not a red herring. This is a question to which people want an answer. They want to know why there was no officer there. Had there been one he could have warned the authorities.

I am astonished that no one has been held accountable for the blunders, including the escape of Liam Averill — the cross-dresser — and the smuggling of weapons into the prison. What about the IRA escape tunnel? What about the ongoing investigation into the murder of David Keys? Perhaps that incident was not within the remit. All these questions must be answered. The shortcomings of the report are obvious. I say once again that an independent inquiry is the only way forward.

I am surprised and annoyed that the Irish Government and the officers commanding all the paramilitary groups in the prison, with the exception of the INLA, were asked for their opinion. It is a pity that Mr Donaldson is not here, for he mentioned this matter. Why do the Irish Government have to be consulted about the running of the Maze Prison? And why should the commanding officers, bar the INLA's, be asked for their opinion? Did they say "Have a look at the report. If you are happy with it we will make it public. If not, we will change it."? Their comments were unnecessary and irrelevant.



We must have a full and independent inquiry into management and security at the Maze. There is a definite conspiracy theory. People are concerned about the working of the Maze, and they do not believe that this inquiry addressed the issues. There must be a security crack-down in the wake of the Maze murders. It seems that no one has been made accountable for the breaches, including the murder of Billy Wright, and these have led to further deterioration in the rest of the province.

What happens at the Maze has a detrimental effect on life outside. It is essential that the Government ensure that prisoners, despite their crimes, are held in safety.

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** Tomorrow is a big day in Irish football, with the morning clash at Windsor Park between Linfield and Glentoran in the Bass Irish Cup semi-final. Members will be aware of what happened a few weeks ago at the same venue. I urge people to behave responsibly on this occasion — players as well as fans. The city and Northern Ireland got very bad publicity the last time. It would be disastrous if there were a repeat tomorrow. The finger has been pointed at a number of people. Some folk blamed the police, who seemed to be caught unawares, while others were very unhappy about the security arrangements.

Tomorrow's kick-off has been brought forward from 3.00 pm to 11.00 am, and the crowd has been restricted to 6,000, each club receiving 3,000 tickets. That is not satisfactory. The clubs will lose quite a lot of money. I hope for better arrangements in the future. Sporting fixtures — whether motorcycling, rugby or soccer — should be family affairs. Sport will be the loser if behaviour of this type continues.

I appeal to the Irish Football Association — the body organizing this fixture — the clubs, the fans and the police to ensure that tomorrow we will let not just the rest of Northern Ireland but the mainland and Europe as well see that we can stage a soccer match properly and that players can behave themselves properly.

**Mr Shannon:** Does the Member agree that the really important match is the one next Tuesday night between Ards and Omagh?

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** There has also been speculation that the police —

**Mr Hunter:** I agree entirely with Mr Shannon. After the brilliant performance last night against Ballymena United in the Irish News Cup — a cross-community newspaper competition — I look forward to victory against Ards and to premier league football next season for Omagh Town.

**Mr Jim Rodgers:** Members will be glad to know that the Omagh manager has resigned over Mr Hunter.

**Mr Hunter:** Absolutely not. It is a sad day when people like Mr Rodgers spread falsehoods in this Chamber. He ought to reconsider his position.

**The Chairman:** With one barrister turning out to be a wealthy farmer, and another a football manager, it seems that there is a good deal of initiative and versatility among Forum Members.



**Mr Jim Rodgers:** It has been said that the police may prosecute some of the players who were involved in the recent Irish League match between the Glens and the Blues. I hope that it will not come to that. Week in, week out, we see television footage of Gaelic fixtures that the police are not allowed to attend. There are many brawls, but nothing is ever done. The police should treat members of our community equally. I fully support the Royal Ulster Constabulary, but I have to say that if it goes down this road the floodgates to more divisions will be opened.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** I want to reiterate the points made by my Colleague Mr Shannon about the Narey report. It is amazing that a person of such so-called calibre should be asked to investigate not only the escape of Liam Averill but also how a gun was smuggled in to murder an inmate. He says that he was unable to discover how the gun was smuggled in, but he has identified 59 ways to improve security so that it will not happen again. If he does not know where the security breach is, how can he plug it? I was with Sir David Ramsbotham, Her Majesty's Inspector of Prisons, just this week. He indicated that he had been sent here for one purpose: to prepare the prisoners for release. He made it perfectly clear that the Secretary of State believes that if she can get a sizeable "Yes" vote in the referenda the prison gates will be opened.

3.30 pm

On Monday 'The Times' published a letter in which the Secretary of State is supposed to have told Jack Straw that she would not agree to a change in the employment rights of prison officers because she intended that there would be a series of lay-offs over the next two years. So the ground is being prepared for redundancies. If the Government get their way, terrorist prisoners will be out before their time. It is a shame.

But that is not the only shameful thing to have happened recently. This American, Mr Mitchell, told us that the Stormont talks had a 15-day deadline — 15 days of eating, drinking, sleeping and politics. It is a disgrace that an outsider can tell the people of Northern Ireland that their future is to be bartered within a set time. Mo Mowlam emphasized this morning that there are six days to go. But in whose interests is this deadline? It is in the interests of the Provisional IRA and Sinn Féin. On coming into the process, Sinn Féin made it very clear that it wanted a deadline. All the parties that stay in the process are working to Gerry Adams's deadline, whether they like it or not. People who allow themselves to be forced into negotiating round the clock — negotiating Northern Ireland's future under duress — are showing just how inept they really are. This deal will be rammed down the throats of the people round that table.

The outcome of the negotiations is predetermined. Yesterday we heard Bertie Ahern arrogantly making it clear that there will be no more concessions from Dublin. What concessions has Dublin made? Maybe some Ulster Unionists who have been up to Stormont can tell us.

**Mr Stoker:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** In a moment.



Maybe some Ulster Unionists — *[Interruption]*

I will give way when I have made my point. The Member should not, like Mo Mowlam, expect an answer before the question is asked.

Maybe someone in the Ulster Unionist Party will tell us what concessions Dublin has made. I do not think the public are aware of any.

**Mr Stoker:** If the Member were in the talks he would know what sorts of concessions have been made.

**Mr Ian Paisley Jnr:** The Member cannot give us a list of the concessions that Dublin has made. Would he like to tell us what benefits this process has brought to the Unionist people? Obviously not. The Member's silence speaks volumes. There has not been a single benefit for Unionists. Our children will look back on the people who took part in the negotiations and say "There is nothing to thank them for."

But there have been many benefits for the Provisionals. They have been legitimized. Their negotiators are now the main men. They are acceptable. You can talk to them, and you can appear on television with them. They are acceptable politicians. According to the Secretary of State "They are just like any other politicians." But we know that they are not. They will never be acceptable.

Mr Ahern has decided that there will be no more concessions — not that there ever were any. The Dublin Government are going to push this process to the very end. Let me remind people what William Thompson said in the Ulster Hall last night when he shared a platform with other Unionists — that if no agreement is reached by the time this process comes to an end, that will not be the end of Northern Ireland. Those were sensible words. There are far too many people hyping up this process, saying that if we do not get agreement, all will be at an end.

On 'Inside Politics' last week Lord Alderdice said that unless we reached agreement Northern Ireland would be heading towards the abyss — again. It is intolerable for politicians deliberately to fan sectarian flames in order to justify their involvement. I look forward to the end of this process. Not only will we be able to make our choice; we will also get a chance to answer the Secretary of State, to answer Gerry Adams and to ask Bertie Ahern "Which part of 'Get out' do you fail to understand?"

**Mr Speers:** My first topic will no doubt touch the hearts of many Members. It is the tragic, brutal murder of Cyril Stewart in Armagh last Friday evening when he and his wife, Joan, had been out shopping. They normally went out on a Friday afternoon, so those intending to murder this retired reserve constable had to wait some time to get their target. I understand that members of the INLA have claimed responsibility for the murder, and I utterly condemn them. Much has been said about this incident. I have no wish to be repetitive, but I want to express the hope that the Forum's sympathy will be conveyed to Mrs Stewart and her daughter on the brutal murder of one of Ulster's most decent, upright



citizens. He was a policeman whom I knew very well. In fact, I know the whole family well. I hope that you, Mr Chairman, will feel it appropriate to write to Mrs Stewart.

**The Chairman:** I am sure everybody agrees that that is a good idea. I shall write to Mrs Stewart.

**Mr Speers:** My second point — this is a matter that I have raised in the Agriculture Committee — concerns the draft reports that come before the Forum. I have here the draft report on transport in rural areas. Having been adopted, it is now the report of the Forum. As it was not amended, it really reflects only the monopoly of brains in the Committee that drew it up. Mr McAlister said that the Committee had sought the views of Forum Members. Not all Committees have done so in the past. I would be interested to know whether any draft reports have been amended by the Forum.

I am making this point as I feel that one or two of the issues raised this morning — for instance, I referred to roads in my area, and Mr Foster referred to Enniskillen — are important and worthy of inclusion. I am quite sure that the same thing has happened in the past and is likely to happen in the future. This is a procedural matter that needs to be addressed. There should be a mechanism for incorporating in a report points brought up in the Forum.

**Rev Trevor Kirkland:** This has happened in the case of the Education Committee. It has circulated information and questions to Members, but without response.

**The Chairman:** Mr Speers's point is a good one. If there are other ideas, they too should be aired. If the present system is not effective, perhaps we should devise another one.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Forum at its rising today do adjourn until Friday 10 April 1998.

*The Forum was adjourned at 3.42 pm.*