



**BRITISH-IRISH INTER-
PARLIAMENTARY BODY**

**COMHLACHT IDIR-
PHARLAIMINTEACH NA BREATAINE
AGUS NA hÉIREANN**

TWENTY-EIGHTH PLENARY CONFERENCE

19 and 20 April 2004

Inchydoney, West Cork

OFFICIAL REPORT
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Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the British-Irish Parliamentary Reporting Association. They should be sent to:

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to arrive no later than 17 June 2004

IN ATTENDANCE

CO-CHAIRMEN

Mr Brendan Smith TD

Mr David Winnick MP

MEMBERS AND ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

Mr Barry Andrews TD

Mr Harry Barnes MP

Mr Joe Benton MP

Mr Johnny Brady TD

Rt Hon the Lord Brooke

of Sutton Mandeville CH

Senator Paul Coghlan

Dr Jerry Cowley TD

Mr Seymour Crawford TD

Mr Tony Cunningham MP

Dr Jimmy Devins TD

The Lord Dubs

Ms Helen Eadie MSP

Mr Jeff Ennis MP

Mrs Margaret Ewing MSP

Mr Paul Flynn MP

Mr Donald J Gelling CBE MLC

Mr Mike German AM

Mr Dominic Grieve MP

Mr John Griffiths AM

Senator Brian Hayes

Ms Cecilia Keaveney TD

Mr Andy King MP

Mr Conor Lenihan TD

Dr Dai Lloyd AM

Rt Hon Andrew Mackay MP

Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP

Rt Hon Michael Mates MP

Mr Steve McCabe MP

Senator Michael McCarthy

Senator Joe McHugh

Mrs Rosemary McKenna MP CBE

Mr David McLetchie MSP

Mr Kevin McNamara MP

Mr John McWilliam MP

Senator Martin Mansergh

Senator Paschal Mooney

Mr Arthur Morgan TD

Senator Francie O'Brien

Mr William O'Brien MP

Ms Liz O'Donnell TD

Mr Jim O'Keeffe TD

Mr Ned O'Keeffe TD

Senator Mary O'Rourke

Mr Séamus Pattison TD

Mr Chris Ruane MP

Mr Alex Salmond MP

Mr Joe Sherlock TD

Mr Iain Smith MSP

The Lord Smith of Clifton

Mr Hugo Swire MP

The Lord Temple-Morris

Mr Gareth Thomas MP

Mr Murray Tosh MSP

STEERING COMMITTEE

<i>Co-Chairmen</i>	Mr David Winnick MP Mr Brendan Smith TD
<i>Members</i>	Mr Kevin McNamara MP Mr Séamus Kirk TD Mr Michael Mates MP Mr Jim O’Keeffe TD

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<i>Committee B: European Affairs</i>	Mr Mike Clark Mr David Keating
<i>Committee C: Economic</i>	Mr Colm McGrady Mr Mike Hennessy
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BRITISH-IRISH INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY

COMHLAUGHT IDIR-PHARLAIMINTEACH NA BREATAINE AGUS NA hÉIREANN

TWENTY-EIGHTH PLENARY CONFERENCE

Monday 19 April 2004

The Body met at 9.30 am.

PLENARY BUSINESS

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): I welcome Co-Chairman Mr David Winnick MP, Members and guests to the plenary session. I trust that we will have a productive meeting during the next two days. I remind Members that the Body's proceedings do not attract parliamentary privilege.

Since the Body's previous plenary conference there has been one change in the United Kingdom membership. Mr Chris Ruane MP, a former Associate Member, has been nominated to replace Mr John Battle MP, who becomes an Associate Member. In concurrence with rule 2(a), the following Associate Members have accepted the Steering Committee's invitation to assume Members' powers and responsibilities for the entire session: Mr Barry Andrews TD; Senator Michael McCarthy; Senator Paul Coghlan; Mr Ned O'Keefe TD; Mr Tony Cunningham MP; Mr Paul Flynn MP; Mr Dominic Grieve MP; Mr Andy King MP; Mr John McWilliam MP; Mr Alex Salmond MP; Mr Gareth Thomas MP; and Ms Helen Eadie MSP.

At 3.30 pm, at the conclusion of item 3 on the Programme of Business — the motion on European Union enlargement — a group photograph will be taken.

ADOPTION OF PROPOSED PROGRAMME OF BUSINESS

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith): Members have received the proposed Programme of Business. Is the proposed order of business agreed?

Programme of Business agreed.

RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): The Co-Chairman and I would find it extremely useful if those Members who wish to speak in the debate, but who have not already given their names to the Clerks, could do so as soon as possible; otherwise, they should indicate to the Chair their wish to participate in the debate.

Mr Jim O'Keefe TD: I beg to move

That the Body reaffirms its support for the Good Friday Agreement, the workings of which are now being reviewed; welcomes the continued commitment of both Governments, and the considerable progress made to date in its implementation; notes that elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly were held in November 2003; regrets that the devolved institutions have been suspended since October 2002 and urges all parties to work together to secure their early restoration; and looks forward to a sustained period of political stability in which the devolved institutions can operate effectively for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland and of these islands.

I draw Members' attention to a small amendment to the motion as originally circulated. After "the Good Friday Agreement," the words

"the workings of which are now being reviewed"

have been added. The agreement itself is not being reviewed. That is of some significance.

The Body has consistently given its full support to the Good Friday Agreement. We have recognised, with others, that it represents the only real way forward in order to achieve a just, peaceful and lasting political settlement in Northern Ireland. We welcome both Governments' continuing support for the agreement's full implementation and its fundamental principles.

It is worth recalling what those are. They are the rejection of violence in any form; the commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic politics; the safeguarding of human rights and equality; the promotion of real partnership government on a cross-community and inclusive basis; new policing arrangements; reform of the criminal justice system; and the normalisation of security arrangements.

The agreement is now more than six years old, and great progress has been made in moving forward the peace process. We are entirely satisfied that the agreement that emerged after such protracted negotiations includes the elements essential to healing a divided society and to building relations on and between these islands. Therefore it is important that the two Governments continue in their determination to protect and promote the agreement in every way possible.

New and positive partnerships have been developed within Northern Ireland, in Ireland, North and South, and between Ireland and Britain. Devolved government has brought together representatives of both communities in Northern Ireland to work with a common purpose for the

benefit of all the people in Northern Ireland. It is widely recognised that devolved government worked well and effectively in meeting the needs of the whole community. Its success clearly demonstrates that co-operation based on partnership, mutual respect and equality is the key to finding agreed solutions to, at times, very difficult and contentious issues. The North/South Ministerial Council created an unprecedented level of co-operation between both parts of the island and promoted real partnership that benefited all the people of the island.

Through the British-Irish Council, the Irish and British Governments, together with colleagues from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands, have worked together on areas of mutual interest, including social, environmental and health issues. Progress has been made in the areas of policing, criminal justice, security normalisation, human rights and equality issues, and we look forward to further progress in those areas.

We are clear on what we need: the commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means in the agreement must become a living reality in Northern Ireland. Partnership can only work completely and achieve its reconciling potential when the use or threat of force has been finally removed from the equation. It is worth recalling the considerable progress that has been made since 1998. That serves to underline the fact that the agreement is the only viable template for the future of Northern Ireland in which all sides' aspirations can be accommodated. Of course there have been difficulties during the past six years. In many ways, the agreement has not been given the opportunity to function at optimum level. However, there is no going back on the process of change. That is the message to which we must always return.

The two Governments and the pro-agreement parties in Northern Ireland have invested great efforts in moving the process forward. Much more remains to be done, but the successes of recent years have demonstrated the value and importance of partnership in a tangible and practical way. The key to future stability lies in developing those partnerships further at every level and in building on the progress achieved to date.

It is clear that to move ahead with full implementation of the agreement, we need an end to all forms of paramilitarism, wherever they occur, genuine dialogue between all the parties and the restoration of an inclusive-partnership Government in Northern Ireland. There is no place for violence or the threat of violence in a democracy. Paramilitarism, regardless of whether it is Republican or Loyalist in origin, must cease.

That brings to mind one of the current controversial issues that the report by the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) outlined. I have not read the report but have read a preview of it, compliments of Stephen Collins in yesterday's 'Sunday Tribune'. Many who have read that preview have probably reached the same conclusion as

me: that it is on par with what is contained in the report. I base my remarks on that review, but if that is so, serious issues arise. It reinforces the view that paramilitarism must end. The report concentrates to some degree on IRA activities. However, I talk of paramilitarism in all its forms.

If the report confirms the IRA's continuing existence and its continued involvement in paramilitary and criminal activities, we must face that consequence and be prepared to back the report's recommendations. The issue of the link between the IRA and Sinn Féin has also been raised; another area in which there can be no fudge. We must confront that issue.

9.45 am

This morning's 'Irish Independent' states that Sinn Féin has retaliated first. Its chairman has stated that speculation on the report's contents entirely vindicates his party's position: that the IMC was little more than a tool to be used by the British Government to undermine the electoral mandate of Sinn Féin. My response to that is: bunkum. The IMC, as independent referee, has stated its view. If Sinn Féin's only response is to undermine the independence of that referee then it is no response. It is an issue that no doubt will figure in discussions here.

All sides must also embrace unequivocally the principle and practice of inclusive partnership in the government of Northern Ireland. Partnership is at the core of the British-Irish agreement. There must therefore be a clear and genuine commitment to the full and continuous operation of all the political institutions of that agreement. That entails sharing power in a Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive with all political parties whose mandates give them a right to participate in government. Whatever the origin of the current problems standing in the way of a return to inclusive devolved government in Northern Ireland, all sides share responsibility for ensuring that every effort is made to resolve them and to move forward.

All parties of influence must focus on remedying the deficit of trust and confidence that exists. That brings to the surface another issue of relevance to our discussions: the fact that the DUP, unfortunately not represented on the Body, has made consistent efforts since the last election to engage and has produced a report on strand one. I cannot say that I agree with everything in the report, but the DUP has laid out its stall for discussion. I very much wish the representatives were present so we could actively discuss their views. The DUP, in the meantime, has also put on its web site its views on strands two and three. It is a positive sign that the DUP has been prepared to lay out its stall in that regard. I hope that the next stage will be constructive discussions and debate with the DUP on its particular viewpoints.

All parties of influence must focus on remedying the deficit of trust and confidence that exists. Those core issues are inextricably linked and need to be resolved. I am confident that the Governments will redouble their

efforts to find a solution. The parties involved have a direct responsibility to resolve the issues, and thereby allow us to move to the position where our energies are focused on the real issue of building the peaceful and prosperous future that all the people of Northern Ireland want and deserve.

Discussions with different parties were held at Committee A in Belfast a few weeks ago. There appeared to be an understanding that much room for progress existed in the short term. In fact, many parties appeared to be suggesting that a solution would not be found until after the next UK General Election. It was clear, however, that people felt that a solution would be found. There was a common understanding, as regards timing, that a solution would be found later rather than sooner.

Having spoken about the responsibilities of all parties, there is one other issue that we must deal with in our discussions on the commitment to the British-Irish agreement. At first glance, the forthcoming referendum may appear more relevant to domestic politics, but given the loudly expressed views of the Northern Ireland parties in terms on their concerns about that referendum, we must also discuss the issue here. In particular, it is a matter for discussion here because of the suggestion that the terms of the referendum may be in conflict with the British-Irish agreement or, if not in conflict, may impinge on the working of the agreement. I have considerable concerns in that regard and can confirm that, as spokesperson for my party, I obtained advice from senior counsel, from which I quote this sentence:

“Certainly what is involved is a breach of the multi-party agreement and it is arguable that the obligation to observe the multi-party agreement is carried over into the inter-governmental agreement.”

I will not say any more on the matter now. However, I will speak on the issue in debate in the Dáil later this week.

As far as the Body is concerned, the matter is of relevance in so far as the proposal impinges on the Good Friday Agreement. I am confident that, with real commitment and hard work, the outstanding issues, problems and difficulties will be confronted and resolved. As parliamentarians, we all wish to see an outcome and an early return to devolved parliamentary and political institutions working effectively in Northern Ireland for the benefit of all the people. I recommend this motion for adoption by the Body as an earnest of its continuing support for the Good Friday Agreement and the objective of securing peaceful, stable and effective devolved government in Northern Ireland.

The Lord Temple-Morris: I welcome the opportunity to speak so early in the debate and to follow Mr Jim O’Keeffe. Much of what I say will be closely related to what he has just said. When we spoke on this debate at Ware, we said that not much had been happening and that progress was slow. Little has happened since our conference in Ware. In other words, there has been a marking of time.

In these debates over the years and generally, we have talked about the importance of momentum. It has been crucial to the peace process that we are seen to be going somewhere. At present, much of what is happening is important, but I would describe it as being a form of important political occupational therapy. We hover around the edges of the various problems. We are making some progress but we are not dealing, by way of momentum, with the essential matter — the end of the conflict. That is what it is about. It is about the end as it is perceived and pronounced. We are not, I am afraid, there yet.

To get there, we must decide where to apply the pressure. In one debate it might be on the Unionists or elements of the Unionists, while in another debate it might be on the Nationalists and the Republicans. It is plain and clear to me where we should put the pressure now. It has not altered for the past year or two and the statements of both Prime Ministers have made that clear. The pressure at the moment — obviously we must bring it on everyone concerned — is primarily on the Republican element. That element must face and answer our demands for peace. In saying that, I accept Republican sincerity — and we will hear from Sinn Féin shortly. Mr Gerry Adams and his colleagues have tried hard, and I have had personal experience of that effort from meeting him over the years. He has leant over as far as he possibly can without actually delivering the IRA. Having said that, he must try further.

We need a complete end, not only to the outright violence — I thank God the ceasefire has held all these years — but to all activities inconsistent with the Good Friday Agreement. That means one cannot play games, target people, carry out punishment beatings or continue unpleasant activities. Those must stop. Until they stop, the more extreme elements on the Unionist side have every excuse to behave in the manner in which they have. We have few opportunities, and we need to use whatever opportunity and space we get to pressure them into the fold. Until the Republican side makes this vital step, we cannot bring that pressure.

Arms must be put transparently beyond use. Last October, we had apparently — some people here may know the rough extent of it, but I just know what I read in the newspapers — a significant surrendering of arms. However, it was not transparent. That was a classic example of the Unionists, with the differences among them, being in a position in which David Trimble could not deliver. If anything, he was forced into pronouncements more extreme than those he might like to have made.

He was in a difficult position, and that position is made plain by the recent elections and the now minority position of the Ulster Unionist Party within Unionism.

Last but not least, we need a plain statement that the conflict is over. It is not enough to balance words. Gerry Adams has strained the English language to its utmost to be able to say that he is delivering the IRA. However,

that is not what will deliver the Unionists and enable us to bring pressure right across the board. If we can achieve a situation in which the Republicans deliver on that, the whole situation will change.

The DUP – now the majority party – will have to deliver on its obligation to talk if it is to preserve its position. As matters stand, all sides are becoming more entrenched, they are losing out, momentum is lacking and sufficient pressure cannot be brought to enable the parties concerned to enter into government. Without that fundamental, we cannot achieve our objective. Much good has been achieved. Establishing the Independent Monitoring Commission was an excellent step and the review of the Good Friday Agreement is a necessary step. At the same time, we all realise that we must keep the troops busy. The review is significant and will deliver, but on the surrounds rather than on the central and main problem.

Both sides have made considerable sacrifices. It is all very well to make those observations, but we must remember the enormous progress we have made, to which people here have actively contributed. For Republicans to have accepted working constitutionally within the United Kingdom is an enormous step. We would hardly have believed that would happen 10 years ago. For all Nationalists, and the Republic, to abandon the constitutional goal of a united Ireland is formidable. We should recognise that. At the same time, for the Unionists to agree in principle to work with Republicans and Nationalists in the governing of a province they have dominated for so long is another enormous step forward. For them to agree to take a path that leads in the direction of the Republic of Ireland — a constant problem for them, as they do not feel comfortable with the direction taken towards bringing the two together — and to acknowledge that that path leads to that end is tremendous.

It must be indicated that the conflict is over. What can we do about that? Essentially, and Jim O’Keeffe mentioned this, the Governments must stick together. The cause is lost if the Governments are not together. I welcome the relationship between the two Prime Ministers, which has been sustained over a period of years. Whether it succeeds, the relationship must remain solid.

I was delighted to hear that Committee A had visited Belfast. I mentioned during our previous debate that the Body should attempt to meet in Northern Ireland - the sooner the better. It is a recurring proposal. It is good that the Committees are visiting Northern Ireland. We need a higher Northern Ireland profile. However, that subject remains to be discussed when we deal with the activities of our Committees. It will not matter if somebody does not attend a meeting of the Body in Northern Ireland; what is important is for the parties and their supporters to see us meeting there.

I hope what I have had to say is helpful. We must tackle the main points rather than the peripheries if we are to get anywhere.

10.00 am

Mr Arthur Morgan TD: Go raibh maith agat, Chomh-Chathaoirligh. On the Monday afternoon of our previous meeting in Manchester, I expressed the hope that by our next meeting we would have the Unionists and my colleagues from the North on board at our next plenary session.

Agreement was reached between the two Governments and my party on that evening for a series of steps to occur that would have facilitated that happening. The IRA lived up to its side of that agreement and so too did Sinn Féin with Gerry Adams’s statement. Unfortunately, David Trimble just walked away, having agreed it all. The two Governments did so also, because they did not live up to their end of the agreement on that occasion.

Republicans and Sinn Féin want to build peace. We want to build the trust that people have talked about. We need to work closely together to do that. My part in building that may be to come to these meetings, However, frankly, I regard them as pretty much fruitless, because we hear the same — I was going to use the word “bullshit” but I am not sure whether that is permissible parliamentary language — coming from the usual suspects.

Peter Temple-Morris pretty much let the cat out of the bag when he said that Gerry Adams has not delivered on the IRA. If anybody in this room or anywhere else thinks that it is the job of Republicans, the job of Sinn Féin, to deliver what British Governments have not been able to do for almost a century - the British Army, the interrogators and the torturers could not deliver the IRA - I ask people to think again. That is not our job. Our job is to deliver a peace; to deliver a settlement where everybody can come on board. That is a key element of what we are about. The notion should be dispelled that Sinn Féin will attempt to deliver the IRA, because that is not my job and not what I am about. I am about delivering a peaceful solution to the historical problem that we have here. We will endeavour seriously and genuinely to do that.

There is a perception that all the problems are coming from the IRA and that it has nothing to do with British Government policy in Ireland and nothing to do with the British arming and running Unionist paramilitaries, yet demilitarisation in south Armagh has not happened. I acknowledge that the British Army has taken down a couple of sangars and a couple of towers but they have relocated them and strengthened them in other areas. Nobody is fooled. I am familiar with that area of Armagh, and the level of recruitment of informers by the PSNI has never been greater. The targeting is not on one side, as far as I can see.

We should examine how the Body can collectively be more constructive. If the single item on the agenda is to bash Sinn Féin or to bash the IRA, we will not make progress. The two contributions so far lean very heavily in that direction. We are about to commence the serious part

of a review of the Good Friday Agreement. I accept that my party has a significant part to play in the task of trying to bring the DUP on board, and we will play our part.

If anybody here has the solution to that problem, I am sure we would all be happy to hear it. The nonsense talk of breaking up the IRA and sending it away for ever will not make it happen. We are in a process that is at this stage a conflict-resolution process. To point the finger at one organisation certainly will not fix everything.

The Independent Monitoring Commission has reported, and I am confident that the report will be published in the next week or 10 days. It is exactly what we had expected. The chairperson of the commission was described as an independent referee. I would love to appoint the referee to all the debates in which I am involved. I am sure that I would not lose too many arguments if that were the case. It is pretty much as we expected.

I regret contributing so early in the debate because I am conscious that there are not too many more here who share my perspective. They will pick up on contributions and respond to them. I regard that as unfortunate. I will have to reserve my retort to the contributions until this evening's dinner.

Senator Martin Mansergh: The Body should register the positives in the present situation. The first positive is that we have, largely speaking, peace in Northern Ireland, with a few exceptions at the fringes. Secondly, it is wrong to say that all the institutions are down. The North/South bodies are functioning, albeit on a care-and-maintenance basis. For example, the tourism body is doing very good work for the whole island of Ireland.

The third positive is that the DUP has come into the general political dialogue. It is talking across the table, for example, to the Irish Government; it is in a room with Sinn Féin, which is roughly where the UUP was at the time of the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement. I have spoken to a few DUP people recently. I sense that they want to do business and do not really want to see their place as being solely or even mainly at Westminster.

One of the conditions of getting the process up and running again, as part of an overall agreement or package, must be the retirement of paramilitarism. I remind Deputy Morgan that four months after the end of the Civil War in 1923, de Valera was able to say: "War, as far as we are concerned, is finished." Within four years, he had established a party without any organic paramilitary links; within nine years he had taken power. We are now 10 years on from the ceasefire.

I am second to none in my admiration of the achievement of the Republican leadership, Mr Adams and Mr McGuinness, in leading the Republican movement this far, but they must be able to take the final step. I do not see any point in talking as if Sinn Féin and the IRA were entirely separate movements. The Easter orations

will have shown that they are two sides of the same coin — part of the one movement. When the Downing Street declaration, and many declarations and agreements since, talked about exclusive commitment to peaceful means, that not only meant exclusive commitment by Sinn Féin but by any organisation with which they are associated.

I have to correct Peter Temple-Morris on one matter: we did not give up the constitutional goal of a united Ireland. That is written into the new articles 2 and 3. What was given up was the assertion of a theoretical claim to jurisdiction, which is a different matter. All parties in the South, and my party in particular, are committed to the achievement of a united Ireland by agreement and consent, and that has not in any way been given up.

As much as I might have preferred it not to have proved necessary, I do not see the proposed referendum on citizenship as in any way impinging on the Good Friday Agreement. No change is proposed to articles 2 and 3, nor does it affect the rights of anyone in Northern Ireland. The British Government, in annex 2 of the agreement, defined what was meant by

"the people of Northern Ireland".

It is not just an issue of Irish citizenship, because Irish citizenship confers EU citizenship. That is not the case in America or Canada. Although we have some responsibility to our partners, I do not see it impinging in any way on the Good Friday Agreement or the principle therein about which we are talking. There may be two jurisdictions, but we are talking about people being entitled to see themselves as part of one nation.

Mr Kevin McNamara MP: I am not really surprised at what looks like an apparent lack of progress. I do not believe we will see any earth-shattering movement until after the European Parliament elections, until unionism and nationalism are properly defined within Northern Ireland, and until the fight between the UUP, DUP, SDLP and Sinn Féin is resolved one way or another and we know which will properly be the dominant parties. I do not see that the DUP or Sinn Féin will do anything likely to embarrass themselves or cause them to lose ground in the June elections, which they will see as an opportunity to consolidate their positions. Certainly, Sinn Féin, in hoping to gain a European seat in the North at the expense of the SDLP and one in the Republic, is not likely to shift its position considerably. That takes us to June.

What I will now say must be right, as it was covered by the BBC this morning. Bob Worcester of MORI said we would have an election on 5 May in the United Kingdom.

Mr Alex Salmond MP: That is next year.

Mr Kevin McNamara MP: Yes, that is next year. If we go from June 2004 to May 2005, we will again have the same problem in the North of consolidating who will win which constituencies and who will emerge as the prime leader. Therefore I hope any movement we can get between

June and May will be constructive, but it will not be momentous until the Westminster election is out of the way. God alone knows when the next election will be, whether in the Republic or elsewhere, and how inhibiting it will be on the progress that has been made. However, in those upcoming two elections both of the emergent parties will not want either to lose their own core support or to frighten off any of the fresh support that they have had from those who voted for them for the first time in the Assembly elections and that they wish to keep.

Having said that, from the Westminster side, positive movements have taken place on the ground, and those have been carrying through some of the undertakings that were made at Weston Park. We had the return of powers and changes in the Police Service of Northern Ireland, which had been emasculated by the then Secretary of State, Mr Mandelson. The Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill [HL] is completing its passage through the House of Commons. There may be some to-ing and fro-ing in the House of Lords because of amendments. By and large, that legislation is carrying out the agreements reached at Weston Park on justice.

10.15 am

Although it took place rather later than in the Republic, we have at last had the announcement by the British Government of the establishment of public inquiries to investigate the contested deaths. I know public inquiries are not all that popular in the Republic and, after the length and expense of the Saville inquiry, not terribly popular in the United Kingdom. However, the inquiries will be independent and will have judicial powers, based on an acceptance of what Judge Cory said. Those are important developments and will form the building blocks for movement towards what Nationalists in particular sought at Weston Park.

The Government have set up talks and discussions to try to establish the equivalent of a truth and reconciliation commission, somewhat based on the South African experience but, in a way, to try to lance all the wounds and to give an opportunity for people from both communities to show their hurt and to try to reach reconciliation by a public confession of sins, et cetera. That would be an important step forward, given the talks going on with the parties in the North, and is an initiative that should not be undervalued if it proceeds.

With many others, I expressed concern that the cases investigated by Judge Cory might be subsumed into a truth and reconciliation commission. Had that happened, it would not have been welcome. However, the Prime Minister clearly declared that that would not happen, and it did not. Those are important steps forward that have taken place. We should recognise them for the value that they have.

The problems of decommissioning and the IRA's relationship with Sinn Féin are matters in which the

ordinary punter and ordinary British Member of Parliament find the theology somewhat confusing and the distinctions that have been made on the Republican side between the two elements rather hard to understand. That is a problem for the ordinary punter and ordinary Member of Parliament but it is a bigger problem for Sinn Féin. While the relationship between Sinn Féin and the IRA exists, it is not just the Unionists who find it difficult to accept the bona fides of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, but others within the general community of these islands. That is very sad, because both Mr McGuinness and Mr Adams have worked extremely hard to move the Republican movement considerably in the past 10 years.

People find it hard to accept the link that still exists and the failure on occasions specifically and directly to condemn paramilitary organisations and developments in the North and the South. Although I am not sure that Deputy Morgan would see it in this light, with the best of good will people find it very hard to accept.

There is an enormous onus on Sinn Féin to show that it is delivering the peace. For many people, delivering the peace means an end to the IRA's activities. That is important. I know that we have beams in our own eyes, such as the need to demilitarise South Armagh, et cetera. There are legitimate criticisms that can be made on the other side. However, tit-for-tat arguments will not really get us very far.

Where there has been a stepping down of activities by one side, it has generally been matched by the other. There is no reason why the IRA cannot do more. I understand the IRA's attitude, which is that it will not allow itself, not having been beaten by the British Army, to appear to be beaten by the rhetoric of the DUP and the UUP, whether it come from Ian Paisley, John Taylor, David Burnside or others. Equally, the IRA should realise that it has achieved considerable victories or advances for the Republican movement's cause through the Good Friday Agreement and the implementation of the Weston Park agreement. A degree of reciprocity on the question of arms would be appreciated.

It does not help to speak about torture and what happened in Castlereagh and elsewhere. I do not claim that we should deny that such events took place. At that time, Dr Joe Hendron, I and others revealed what was happening in Castlereagh. I do not seek to make excuses. I merely say that to rehearse such events is to trade atrocity for atrocity. It does not help. We have to move on from that, to look at what the Good Friday Agreement has achieved and to examine how we can take forward such progress.

Mr Conor Lenihan TD: Like Senator Mansergh, I was somewhat alarmed by the Lord Temple-Morris's suggestion that Republicans and Nationalists have abandoned the goal of a united Ireland. That is certainly not what I signed on for when I supported the Good Friday Agreement. Many Nationalists and Republicans said at the time that

they regarded the agreement as a transitional set of arrangements along the way to our ultimate goals. We have not abandoned our ultimate goals and we never will. It would be foolish of us to abandon them, particularly against the background of a process in which there has not been reciprocity on both sides.

In a debate such as we are having at this gathering, it is dangerous to assume that all fault lies on one side; that the fault is entirely in the hands of the IRA; and that an entire set of relationships will be transformed if the IRA engages in some form of somersault action. The establishment of the IMC is welcome and necessary. People should move into a new arrangement in which paramilitarism is unnecessary and unwanted.

People talk about Gerry Adams not delivering the IRA, but one could ask whether the Unionist leadership has delivered the Unionist political parties. The Body is fairly worthy or harmless in the general context of arrangements that were agreed in the Good Friday Agreement and in the previous Anglo-Irish accord. The latter agreement established all sorts of institutions that Unionists did not like, such as the Maryfield Secretariat. This Body is entirely harmless. Deputy Jim O’Keeffe spoke about the absence of the DUP, but I remind him that the UUP is also absent from this rather harmless Body.

If one is a rational-thinking Irish Republican or Nationalist, one must wonder seriously about the level of commitment in the Unionist community, especially in the Unionist political leadership, to the Anglo-Irish process, such as it exists. Given that it cannot bring itself to participate in a harmless body such as this one, what is the Unionist community’s level of commitment? This Body is entirely harmless. The words that are traded here may seem alarming, but they are not alarming in real terms because the action is taking place elsewhere. Let us be honest — the action is taking place at Government level rather than at the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body. All sorts of monitoring bodies that have nothing to do with the Body are probably doing far more serious work than the Body.

As Senator Mansergh said, Gerry Adams has delivered the IRA, largely speaking. I find it somewhat odd that people do not seem to be prepared to recognise that a significant and substantial ceasefire has been in operation for a long period and that many lives have been saved as a result.

It is somewhat bizarre to hear Deputy Jim O’Keeffe speaking about the citizenship referendum in the context of the Good Friday Agreement. He used the word “bunkum”, which I would like to use now because it is complete bunkum to try to link the citizenship referendum with the problems in the Good Friday Agreement. The two matters are not related, and I am disappointed that the SDLP has decided that they are. The fact that the SDLP has sought to raise the matter in the manner in which it has

might explain why it is not doing particularly well in the North, politically speaking.

I am slightly amused by Deputy Jim O’Keeffe’s expression of enormous respect for senior counsel. We all know that such people will tell one almost anything if the fee is right. I would not rely on such a constitutional or political device if I hoped to defeat the referendum.

The Lord Smith: It is obvious that we want to condemn paramilitary violence, which is even more unacceptable in the new context of international terrorism. I agree with Deputy Conor Lenihan that one should balance things somewhat, given that the current rate of Loyalist atrocities in the North is double that of Republican atrocities. As the Deputy said, Unionism needs to deal actively with Loyalist paramilitaries head-on. It is not enough for Unionism to condemn such violence rhetorically while abdicating its political responsibilities. It must deal with the issue of Loyalist violence robustly. Having said that, it is clear that Sinn Féin is now at a critical point, as others have said. The restoration of devolution is in its hands. All parties must renew their endeavours, but the primary initiative now lies with Sinn Féin.

I agree with Lord Temple-Morris that momentum must be regained and that efforts should be made to reconvene the Assembly, even if an Executive cannot be formed. The Assembly should be charged with doing some real work, such as undertaking some pre-legislative scrutiny to advise Westminster while direct rule regrettably continues to obtain. There is a need for the Assembly to do something and to help Westminster to deal with the Orders in Council that are passed.

With the best will in the world, frankly, we cannot give Northern Ireland legislation the attention it deserves. The House of Commons, in particular, has time constraints and the House of Lords, try as it might, cannot give much more time. We considered the Northern Ireland Budget in one and a half hours the other day. To do that is absolutely absurd. Local councils spend many more days examining their annual budgets. The debate brought home to me that fact that we are not doing justice to Northern Ireland legislation.

There is Civil Service rule, essentially, in the North at the moment. Although civil servants do a good job, there is precious little public accountability at present. As parliamentarians and democrats, we should deplore that fact. We should urge the reconvening of the Assembly, even if an Executive cannot be formed, so that it can undertake pre-legislative scrutiny of the vast plethora of Northern Ireland legislation that comes before Westminster.

One positive that I recommend is that we try to regain momentum. Lord Temple-Morris spoke about the hiatus. When Committee A was in Belfast two or three weeks ago, some speakers such as Mr Kevin McNamara MP came out with a litany of excuses. They said that we have to wait for the European elections, but there will always be an election

around the corner. Such excuses are not good enough to justify the continual postponement of any march forward.

Another credibility problem arises from the taxpayer's point of view. I have raised such questions in the House of Lords on many occasions. How much longer is it credible to pay the salaries of MLAs when they are not delivering the goods? One might say that they are doing good constituency work, and I am sure that is the case, but their core business is to administer the devolution settlement in Northern Ireland. If they do not get back to that business, I am afraid that there will be growing public resentment sooner or later.

10.30 am

The Assembly is running at a cost of £500,000 a month, even on MLAs' slightly reduced salaries. That is unacceptable, given that the majority of its time has been spent in suspension rather than actively engaged in the business that it was intended to address.

Senator Brian Hayes: To take up Lord Smith's point, it is very important to state quite clearly that if people are paid a salary, they should do a job. MLAs are not working because the Assembly is in cold storage. It is ridiculous that people are being paid substantial sums of money to do nothing, in effect. I acknowledge that they are engaged in constituency work, et cetera. That may well be a financial incentive in order to ensure that their political leaders start moving on the remaining issues. If both Governments moved on that issue, I would endorse them.

Since we last met, a number of outstanding democrats have lost their seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly, including Dr Joe Hendron, Mr Denis Haughey, Mr John Fee and Prof Monica McWilliams. We should recognise the polarisation within Northern society as a result of the elections. Good people have lost their seats who never used political violence for party political advantage.

There is a great deal of frustration evident in the Body today about the lack of progress. Deputy Conor Lenihan referred to the fact that this is a harmless Body and failed to see an irony in that he and I are Members of it. We have been put here by our respective parties, and that may say something in itself. The Body has a job to do, particularly when it comes to the east-west relationship of the British-Irish Council. I would like at our next plenary session to hear exactly what is happening on the environment, misuse of drugs, the knowledge economy, transport and social inclusion. Guernsey is carrying out a tourism project that we should look at. Communication should not involve Executives alone. Parliamentarians should also have a role in order to allow us to see what our Governments are doing on our behalf. Apart from the North and the frustrations of that, we have an important job to do to build bridges on an east-west basis. We can get on with our important task by monitoring the work our Governments are doing on our behalf. We should consider that approach for the next plenary conference.

Jersey is carrying out a study on the knowledge economy. The Minister with responsibility should be encouraged to come here, present a paper and take questions from us on the level of co-ordination and co-operation, or lack of, between jurisdictions. I would welcome that.

Since our last meeting, Judge Cory has submitted his reports to the Governments. If the British Government accept the need to respond to his conclusions, there is an imperative to conduct an investigation in respect of each of the four matters to which Judge Cory referred. The sooner that that happens, the better, as is true of the two Irish cases that we will see. The matter gives rise to an interesting point. The Secretary of State has asked for consultation on the possibility of having a truth and reconciliation commission. We will not have an adequate truth and reconciliation commission without the active support and participation of the paramilitaries. If it is right and proper for the British or Irish Government to be held accountable for their actions of 10, 20 or 30 years ago, it must be right for those of us who have never supported paramilitaries that they be held accountable for their actions over the same period. Why should the files on Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams not be published in full by both Governments to allow the men in question to refute the claims counter intelligence made about them over many years?

It is unacceptable for a paramilitary organisation and the political party attached to it to continue to point the finger at Governments while refusing to own up to their responsibilities for the part that they played in the same dirty war. If we are to have truth and reconciliation, it must be for everyone and for all organisations. One cannot have a hierarchy of victims. In Northern Ireland, where investigations into the collusion that disparate elements of the security forces clearly carried out are ongoing, the paramilitaries who formed the major component of the murder machine cannot stand back from the whole operation. That is unacceptable.

We had the case recently in Dublin of the publication of the report on the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. Although the responsibility for those attacks has been put in the UVF's corner, no one ever asks a question of that organisation or its political representatives about their responsibility to come forward with information. I make that point strongly.

Deputy Morgan referred to the fact that there has been little progress on demilitarisation. Since the agenda was agreed at the Weston Park talks, 13 military bases and 13 patrol bases in the North have been closed; several surveillance posts in south Armagh have been demolished, with two more scheduled for dismantling; 11 permanent vehicle checkpoints have been demolished; troops have been withdrawn from 10 police stations in sensitive areas; and three holding centres have been closed. Although the Republicans continually ask for the British and Irish

Governments to live up to their obligations on the time-scales and levels of demilitarisation, they cannot understand why those of us who must persuade democrats about the IRA's true intentions require that organisation to come forward with information on the decommissioning of its armaments in order to give confidence to the majority community in Northern Ireland and the community throughout these islands. The Independent Monitoring Commission has a direct responsibility to issue reports on whether the British Government have lived up to their obligations. Republicans should accept that the commission has an important role to play in giving confidence to this process.

I endorse the comments of my colleague Deputy Jim O'Keeffe, who referred to the Irish Government's proposed constitutional referendum on 11 June. Any change to the Good Friday Agreement agreed by both Governments gives succour to the DUP argument. According to that argument, if it is acceptable for the Governments to change a part of the agreement to suit themselves, it is equally acceptable for the DUP and other elements to argue for change themselves. The Irish Government spoke to the British Government before they spoke to parties in the Dáil or, as we are now finding out, in Northern Ireland. We must be careful. If we are saying to the DUP and other parties that there can be no change to the Good Friday Agreement only to bring about a change ourselves, we are on very slippery territory. I make that point in the context of the referendum campaign on that matter that will take place over the coming weeks.

Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP: Will it be possible at some point to obtain a report from the Steering Committee? I say in friendship that it has not caught the mood of the Body on a number of matters. The mood of the Body was that the possibility of holding a plenary conference in Northern Ireland should be investigated with vigour. That has not been done. Senator Brian Hayes's suggestion that more Ministers should address the Body about matters relating to our jurisdictions has certainly been raised before, but, regrettably, not picked up.

There is clearly an instruction to the Steering Committee from the Body to try to get people who are not here to attend. It was simply suggested that some innovation or formulation could be found. I do not accept that the DUP would not have accepted an invitation to give a presentation on its documentation and to answer questions. That need not have required it to join the Body. It would have been beneficial to the DUP and the other parties who are not here, including the SDLP and the Alliance Party, if the party had presented its position. The DUP could have attended, not as MLAs or parliamentarians but as a political party, to explain its current positions, which are food and drink to us. I urge that we encourage absent political parties to attend the next plenary session of the Body.

I also draw the Body's attention to a great danger, namely the growing political-dependency culture in

Northern Ireland. That culture is mainly, although not exclusively, among Unionists who are happy with direct rule. No governance is poor governance. The statute book on Northern Ireland is 25 years out of date. There are many matters relating to quality of life, the environment, planning, social services, and so forth, that are not receiving scrutiny and have not been updated. It is desperately worrying that people are content, as others argue, because Northern Ireland receives a significant subvention from the United Kingdom Treasury. People are becoming comfortable with the absence of legislative scrutiny, proper legislation and governance other than direct rule, and it is wholly unacceptable to us, as democrats, that that should endure.

This political-dependency culture came home to me just three weeks ago in a House of Commons Committee meeting, at which Hugo Swire was present, that dealt with the continued suspension of the Assembly. As a constitutional matter was being discussed and voted on, any Member of the House of Commons could attend and speak at the meeting, but only one representative from the Northern Ireland constituencies attended.

It is also significant that no press or media were present. The BBC was not switched on, and one could tell it was not present. Whether that is a case of the BBC not attending because politicians were not present or the reverse, I do not know, but the fact is that nobody took an interest in matters that were critical to the people of Northern Ireland and the rest of our jurisdictions. The level of disinterest is getting worse, even at Westminster.

Colleagues raised the question of MLA expenses. I agree with Lord Smith on that point. I cannot understand the reason why MLAs cannot meet, at least informally, to consider and scrutinise proposals and have a vehicle for calling to account the Civil Service-run governance in Northern Ireland.

I mentioned the DUP earlier. One of the great pities is that, because of the party's track record, a number of people are paying insignificant attention to its proposals. What is significant, as far as I can discern, is that not one other political party has wholly rejected the DUP's propositions, which are worthy of consideration and debate. There is a great danger that what could be the foundations for an accord could once more slip through our fingers simply because they have been proposed by the DUP and, as a result, other parties fail to pick up on matters that could be fruitfully discussed and built on. Why is that happening? Perhaps it is due to the lack of initiative of the two Governments or, in a small way, people like us. As we do not have the propositions of the DUP, the Alliance Party and the SDLP before us, we cannot explore them, and other parties who may wish to give a presentation are not present.

The other issue raised was the question of the constitutional referendum in the Republic. Although I do not

wish to trespass into that area, an issue of real material interest for the Body is the common mutual interest in at least having harmonisation or some consistency in our laws on citizenship, asylum, refugee status, immigration, et cetera. We overlook the fact that a common travel area has been in place since time immemorial and, whether we like it or not, we have a common land border. If one jurisdiction moves a significant distance from the other, it will compound our problems as regards the source of irritation, which could be maternity services or people using one jurisdiction to enter another in order to obtain rights of residence and abode throughout the European Union. The British and Irish Governments, and the Governments of the islands that have some responsibility for control of immigration, and so on, should get together to tackle that point.

10.45 am

I still believe that we should have regard for the fact that the next Westminster elections are likely to produce a further Greening of the west and an unrepresentative political map. I understand that the policy of the SDLP, which raised the issue before, is to favour proportional representation for Northern Ireland at the Westminster elections. I also understand that Sinn Féin has not dismissed that option. The matter certainly needs to be examined; otherwise, one will have the unhealthy position of people not being represented at Westminster or elsewhere. A redrawing of the political map will take place by stealth and will compound problems, not necessarily for this political generation but for later ones.

We already treat Northern Ireland separately, differently and specially with regard to electoral arrangements. After all, the election law relating to the funding of political parties does not apply to Northern Ireland, although it should. We have different arrangements for the European elections, so there is no reason on God's earth not to examine making representation at Westminster more representative and reflective of the views in Northern Ireland. It would make common sense and minimise problems in future.

Mr Seymour Crawford TD: I congratulate Deputy Conor Lenihan on achieving his aim of achieving maximum publicity from this meeting. I am sorry, however, that he will not return, given that he is not prepared to attend such a harmless body in future. I have been a member of the Body for 11 years and, while its proceedings may not have been earth shattering, through its work and that of its subcommittees we have made progress on some issues. I am happy to have worked for many years on Committee B, on which we have tried to find a fair solution to some of the problems arising from cross-border funding and other matters. I expect others have also found satisfaction in their work.

The Fine Gael party that I represent is often sidelined in an effort to justify the Greenness and importance of

other parties in the peace initiative in Northern Ireland. I am glad that the papers recently released in Northern Ireland under the 30 year rule show the role played by former Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave, former Northern Ireland Prime Minister Brian Faulkner and others in trying to come to an agreement by peaceful means. I welcome that all the other parties, including Sinn Féin, have agreed that the process of democracy and discussion envisaged by Mr Cosgrave and Mr Faulkner offers the only hope of solving the difficulties on this island. I hope we will see a Thirty-two County resolution some day. We have made significant progress in that regard already through EU involvement and the elimination of borders.

I welcome Deputy Morgan's statement that Sinn Féin is committed to solving the problem. How long is a piece of string? We are talking about recent political developments, specifically the Good Friday Agreement and its structures. I make no apology for having condemned the activities of the IRA long before I entered politics. Equally, however, I condemn the activities of the Loyalist organisations. For those present who do not know me, I live eight miles from the border and have immediate family members living north and south of the Border. I therefore have an interest in how the situation develops.

The Good Friday Agreement spelt out clearly that there were dates for certain things to be done. We can use whatever type of language we like, we can be as flowery as we like about it, but those dates were of significance.

What concerns me about the motion is that it is so bland. It covers everybody and allows nobody to be hurt in any way. We need to spell out what needs to be done quickly. I tried to do that at the previous meeting: I spelt out what the possible results would be if that did not happen. We now have the two extreme organisations in control in Northern Ireland: the DUP on the one hand and on the other, Sinn Féin with its links to the IRA. That places the onus on both those organisations. They have got to where they want to be. They have used every situation to gain electoral benefit. Good luck to them; that is democracy. However, democracy carries a degree of responsibility. One cannot have one without the other. I would like to see that responsibility being carried through to the end.

I make no apology for saying that the DUP does not have clean hands either as far as its interest in hard-line Loyalism is concerned. It was not totally distanced from it, in the same way as Sinn Féin has been connected to the IRA. That is clear on both sides. I do not say that in any nasty way to Deputy Morgan. I have worked with Sinn Féin members on Monaghan County Council and other places in recent years and tried my best to sympathise with the party's situation. I have seen it change from its failing to condemn the worst possible atrocities to accepting the need for condemnation and reconciliation. We must be brave enough to take that last step. It is

several years — not just two years — since the Good Friday Agreement was signed and we need to move on.

I think it was Kevin McNamara who asked earlier where we go from here. The European elections will be followed by the elections to Westminster, and local elections may take place after that. We can make excuses for everything or we can use opportunities. I urge the Body to place on record its demand for urgent activity, not just passive and peaceable talks, from both Governments and the political parties in authority to meet the deadlines of the Good Friday Agreement. We have had a ceasefire, but punishment beatings, money laundering and other activities continue. My car is in the garage for repairs that will cost about 1,800 euro and that arose because of doubtful diesel. I have some personal anguish about that issue.

I agree, as has already been decided, that inquiries are required into some issues. However, we can go down that road until the end of time. We have seen inquiries in which different groups refused to participate although they were among the people who called for such inquiries to be set up. A truth and reconciliation commission could be the answer. We must remember that in excess of 3,000 people have died as a result of the troubles. Those people have gone to their eternal reward but every week we come across the victims of those deaths and atrocities who still try to cope with the situation. A truth and reconciliation commission would be important to them. I support the motion but believe it needs to be tougher.

At this stage we need to demand that movement take place. We should remember that it is in the best interest of all the people on this island and these islands that there be a working political organisation in Northern Ireland. The Co-Chairman and I saw at first hand the benefits of that during the foot-and-mouth disease crisis, where we had two local Ministers able to understand the situation and deal directly with each other. Tourism is another area that proves that the two parts of the island can work closely together. For God's sake, let us move forward in harmony, which we can only do if the causes of disharmony are removed.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): I thank Deputy Crawford. I trust that the diesel to which he referred was bought outside our constituency. Anything less than good product would not be available in Cavan or Monaghan.

Ms Liz O'Donnell TD: I shall pick up on some of the points that have been made. As somebody who was involved in the process at a time of frantic, progressive political activity in the context of conflict resolution in Northern Ireland and the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement, at times in recent years I find I am frustrated at the very slow rate of the process, or the stagnation of the process, as has been the case especially over the past year or so.

The Body should be able to be constructively critical of the two Governments. Having decided to sit on the Back Benches for the term of this Government, I have restrained myself from shouting from the sidelines when I felt that the two Governments were not being active enough or sufficiently responsive to political developments in Northern Ireland. At this juncture, it is a legitimate comment that a degree of complacency has crept into the two Governments' response to the stagnation of political developments in Northern Ireland. Neither Government have adequately responded to the changed political territory since the most recent elections there. The political landscape has changed in Northern Ireland. That is democracy and we must accept it.

One of the major mistakes that we made at an earlier stage, when the Ulster Unionist Party was in the majority in Northern Ireland was that we tended to concentrate exclusively on it. Saving David was the name of the game rather than trying to engage that large cohort of Unionist opinion and political support represented by the DUP. That was a mistake, for which I accept responsibility. Now that the political landscape has changed, the DUP has been given a mandate that is greater than its previous one. It was and remains the responsibility of the two Governments to open up serious negotiations with that cohort of Unionist opinion as represented by the DUP. That may be politically challenging, but that is the landscape that presents at the moment for the two Governments.

11.00 am

I agree with speakers who have also expressed frustration at the degree of the political-dependency culture that has evolved in Northern Ireland. Similarly, that is just a creature of the way in which the peace process has developed and evolved. The two Governments were always the custodians and drivers of the process. They were the ones that argued, negotiated and drafted by way of proxy for the two sides. Out of that has developed a political dependency on the Governments on behalf of the various parties. I find it extraordinary that mature political parties in Northern Ireland can see it as acceptable that they neither go to work every day nor go to the Assembly. There is always an excuse. In the past it was often due to one more meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council, before which nothing could be done, or a forthcoming election. There was always some reason to proffer to say that the status quo, which is disastrous, was acceptable for the time being. The two Governments must start wearing the trousers again, engage with the parties in a serious way and include Sinn Féin.

Forgive me if I have moved on, but I do not regard decommissioning as the major issue any more. The real end to the conflict and the normalisation of militant Republicanism into democratic politics will be when Sinn Féin participates in the Police Authority. We have had verifiable acts of decommissioning under the terms

of the Good Friday Agreement. They were verified by the decommissioning body and General de Chastelain but were still not enough to generate the necessary trust. What is at issue is not arms but the degree of mistrust between the players who must make up the new Government in a cross-community model.

We have all lost momentum in an important way. A benign dynamic had been developed through considerable work, confidence-building measures and the dedication of the two Governments for five years, all of which comprised major political activity on their part. There is obviously another foreign affair dominating British Government policy at present, and the wider involvement concerning Iraq and international terrorism has removed the focus from Northern Ireland. We must deal with that. Similarly, our Government have moved on and have other issues with which to deal. The urgency that informed the responses of the two Governments four or five years ago has diminished and we must return to it.

Having said that, the issues with which we are dealing are political issues, which are the kind with which we hoped to be dealing. The normalisation of politics after a conflict resolution process is always a slow burner, but complacency has crept into all our responses. More effort should be made on the policing issue.

I agree with Senator Brian Hayes who stated that if we are to have a peace and reconciliation commission, everybody must be present to confess, including the Governments. As we know, the British Government have not come out of this dirty war with clean hands. There is no purpose served by what Gerry Adams called the “whataboutery”. If we engage in that, there will be no end to the dirt that will pour out of the various truth mechanisms. We all know that the war was a dirty one that destroyed thousands of lives in Northern Ireland and for which the perpetrators have not been forgiven. It is a small community; it will take a long time for forgiveness to be genuinely proffered and for reconciliation to take place.

A degree of disrespect has crept into the process regarding Sinn Féin. I have always been fairly tough with Sinn Féin over the more unsavoury aspects of its connection with the IRA, but I believe that we were more constructively engaged in conflict resolution with Sinn Féin when there was respect. The constant mugging of Sinn Féin over the issue of arms and over its connection with the IRA and paramilitarism is not particularly productive. I say that not to criticise those who constantly bang on about it but because I have moved on, as I stated. There are political matters, such as dialogue with Sinn Féin and the DUP, that go way beyond and are more sophisticated than the issue of arms. We should all be ready to take up that challenge. Although I support the motion, I agree with Mr Crawford, who said that a degree of urgency and a dynamic must be injected into the motion if possible.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): I thank Deputy O’Donnell. We will now have a coffee break and resume proceedings at 11.30 am sharp.

The sitting was suspended at 11.05 am and resumed at 11.39 am.

Mr Alex Salmond MP: I see that there is an enormous rush back to hear these words of wisdom.

I shall reflect on some of what was said before the coffee break. I am sorry that Arthur Morgan felt that he was being bashed earlier in the debate; I thought that that was a pretty mild bashing. I am sure that he has been bashed much harder than that in other forums, so I would not worry too much about it. Moreover, he is here — that is the point. It is much easier to bash somebody who is here than to bash somebody who is not here.

It was also interesting to note how clever Peter Temple-Morris was to cast aspersions on — or question — the ambitions of the Irish parties for Irish unity. He helpfully reminded all the parties from the Republic how much they have in common, since they had to declare and correct his point.

I look for guidance on behalf of those of us from elsewhere who come to these meetings who do not spend as much of our time thinking about this process as do the participants in the peace process. Therefore if we are looking for guidance as opposed to trying to lay anything down, we have two options at a time when that process has stalled and when people might be losing faith in aspects of it. One of those options is to look for the big moment: the “hand of history” moment; the grand gesture; the major breakthrough. Alternatively, one could argue that institutional progress is continual, and that sets the background to what is happening. The Body and the contributions that have been made thereto suggest that there is impatience, rightly, in knowing which of those options we should be guided to accept. Members look for progress, and they sense the danger when it is not there.

If the option is to look for the “hand of history” moment, three points are absolutely clear. First, Kevin McNamara said that there are points in the electoral cycle where that moment is more likely and points where it is less likely. It is true, of course, that there is always an election looming. Nonetheless, people do not tend to take leaps of faith in the middle of an election campaign; that is just part of the political process. Therefore the timing must be correct.

The second point is that if people are making a leap of faith, they must jump together. There seems to be little point in saying, “If only one side were doing this” or “That is the final part of the jigsaw.” All participants will find something that they believe is the stumbling block to progress, and if progress is to be made in terms of the big step forward, all participants in this process must take a leap together — all must find something on which they have to move, concede and finalise. That is obvious.

The third point is to agree with what Liz O'Donnell said about dealing with the people who are there. The parties that are currently most successful in the North of Ireland are probably those that both Governments least like and most fear. Obviously, the way to be successful in Northern Ireland is not to be endorsed by either Government; that is part of the process. However, one must deal with those who have been elected; one must deal with what is there and not what one would like to be there. That is also important.

The second option — institutional progress to normalise matters — should not simply be disregarded, because when one lives through a process of change it is true that people rightly feel impatient about what has not happened. The situation may not be normal, but it is a good sight more normal than it was six years ago. There may not be truth and reconciliation, but there is more truth and more reconciliation than there was six years ago. There has been substantial movement, and institutions continue in many ways even when Assemblies are not in existence.

If six years ago we had asked what the consequences would be were the DUP and Sinn Féin to emerge as the leading parties in the North of Ireland, the reaction from most people would have been to say “Armageddon”. People have said that to some degree, and Armageddon has not happened to a great extent. Therefore the institutional background to a process can sometimes be very important.

If that is happening and the Body wants to encourage it, we must ascertain whether we can do anything to help matters. Some people have suggested that a major step might be to get rid of the two thirds of the salaries that MLAs are paid. With great respect to those people, that might concentrate a few minds.

I must say to Lord Smith that £500,000 a month sounds to me a mere bagatelle compared to House of Lords costs. *[Laughter]*.

On that establishment's participation record, I forever hear about Lords who have never said anything. If institutions want to be valued on that, so be it. If Members' salaries were stopped, it would almost be an admission that the Assembly is not expected to meet again. However, there is much more to an Assembly than its Members. There are the Hansard reporters — who are here, incidentally. The Northern Ireland Assembly's Hansard reporters are present, as indeed they were recently in Scotland at the Fraser Inquiry's investigation into that other enormous public expenditure.

If a deadline is set that is not met, and salaries are stopped and the institution collapses, one must think about the consequences. That does not seem to be particularly helpful; in fact, it would seem to be a bit of an admission of defeat.

11.45 am

I wish to endorse fully Andrew Mackinlay's earlier point. I shall repeat that in case he does not believe me: I wish to endorse fully Andrew Mackinlay's earlier point, which

is that the Body should have taken presentations from the Northern Irish parties — all of them — on what they see as the way forward. I have never understood Unionist non-participation in the Body, given that the Council of the Isles idea was at least in part a Unionist idea: its purpose was to have an east-west formalisation to counterbalance the North/South dialogue. I have never understood their non-participation, apart from it being part of the political argument between the Unionist parties. It would somehow have been interpreted as a weakness for one to participate if others did not.

Nonetheless, there are difficulties in getting people here. That is pretty obvious, because they are not here: the Northern Irish Assembly is not sitting. It would have been possible, however, and it still should be possible, to act on Andrew's suggestion to hear presentations from the Northern Irish parties about the way forward. To do so would give parliamentary relevance to an otherwise governmental process. Were we to do that, perhaps we would be a less harmless Body and would have somebody else to bash apart from Arthur. That would make everybody feel much better.

Mr Joe Sherlock TD: Co-Chairman, I shall be brief. I shall speak on this matter in this afternoon's motion. However, this motion states

“That the Body reaffirms its support for the Good Friday Agreement, the workings of which are now being reviewed; welcomes the continued commitment of both Governments”.

I read that, taking into consideration what I have heard over the past few days from my own party leader, Pat Rabbitte. He referred to the impact that the referendum would have on the Good Friday Agreement. He said that senior political and human rights bodies had expressed strong reservations. I shall not go into that, because they have expressed their views on the referendum. The effect of the referendum if carried would restrict the rights of citizenship for children born to non-national mothers in this country of ours. When one reflects on that, one must ask oneself questions.

I state that strong political leaders and human rights bodies expressed those reservations. However, Mr Mark Durkan, for whom I have a great deal of respect, is reported as saying that there was a lack of consultation, which would cause difficulties for the democratic process. He said that the proposed amendment to the constitution should be referred to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation to keep it within the Good Friday Agreement, and I would take that line.

I conclude by putting on the record that those observations have been made. If the proposed amendment conflicts with what had been proposed in the Good Friday Agreement, that puts a question mark over the referendum.

Mr Harry Barnes MP: Lord Smith, followed by Andrew Mackinlay, suggested that MLAs should have a role in scrutinising devolved matters in order for them

to have a parliamentary role. That is a valuable idea. There is also an extra scrutiny role concerning Northern Ireland matters that must take place at Westminster. Many Northern Ireland matters are dealt with by Orders in Council, whether they are matters for Westminster or matters that a devolved authority could cover. The notion that a whole host of big matters, such as those in the Pensions Bill, which deals with occupational pensions, should be dealt with in three hours at most, with no possibility of amendments, is fantastically inadequate.

It is important that Northern Ireland is written into Bills, whether they relate to matters normally dealt with at Westminster or devolved matters. Other MPs, apart from Northern Ireland MPs, could discuss the amendments and concerns relevant to Northern Ireland. That would be a fruitful interconnection that could take place in those circumstances, and has occurred several times before when people have pressed Governments.

When William Hague was Minister for Social Security and Disabled People, the Disability Discrimination Bill did not initially apply to Northern Ireland. Rather than transfer the provisions of the Bill to an Order in Council, it was agreed to include Northern Ireland in the Bill. That idea must be pursued, because it ties in with scrutiny by MLAs. The other advantage is that if MLAs meet to engage in scrutiny, they are more likely to establish an Assembly and an Executive and to get the institutions up and running.

I wish to respond to Arthur Morgan. Some have said that it is easier to bash people who are here. Perhaps I am a coward, but I always find it easier to bash people who are not here rather than bash those who are facing me, so I might be pulling some punches by what I say.

Arthur Morgan said that it was not up to Sinn Féin to deliver the IRA. However, Sinn Féin does need to get the IRA out of its hair. Increasingly, many Nationalists in the British Parliament with Green instincts, plus many in the Republic of Ireland, are expressing that idea. It is not only those of us who, for a long time, have said that; others who said that decommissioning is not the important issue and that there are other considerations have now become quite frustrated that that delivery has not yet occurred.

There are different ways to achieve delivery. I am not sure what Sinn Féin “delivering” the IRA means, but it could certainly separate itself from the IRA. Sinn Féin should show that it is opposed to paramilitary methods and techniques by detaching itself entirely. The political gains for Sinn Féin would be astonishing if they would pick up and run with that.

Senator Mansergh mentioned de Valera and how quickly paramilitary activity ceased after the end of conflict in Ireland. Surely if Sinn Féin’s ambition is to become the major political party on the island of Ireland, it must detach itself from paramilitary activity. Sinn Féin might be able to make its way. It might be able to achieve what it has

achieved in Northern Ireland or it might hold the balance of power in the Republic at some stage.

However, if Sinn Féin really wants to go further than that and be a massive political organisation, it must get out of its current position for the benefit of themselves and everyone else. The Independent Monitoring Commission’s report will be dealt with in the Commons on Tuesday. We will just be packing up, so we will all miss it. If what was said in ‘The Sunday Tribune’ is a reasonable indication of what will occur, and there is much criticism of small Unionist parties for their paramilitary links and of Sinn Féin’s links with the IRA, the answer will be a cut in pay. That does not face the issue full on, because Sinn Féin, per capita of votes, is the richest political party in Western Europe, so taking a bit of money off it in that way will not have much effect.

Andrew Mackinlay mentioned tackling the funding of political parties in Northern Ireland and suggested we look at ways to confiscate funds that have been illegally obtained. Those are much tougher avenues and might, therefore, gain better responses in those circumstances.

I was pleased to hear that another idea had emerged and was being discussed — the possibility of truth and reconciliation measures. It strikes me that the consideration of that possibility and its complexities is a good subject for an appropriate Committee of the Body to investigate and report on. That might get us away from being a harmless Body to one that is discussing matters at the cutting edge.

The Lord Dubs: Conor Lenihan said that we were a harmless body; I think those were his words. I suspect that by that test all the bodies of which I am a member are pretty harmless. I am not sure how much further that takes me. I know Alex Salmond is laughing. We can discuss the House of Lords some other time; I will not waste this opportunity. The House of Lords is a cheap organisation — we do not get paid —

Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP: They keep you warm, though.

The Lord Dubs: I knew that I would provoke a reaction. To be a little more serious, if we are a harmless body, it is surely our fault. If we are harmless, it is because we do not engage sufficiently with the powers that be in the various jurisdictions to which we return from this event. It is up to us to take the issues that arise here and push them hard at our Governments when we go home. If that were to happen successfully, we would not be seen as a harmless organisation. I am not sure of the opposite of “harmless” — is it harmful or vibrant or vital? At any rate, we could be more effective were we to engage with our Governments on the issues that we discuss.

I wish to comment on the point that Conor floated about Irish unity; it has not evoked much of a response. The whole point of the Good Friday Agreement — it is obvious — is that it provided a mechanism whereby, if the people

of Northern Ireland wanted it, Irish unity would follow. That was one of the key points of the Good Friday Agreement, and that was why different opinions in Northern Ireland agreed to support that particular way forward.

I accept fully the comments made by Lord Smith and others that the way we handle Northern Ireland legislation at Westminster in the interim is not satisfactory; we do not give it the scrutiny we should. The problem is that, if we worked out more complicated systems, we say, more or less, that it is going to be for the long haul. There is a reluctance to do that, which is why I also agree with Alex Salmond about the MLAs' pay. Were we to stop paying MLAs, that would perhaps signal that we are telling them to get on with it, but the more important signal would be that we cannot restore the institutions quickly; it would take a long time. If we do not pay MLAs, we dismantle the whole arrangement for the Northern Ireland Assembly, and it will take a long time to get it going again. I know that from when we did it the first time. I think, therefore, that it sends out the wrong signal, uncomfortable as it is, for people to be paid for doing relatively little.

I sympathise with the comments made by Brian Hayes, Andrew Mackinlay, Alex Salmond and others about whether we could engage with Ministers in our various jurisdictions on some of the issues of substance that have been raised. It may be that Secretaries of State and senior Ministers would not have the time to come here, but if the Body could engage at a less senior level, that could be pretty useful. We do so in Committee, but I would like to see us engaging with Ministers from the various jurisdictions on relevant issues that we have discussed.

Recently, I visited Northern Ireland with a BIIPB sub-committee. It was a fairly depressing occasion, to which the Co-Chairperson has already referred. Everybody seemed to be saying that they were in it for the long haul. Beneath the surface, however, there was an attitude that they should leave it to the British Government, and subsequently blame them for everything. That is fair enough, but it does not move us forward, which is why I particularly liked what Liz O'Donnell had to say. We must move forward and make progress. I too feel the absence of the Ulster Unionist Party, which is a matter that we have already discussed. However, the absence of the DUP from our gatherings is a serious weakness. We should find some way of persuading the DUP to have a presence here at least, if not full membership. When members of the DUP went to Number 10 with their proposals, they gave a PowerPoint presentation, which is unusual for a political party. It showed that the DUP takes its proposals seriously. I would dearly love the DUP to come to us and present something along those lines on strand two and strand three. That would be useful for us, even if DUP members chose not to be Members of the Body. I would, however, prefer them to be Members.

I wish decommissioning would go away, because if one examines the issue, it does not have much substance.

The difficulty is that decommissioning has become an issue for Unionists and will not go away simply because we say that it is not that important. It is much more important that all parties in Northern Ireland engage on policing, the cessation of paramilitary activities, and so on. However, the issue of decommissioning exists, and I am not sure how we can persuade the Unionist parties that it is not the most significant issue; Liz O'Donnell has already raised that issue. Clearly, the talks broke down when de Chastelain could not give detailed information on how much had been decommissioned. Had he been able to do that, perhaps the events of recent history in Northern Ireland would have been different. I do not know quite how that particular scenario came about, but it was a grave disappointment to everybody.

The Ulster Unionist Party's internal arguments are conducted in the public domain. We know all the nuances of views within the party — what so-and-so and so-and-so think. With Sinn Féin, of course, it is the opposite: we do not know what its differences are. I have heard leading members of Sinn Féin say that they cannot move that far because they cannot bring their people with them. I understand that. However, it is difficult for outsiders to understand how much margin for manoeuvre Sinn Féin has on some of those issues. We could all come to a fairly clear view on how much margin for manoeuvre David Trimble has. However, the margin for manoeuvre for the majority of parties in Northern Ireland, not just Sinn Féin, is relatively small. We need to understand what those margins are and encourage parties to move as much as they can, while understanding their difficulties.

I welcome the debate and the fact that Conor Lenihan challenged us as being a "harmless body". We must demonstrate that we can be much more effective than his remarks suggest.

Ms Cecilia Keaveney TD: Go raibh maith agat, a Chomh-Chathaoirligh. I came in last night and felt that I could have sat down and written this morning's debate. I have not been a Member of the Body for as long as many of those who are present, but I have a terrible feeling of Groundhog-Day syndrome.

Conor Lenihan then called it the harmless body. Even Seymour Crawford started to object to him calling it that yet went on to say that we had a bland motion, which amounts to the same thing.

12.00 pm

We have the potential to have sharper teeth and to be more than a harmless body. Liz O'Donnell referred to the two Governments sitting back a little bit for many reasons. We have had success to a certain level; however, we have allowed ourselves to go into the same sand that we see from the windows of this wonderful location, and we have not decided that we want to get out of the sand yet.

At the previous meeting, I and many others commented on the fact that the other parties were not present. I commented on the need for them to be brought in but was told that they could not be there because the Assembly was not up and running. I believed that, at that time, there was a way around that. It was said earlier that they would not come to the meetings as Assembly Members. Parties are invited to send representatives: if they come, they come; if they do not come, they were invited. That would send out a stronger message. None of that has happened; therefore I question why I am here at all. I am making another request that we should consider inviting them, by whatever mechanism the Steering Committee deems appropriate. If they do not come, at least we know where we stand. However, I do feel that Groundhog-Day syndrome.

When the Body met in November 2003, we were awaiting the Northern Ireland elections. We said then that, if the situation did not improve, we were in danger of Ireland's presidency of the EU taking over. We now have the excuse of the local and European elections. As others have said, we could always have a problem — every time we raise our heads, there will be another problem, another excuse or another valid reason why things cannot move on.

What we supposedly worried about at the previous conference — I do not know if that is the right phrase — was that the worst could happen: Sinn Fein and the DUP could become the big parties. At the time, I thought that the elections results would not matter, because we are in a democracy and we let the people decide who they want to govern them. We then try to encourage everyone to get on with the job to which they have been assigned. In other words, candidates put themselves forward to govern; yet the situation is that MLAs are drawing a salary but are not governing.

I believe in democracy. Peter Temple-Morris referred to “occupational therapy”, which I thought was a good phrase. We cannot let occupational therapy take over; we must drive the solution. Is it too lucrative a situation for some people where racketeering earns them a lot of money? Are we in a situation where it is very handy electorally, and in other ways, to have thugs who offer a solution to law and order problems, drug problems or any other problem? In any democratic society, surely we want the proper forces to deal with those issues and not let the other situations thrive.

Those situations are not new to Northern Ireland. I was in college in Belfast in the 1980s, and I went in certain taxis to certain parts of the town and in other taxis to other parts of town. One organisation ran one taxi firm and another organisation ran the other taxi firm. It was wrong to side with any particular organisation because it seemed, anecdotally, that everybody was gaining something. If those organisations are being reported on — as they are at the moment — they cannot be left on the shelf. Situations

must be tackled. They have been ongoing for far too long and must be taken in hand.

There has been much talk about the referendum and its implications for the Good Friday Agreement. I do not believe that it has any implications. I was born in Northern Ireland, and parenthood will always be an issue. If a parent has a right to citizenship, it will follow that the child will have that same right.

It is vital that issues concerning racism in Northern Ireland are dealt with. We do not need to look to the future for problems with racism: the Philippine Government had to contact the British Government because of the number of their citizens who were being burnt out of their houses. Let us focus on that issue and see how the problem can be dealt with, or ask some of the parties in the North to deal with it.

If they are on a salary, they could well afford to send someone down to have a chat with us and present their ideas. As has already been stated, we could refocus as a Body.

My constituency is 370 miles north of here — north of the North for those who are here as Associate Members rather than as delegates. Many of those issues cannot wait for ever. I will bore some people now by saying that there have been great successes in my area, and those successes rely on peace. People do not go to north Donegal unless they think that they can get there safely and enjoy a holiday. People do not make economic investments in factories unless they think that they will be accessible, safe and have a future. The motion refers to stability, and we have had some stability, which has helped places such as Donegal. Generally, issues that help the situation in the North also help my constituency. I am absolutely and utterly parochial about that, for which I make no apology.

We have the car ferry, which 500,000 passengers used in 15 months. This week a German television company is over to investigate how that happened, because, apparently, people in Northern Ireland do not talk to one another, they definitely do not talk to people in the Republic, and politicians from different political parties do not work hand in hand. I say that they do. They have done so in the past, they can do so in future, and they should get on and do it now. They cannot posture as they are doing to the media and to outside agencies by saying that things cannot happen, that people do not talk to one another and do not recognise the same problems. I say that they do. I was a member of a local authority cross-border group, which is a concrete example of how we can work together. It is working and has improved the economy in the north-west.

This is another part of my Groundhog-Day syndrome — there is still no legislation governing Lough Foyle. We cannot progress legislation, because we want to do so in association with the Northern Ireland Assembly. We want local people talking about local issues. What happens to the economy of the Foyle in the meantime? Seven years

ago I agreed fully with allowing local people to talk about local issues. At that time we were quite happy to wait; however, I would now say to the two Governments that if it is not going to happen, let us drive it on ourselves. At November's conference, I asked the Minister to come back with progress on legislation. I was therefore distraught to hear that there was no strong representation from Northern Ireland on local issues at Committee meetings. We do not have legislation at a time when there is the threat that the Ballymena to Derry train service will be ceased and that Derry City Airport will not be allowed to expand. The airport will probably face closure, because if it cannot expand, it cannot stand still, and if it cannot stand still, it goes backwards. We do not know where we stand with the wind farm near Castlerock. The removal of those access routes into the north-west marks a return to the 1960s. We give the north-west the right to go backwards while telling everyone that we are moving forwards. Other areas are being allocated motorways and high-speed rail links, while the north-west will lose its train service.

Why am I worried about it? It seems as if I am receiving more representations about those issues than anyone else. I do not hear many people talking about those matters. Perhaps they are discussing them at Westminster, but if they are not discussing them there, where are they being discussed? They are not being discussed at the Assembly.

Who cares? The talk here is pie in the sky, and I am trying to raise realistic issues that I see every day. Whatever about paying or not paying MLAs, we must start to ask questions about accountability. It is all right to allow things to sail along for a certain length of time, but how do you define a "certain length of time"? As a Member asked already, how long is a piece of string? We cannot allow that piece of string to go on for ever.

On a humorous note, when I was first elected, the Oireachtas made a video about how people were elected and how the process operated. On the video my peninsula was referred to as being part of Northern Ireland, so I was called an MP from the outset. I am glad that I am working as an MP and a TD for part of Ulster. I guarantee all the citizens there that I am working on their behalf, no matter what their party affiliation or on which side of the border they live. An improved economy must represent a good and better future for the people, and we have to give them something to look forward to. I do not see much of that at the moment.

On a different matter, it is good to see the post-Cory inquiries. However, I tabled many parliamentary questions about the death of Sean Brown, a GAA member in Bellaghy who was abducted and shot. There is no point in going into the story, but in response to those parliamentary questions, I was given false information. I only found out that I had been given false information when Nuala O'Loan released her report. The indications in response to my parliamentary questions were that the investigation was

ongoing when, in fact, the investigation had closed around 13 months after Sean Brown's death. When we talk about people coming forward and being honest, that includes everybody, and it is time that all the truth came out. I ask anyone who has influence to try to get to the bottom of the Sean Brown case so that the family can get closure and so that people can feel that there has been an investigation.

I do not wish to end on a negative note. Committee C visited Wick, north of Inverness, to look at rural health services. We also went to Cardiff and other places to look at their health services. That was one of the most important jobs that I have done. We went over thinking that our problems were bad; we went over to look for solutions only to discover people in similar positions, and some in worse situations. Simple health services were more than just health services — people who had moved to rural areas because the areas had facilities were having those facilities removed, which was going to affect the economy. All of a sudden, that resonated loudly with different parts of Ireland. It was one of the most useful exercises that the Committee has undertaken.

Members of other Committees have already mentioned that they are doing work that they feel has been very important. I do not think that we are a harmless body; we have the potential to have sharp teeth, but we must hone them. I wish no harm to the Steering Committee, but when we spend a full day debating the same motions and then return next time to find that nothing has moved on, questions need to be asked. We must agree that, on taking a decision, we approach other parties and follow that decision through. If we decide to try to get more Ministers to talk to us or decide that we will tackle issues, we must know that there will be a reaction. I invite Members to come to Letterkenny, or elsewhere in Donegal, for the next conference. We can use what we have in our national spatial strategy — straddling the border — and go to Derry or to whatever location that Members wish. I echo Peter Temple-Morris, taking a line from somebody else: "We haven't gone away, you know." Go raibh maith agat.

12.15 pm

Mr Steve McCabe MP: I agree with Cecilia Keaveney in the sense that I do not wish to sit and hear people saying, "Oh, isn't it awful? Isn't it terrible? Let's wring our hands. What are we going to do?" The truth is that, as much as I love the setting and the hospitality, if all we do is sit for a couple of days to moan and whinge about why the situation is not moving on, we are probably wasting our time. However, I do not have a sense that it needs to be like that. Anyone who looks at the situation in the North now and considers what it has been like over the past 30-odd years cannot say that it has not moved on.

It is frustrating at present if one thinks about the nature of political activity compared with the high hopes that existed when the Good Friday Agreement was signed. I find it astonishing that people think that the situation

has not moved on. The choice is about what we want out of the Body. I bow to those Members who have been here from the early days, but my understanding was that the Body represented a chance to do something that people thought was not possible. There are people present who talk regularly to each other frankly and openly who some years ago could barely recognise each other's existence.

When the Body was set up, it was a chance to get us out of those silos where people just could not make any important steps. It seems that we must re-establish the Body for that purpose. Andrew Mackinlay MP is absolutely right: we should find a way to get the DUP to talk to us. It does not matter how — I would happily redraw or vary the rules in any way that makes that permissible. The Ulster Unionists must also come to talk to us.

I was thinking, particularly when Lord Smith was talking about the Assembly, that I am not in favour of cutting Assembly Members' salaries or getting too exercised about the money issue at the moment. However, I think that it is ridiculous that we have an Assembly yet we are making no effort to use it. I do not know that it is in anyone's interests for us to wait until all the elections and all the manoeuvrings are finished.

It is reasonable for the Body to try to get a bit of movement out of the Assembly. There is work to be done; a great deal of pre-legislative scrutiny could be carried out. Why are we, or a subgroup from the Body, not going to the Assembly and telling the Members that we want them to meet? Why are we not urging them to tell the people of Northern Ireland about matters that must be tackled, whether they be welfare issues or transport issues?

As I understand it, there is no legal process to prevent the folk who have been elected from forming some sort of gathering and beginning to do the work that we all recognise must be done. For whatever reason, it appears that the two Governments are not in any position to get that moving at the moment. Some Assembly Members may decide that they do not want to participate, but that is not a reason to prevent all elected Members from doing their job.

If there is one thing that I would like to leave here having achieved, it is that I want the Body to say that it will take the initiative to get some element of the Assembly active. Even if it is only to get them to talk about some of the issues that Cecilia Keaveney raised or to focus on pre-legislative scrutiny, that would be a substantial achievement. We could say then that something worthwhile has come out of the conference.

I wish to pick up on Arthur Morgan's comments. I am conscious that he is very much in the minority here, but I sensed from him that no progress has been made. I agree with him that it is not all of one side's making; I have no sense that we must constantly focus on Sinn Féin or the IRA, as if everything rests on them. Many Unionist poli-

ticians must take some responsibility for the activities of Loyalist paramilitaries. Whether Unionist politicians are directly connected to them or not, it seems that the mood, the language and the atmosphere that they create has as much bearing on some of their actions as anything else.

It is not remotely one-sided, but to hear Arthur Morgan talk as if nothing has happened, as if no progress has been made or there has been no attempt to reduce the British military presence in Northern Ireland, is to take us back to a stage where we do not recognise that anything at all has been achieved, and that just is not the case. Brian Hayes made it obvious that things are happening, so to deny that constantly, or to say that what is happening is not good enough or helpful in any way, is to make us all feel powerless. That is the danger of getting locked into such a position.

In a funny way, Arthur Morgan may have been joking when he said that informants are still being recruited. He might know more about that than me, but it occurs to me that informants are only any good if there is something to inform on or if some activity is taking place in the first instance. We will not have to worry about that if the war is really over and there is no activity going on behind the scenes. I simply do not buy into the idea that no progress is being made. We must constantly say that there is progress, value that and ask how we move on to the next stage.

Finally, I want to comment on a matter to which Harry Barnes and one or two other Members referred. Yes, inquiries are important; yes, there are many people who want to know what went on; yes, there was a brutal, dirty war. However, pseudo-judicial inquiries that make a great deal of money for lawyers, that create cheap headlines, that manage to establish blame and that wriggle out little bits and pieces of information from complex sets of events do not necessarily leave people feeling free of pain or ready to move on. Inquiries find ways of boxing off bits of blame and attributing that blame.

I do not say that an attempt should not be made to clarify and straighten out some aspects. However, I am much more interested in some kind of reconciliation process that allows people to move on and to deal with their pain. What happened should be acknowledged so that they can move on and build for the future.

There is one area — I think it was what Harry referred to — at which the Body might productively look. Why do we not get one Committee to look at what might be the nature of a reconciliation process if we were to try to apply it to the situation? Why do we not do some of the preparatory work on what might be the ground rules and what might help get something moving? As I understand it, the Body was set up to think the things that could not be thought in the narrow legislative groups to which we belong, to try to be the bridge that brought people together, and to look for the common ground and move that on.

I want us to go away from this conference saying that we are going to get some element of Assembly activity; that it is our ambition to get it going. We should also say that we will consider a reconciliation process that is meaningful, that allows those people who want to put the pain behind them to go forward and that gives them a mechanism to do that.

The Lord Brooke: As Steve McCabe will know, it is a pleasure for me to follow him, and I follow him on one particular remark about a dirty war. For reasons that others will understand, I did not regard it as a war. However, I did regard it, all things being considered, as having been astonishingly clean. My party has always believed in original sin, and of course I acknowledge that there may have been dirt on either side. However, looking around the world, it was an astonishingly clean engagement for 30 years.

The London marathon took place yesterday, and when Jim O’Keeffe started his speech one of my colleagues remarked how quickly he got into his stride. We read in the papers that a 36-year-old girl running as a veteran amateur has made the Olympic team on the strength of her performance. I am a veteran, but I am only a whisker off being twice the age of that lady — no one should expect any such outcome on my part here.

The marathon is a good and inevitable metaphor for the peace process. As to this debate, Warden Spooner of Oxford, who was constantly reversing the initial letters of words, preached a sermon on the text:

“We are all but as clay in the ponds of the hatter.”

To draw on another nineteenth-century Oxford figure, Lewis Carroll, Northern Ireland’s affairs sometimes resemble the Mad Hatter’s tea party. To give a topical illustration; I much enjoyed the summation of Arthur Morgan’s speech, which included some points I have made myself, one being that Sinn Féin is not responsible for delivering the IRA but is responsible for delivering the DUP. In that apparent paradox lies a profound truth of which Alice and Lewis Carroll would have wholly approved. If Arthur thinks he is on his own, let me say that Secretaries of State have some of the same characteristics.

One of the pleasures of a British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body debate is that one can agree with at least something in every speech that is made. The interesting question is which speech one agrees with most. My response is that it would be Liz O’Donnell’s, although that is regarding her conclusions rather than necessarily how she reached them.

In that regard, I endorse the responsibility that the two Governments share, but I would rather that they limited that responsibility to leaving the parties to sort matters out, rather than to hand-holding. Hand-holding does not breed responsibility. What the Governments must do, however, is remove disincentives that stop the parties getting on with it. In that instance, Lord Smith’s suggestion,

endorsed by Liz O’Donnell, has merit. Alex Salmond has poured cold water on it.

My father was at school with a boy called Freshwater, one of whose school reports simply read “stagnant”. I fear that business as usual on Assembly pay is a recipe for stagnancy. Governments are very good at thinking up reasons for not doing things, but once the man in the street starts asking the question that Lord Smith asked, the Governments should be ready to pick it up. Alternatively, they could insist that the politicians earn their pay so that they can remember through pre-legislative scrutiny, which was another of Lord Smith’s suggestions, how worthwhile their work is.

A final word about arms. The second-hand market in arms in most of the countries that are about to join the EU could re-arm the interested parties on the morrow of any decommissioning. The important issue is that the community at large should have confidence that existing arms will be not used. Active paramilitarism on either side of the community constitutes a massive continuing threat to public confidence. The peace process is not so much a marathon, it is more like the Liverpool Grand National. However, it is the stayers who win that as well. We all know what the fences are — Members have reminded us today — but, broadly speaking, the fences never change. What we must maintain is the determination to get over them and to finish the course.

Each party has its internal political problems, and all of us know what they are. The best contribution each party can make is not to create new problems for those with whom they are negotiating. That is a good political game, but it is too serious an indulgence for the peace process.

Mr Andrew Mackay MP: Mr Co-Chairman, if I may pick up on one of Peter’s many themes, is this plenary session not in danger of becoming as stagnant as the Northern Ireland Assembly?

I have been struck by powerful speeches from Andrew Mackinlay, Cecilia Keaveney, Alf Dubs, Steve McCabe and others. I hope that the Steering Committee senses that there is huge frustration in the Body that we go around the same track, making no progress. We have not engaged the politicians of Northern Ireland at all; in fact, we have reached a new low. I was admittedly absent from the Body for 10 years when a Minister, but I was one of its founding Members and have returned to it over the past three years, and this is the first meeting I recall at which there were no Northern Ireland representatives at all. When Conor Lenihan rightly berated us because there are no Unionists here, I was gently heckling to say that there was no SDLP representative here either. We can nominate alternates as well as full Members; therefore there is no excuse.

Now is surely the time for the Steering Committee to engage Northern Ireland’s politicians. It could act on Andrew Mackinlay’s excellent suggestion that the DUP, and equally Sinn Féin, the Official Unionists and any other

political party, come as our guests, not as Members, to make a presentation and answer our questions. I believe that they would be willing and delighted to do that. If I may say to the Steering Committee, merely to write a letter to Northern Ireland's politicians is not, perhaps, enough: we need to speak to them and persuade them to attend our next plenary session in the autumn. I believe that they would attend.

I also wish to express my disappointment that, after so many of us strongly suggested it at Ware, it has been completely ruled out that the next British venue for the conference should be Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State has said that now is not an appropriate time. Have we not heard that before? Is Northern Ireland's whole problem not that there never is an appropriate time? I beg to differ. I know that a venue has been fixed, at the St Pierre Hotel & Country Club in Chepstow — as a golfer I half commend that — but even at this late hour I ask that the Steering Committee revisit the possibility of going to Northern Ireland in the autumn. Not to do so would be a great opportunity missed.

12.30 pm

Cecilia's invitation to go to "her part of Ulster", as I would put it, is an extremely good idea. It is not for me to tell my Irish friends where to host next year, having been at such a wonderful venue here, but that would also be extremely useful for precisely the reasons that Cecilia outlined.

In conclusion, we are in danger of running into the sand, and there may no longer be any point to the Body unless we move forward. We are at a crucial time. The BIIPB has done a huge amount of good. I recall the early days, and an awful lot has been achieved, but we need to move on to a new phase. Otherwise, people will wander away, fewer and fewer people will attend the plenary sessions and the BIIPB will die on its feet — that would represent a huge missed opportunity.

Mr Chris Ruane MP: I am in more positive mood. Over recent years, there have been political and economic achievements, and there is both political and economic momentum. On the political side, look at the successes that have been mentioned. There is an inquiry into collusion, not just on the Nationalist/Republican side with the Pat Finucane case, but into the death of Billy Wright. Demilitarisation has occurred — Steve McCabe mentioned that Arthur Morgan did not recognise that.

We should celebrate what we have achieved. It was said that 13 army bases and 11 permanent vehicle checkpoints in Northern Ireland have been closed and the army have been withdrawn from 10 police stations. We should recognise and celebrate that; we should talk up our successes, not talk them down.

The North/South bodies are just ticking over, there is the possibility of a truth and reconciliation commission,

and all-Ireland tourism is booming. We have heard Cecilia Keaveney's graphic descriptions to that effect, about which I talked to her the last time the Body met, and I am pleased that results on the ground are influencing people's lives. Figures for police, security and civilian deaths are at their lowest in 30 years.

There has been economic momentum, with unemployment in Northern Ireland, as throughout the UK, at its lowest in the past 30 years. The Northern Ireland economy is booming; house prices are at an all-time high. Tourism has an economic and political impact, because people travelling from the North to the South or from the South to the North get to know each other as people, and the same applies to east-west traffic. People from around the world who visit Northern and Southern Ireland can see that success.

Many of the causes of the troubles that started in 1969 were economic: housing; policing; jobs. If we concentrate on those bread-and-butter economic issues and keep up the momentum, we shall have political success as well. There have been failings, but I shall not go over those, as many other speakers have outlined them.

The BIIPB must also be careful with its terminology. It was mentioned that we expect Gerry Adams to "deliver the IRA". Such terminology makes one think of the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter. We must be careful not to put Sinn Féin, the IRA or indeed the Unionists into a hole through our terminology. It was further suggested that Sinn Féin and the IRA should disengage, separate, distance themselves from each other. That would be a retrograde step. Limited progress has been achieved because those groups delivered. We may not have liked that pace, which was dictated from the outside, but it has enabled them to deliver, albeit in a limited way.

I have said before that the parties in Northern Ireland must bring their membership along with them. It is like the armada: they must sail at the speed of the slowest ship; otherwise the splits, divisions and schisms that have bedevilled Northern Ireland politics for generations will occur. However, even a natural optimist like myself feels, to use another seafaring metaphor, that we are becalmed — that we are in the horse latitudes — as far as the political momentum is concerned. It is all very well to point the finger and say that there has not been enough decommissioning here or enough demilitarisation there, but that tit-for-tat finger-pointing will not get us anywhere. All the parties jumping together achieved past progress. We must concentrate on that in future.

Members made several positive suggestions. Andrew Mackinlay suggested inviting all Northern Ireland's parties to address the Body. The North would be the proper venue for that, but the UK mainland might be more amenable to the DUP and UUP. Perhaps that should be the task for the Body's next meeting. Andrew Mackay is also right: the invite should be neither formal nor written.

We need to send people whom the various communities trust, and we need to communicate with them face to face and get them to the table. If they attend and speak, and if they engage with us and have a drink at the bar afterwards, they might find that the Body is not so bad after all.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): Mr Kevin McNamara has a point of clarification before I call Mr Mates.

Mr Kevin McNamara MP: I am sorry to be rude and usurping, Mr Co-Chairman. Colleagues seem to have forgotten the legislation that established the Assembly. After an election, the Assembly has two duties: first, to elect a Presiding Officer; secondly, to vote for an Executive. It is the failure to be able to vote for an Executive that prevents the Assembly from meeting. Therefore if we urge that the Assembly carry out a monitoring duty — I have a strong feeling that that is being urged, and I do not disagree — amending legislation will be required. The problem with that is that, at the moment, neither Government are prepared to concede that little bit, because they want to try to get an Executive up and running. That is the legal position.

Mr Michael Mates MP: Kevin has taken my second point, so my summing-up can be that much briefer. However, I am grateful to him for that, and he is quite right.

There have been 20 very thoughtful contributions, and if I were to spend a couple of minutes on each, which I could do quite easily, Members would miss lunch, so I hope that those whom I do not mention will forgive me.

As a member of the Steering Committee, I begin by responding to some of the criticisms and suggestions that have been made. First, there is the question of meeting in Northern Ireland. That is an old chestnut with which we have been grappling for a long time. The Committee understood the strength of feeling in Ware and, as a result, wrote formally to the Secretary of State stating that, with his blessing, we intended to hold a meeting in Northern Ireland. He replied formally asking us not to do so at this time because it would make his life more difficult. There is a simple choice: we defy him and do it anyway, or we listen to what he says.

Therefore I want the Body to realise that there has been no lack of effort on our part. If the Secretary of State of the day thinks that it will not help the cause of trying to bring people together, we must accept that. Reluctantly, the Steering Committee can do nothing more except to try again, and I feel that I speak for all its members when I say that we will try again and hope that we get a more favourable response. However, that is the state of affairs, so I think Andrew's charge that we are not doing our stuff is a little hard.

The next point that was made was why we do not try to get the Unionists to attend. As people know, I have been a

member of this Committee since it started, and that issue has been a biannual chestnut from a very early stage. Each time I have been sent by the Steering Committee to speak to, discuss with and try to persuade the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party — I have a good personal relationship with both Jim Molyneux and David Trimble — they have said that they have enough problems without adding to them.

I shall return to the theme of talking to Unionists later when I comment on Liz O'Donnell's remarks. However, we have tried everything to get them to come here as observers, as guests, as whatever, and, so far, the answer has been a firm no. At the most recent meeting or at the one before — I cannot remember which — I asked David Trimble whether there was someone who was now a tad away from the main body of the Ulster Unionist Party who could come to the Body as an individual, as it were. I had Ken Maginnis in mind. David's reply was that when the time comes, he would rather do it officially than through the back door. Again, we have made enormous efforts to try to achieve that.

The question has emerged today, in a rather new and strong form, of getting Unionists to give the Body a presentation of their views. That is a very interesting suggestion, because it is only relatively recently, in the lead-up to and aftermath of the November Assembly elections, that parties have formally committed views to paper. Indeed, the DUP published something, but I think it was only two or three weeks ago.

Every member of the Steering Committee will have heard what has been said, and I am quite certain that when we next meet we will discuss how best to get Unionist representation and see whether we can get anyone from any of the parties to give a presentation. I must include a certain caveat when I say that, because over the years a whole range of organisations has offered to give presentations to the Body — not parliamentary organisations, but others. The Steering Committee feared that that would turn the Body's meetings into a series of seminars from people who had a certain point of view that they wanted (a) to discuss and (b) to get some publicity for. I will not name any of them, but they are from across a broad spectrum of Northern Irish opinion. We have resisted it because we are not about seminars; we are a parliamentary body discussing the interparliamentary events that we wish to discuss.

That has been our caveat. Although I cannot speak for any other member of the Steering Committee, if we could persuade a genuine political party with democratic representatives to give us a presentation of its views and how it saw developments happening, that would be nothing but helpful. That is my personal view, and I am sure that all members of the Steering Committee will have heard it, and I know that we will discuss it as soon as we get a chance to meet again. I very much hope that there will be

some progress by the next plenary, even if we ask them to come and they all say no. However, that is out of our hands.

I wish to make one more personal point. Several contributors have bemoaned the lack of scrutiny of Northern Ireland legislation. Wearing another of my hats, as Chairman of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, I say amen to that. As the Assembly was clearly going to be suspended for some time, the Select Committee has had to take on the scrutiny of all domestic matters that Northern Ireland Assembly Standing Committees were to deal with. We have an enormously increased workload, which we will do our best to meet. In that regard, we have set up a subcommittee to look at those previously devolved matters to try to give them a bit of attention.

Let me make it absolutely clear: we cannot do the job that the MLAs could do. The members of the Select Committee have other things to do; they are good and loyal and hard-working, but we can only scratch the surface. I am sure that Harry Barnes, who served so loyally and long on that Committee and who has just left us, would agree.

12.45 pm

We will do our best, but our best is only a second best, and, therefore, if a way can be found to scrutinise better, no one will be happier than I. Alas, for the reasons that Kevin McNamara gave, we cannot have that scrutiny done by a Northern Ireland Assembly without an Executive and without any Committees and formal structure. However, I can tell the Body that we are making use of the Clerks of those Committees to help us in our work. They do sterling work and provide an enormous leg-up because they at least approach the problem from the devolved side, if I can put it that way, and they have tremendous input into the work that we are trying to do.

If I were to deal with the politics of what everyone said, I would be here for a long time. However, I do wish to comment on the very interesting contributions of two or three people. Like Peter Brooke, I agree with much of what Liz O'Donnell said but not all of it. She talked about the political parties' intractability; she urged Governments to get on board and talk to the DUP. I do not think the DUP has any problem with talking to Governments; what the DUP has a problem with is talking to Sinn Féin. Apart from the "saving David" line, which all of us followed with the best of intentions, one of the main reasons for the DUP's becoming the party with the largest electoral mandate is simply that its members have not talked to Sinn Féin. Moderate Unionists suspected that David Trimble was selling them out.

David Trimble walked a very fine line trying to keep his troops with him. He kept his party executive, and he kept the Ulster Unionist Council with him. Unfortunately, he did not keep his people, and his people saw the end of the discussions without moves by Sinn Féin/IRA,

which I will come to in a moment, as selling them out. They said, "If we are going to be in this position, let us at least be with someone whom we can trust to defend the Unionist point of view." That explains the surge in support for the DUP. If I had led the DUP to electoral success, I would see no reason to do precisely what David Trimble did, which lost him his electoral support. That is the problem, and it is a problem that is not going to be solved until there is movement.

Arthur Morgan, as always, is good and robust; he has his own point of view. He dismisses the need for the IRA to show that the war is over. Liz O'Donnell says that that is not the important point now. How important it is in the pantheon of arguments, I am not quite sure, but I do know is that it is a totem. Had I been the head of the IRA, coming close to getting almost everything that I wanted, I would have made a massive and public decommissioning effort. I would know, as somebody just said, that the arms could always be replaced; I would know that most of them are out of date; and I would know that the sophisticated ones that came from Libya would not work any more because they have not been properly serviced. I would have said to the Unionists, "There you are."

If the Unionists were bluffing about power-sharing, and I had fulfilled every one of my commitments under the Good Friday Agreement, I would have been laughing; and the Unionists would have had to swallow power-sharing. The IRA is making an enormous tactical error by staying in its trenches and saying: "The IRA is never going to give up; the IRA is never going to be defeated." I say to Arthur Morgan that either the war is over or it is not over. If it is not over, his position is fine and defensible. If, however, it is over and Sinn Féin is going to get into the politics of Northern Ireland, the IRA does not need those vast arsenals of weapons.

By handing them over, and by giving John de Chastelain permission to say what has been handed over and destroyed, the IRA would be making a powerful political point to which the Unionists would have to respond or else they would, frankly, look pretty stupid. I am amazed that Gerry Adams and the others have not thrown down that challenge to the Unionists. If they did, they could move that matter along greatly.

As Martin Mansergh reminded us, Sinn Féin says that it has nothing to do with the IRA. Then one reads Sinn Féin's Easter speeches and knows that the party has everything to do with the IRA. I understand that those leaders have to talk to one audience and then have to talk to another. However, it is taking cynicism a little too far when Mr Adams says that he is not in the IRA. My question to him is: "When did you leave?" That question has not been answered. He was in the IRA; he was an official representative to IRA talks; and now he says that he has nothing to do with it. I would like to know when he severed his links. It would be helpful if he told us.

I am not saying that only the IRA, Sinn Féin and the Republican movement have to move now. However, the initiative to break the deadlock is theirs. It will not come from Paisley. Paisley is not going to turn his back on what he sees as a thoroughly successful campaign of having nothing to do with the peace process. The challenge is for the DUP. If it rises to it, we can move this show on, and it will not disappear into the sand as so many people fear.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): Before we vote, I wish to say that all the Body's representations to Ministers have been sent to those Ministers. As you leave the room, you will see on the table the responses from the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs; the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; Patricia Hewitt, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry; and the Chief Minister of the Isle of Man. I would not want anyone here, Brendan, to have the impression that resolutions and comments that are passed — whether by the plenary meeting or by the Committees — are not sent to the appropriate Minister.

Arthur Morgan said that he got the impression that we were Sinn Féin-bashing. Sometimes, sitting here, I get the impression that it is Steering Committee-bashing, to a greater extent than there is criticism of Sinn Féin. We have broad shoulders here, and if you cannot have a go at certain Ministers directly by participating in the Body, you can have a go at us, and no doubt some of the criticism is justified.

However, I wish to make a point and to emphasise what Michael Mates has said. We have made constant attempts — officially and unofficially — over the past few years to bring the Unionists to this organisation, because we know that we are weakened by the fact that the parties representing the majority community in Northern Ireland are not represented at our meetings. However, we cannot force them; we cannot use paramilitary measures to bring them here at rifle-point. At this stage, one has to accept that they have simply been unwilling to come along.

We asked Professor Paul Bew to come to our previous plenary meeting precisely for that reason. We could not get the Unionists to come along; therefore we thought that a distinguished historian who, to a great extent, is able to articulate and understand the Unionist viewpoint in Northern Ireland, should be able to give us his commentaries. One or two people considered that to be controversial. My view is that it was appreciated. Some of his remarks were controversial, but his view on the likely result of the election in Northern Ireland proved to be correct. Perhaps some consider that not to have been enough, but it was a genuine attempt by the Steering Committee to get the Unionist viewpoint expressed at our meetings, although that has not happened directly so far. At every stage over the past few years we have tried: Michael Mates has emphasised it; Brendan Smith has tried; I have tried, through various contacts — so far with-

out success — to persuade at least the main Unionist party to come along.

With regard to participation, I understand that John Hume could not attend. We tried unsuccessfully to get a substitute. John Hume has been a long-standing supporter of the Body. That explains why the SDLP is not here. Again, we cannot force its members to come. They have participated in most of our plenary sessions, and no doubt they have genuine reasons for not attending. As Michael Mates has said — Brendan Smith and I have just had a brief conversation about this — the Steering Committee will take on board the points that have been made about future participation, and we will certainly make every possible effort on Members' behalf to bring the Unionist parties along here. Ultimately it is their decision; we cannot simply force them to do so.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): I shall now put the question.

Mr Joe Sherlock TD: I shall abstain from the vote because nobody referred to the reasons that I stated. I do not mind that; however, I believe that the referendum's failure to observe the democratic process is amazing.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): We note your abstention.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Body reaffirms its support for the Good Friday Agreement, the workings of which are now being reviewed; welcomes the continued commitment of both Governments, and the considerable progress made to date in its implementation; notes that elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly were held in November 2003; regrets that the devolved institutions have been suspended since October 2002 and urges all parties to work together to secure their early restoration; and looks forward to a sustained period of political stability in which the devolved institutions can operate effectively for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland and of these islands.

The sitting was suspended at 1.00 pm.

The sitting was resumed at 2.30 pm.

EUROPEAN UNION ENLARGEMENT.

Mr Barry Andrews TD: I beg to move

That the Body takes note of the enlargement of the European Union of 1 May 2004.

I thank the Co-Chairmen for allowing me to speak on the motion. I hope that the low attendance is not linked to my speaking first and that all the Members do not come in after I have finished.

I will begin by framing the debate in its historical context. In 1946, Winston Churchill, with his sense of historic moment, described the falling of the Iron Curtain across Europe. What will happen in a few days in Ireland is the end of that chapter in European history. As an Irish person, I am proud to be part of the hosting of this event. We hope that we can ensure that the accession countries enjoy a smooth transition into member state status of the EU. That has been a key priority of the Irish presidency.

The issues that we will discuss today are those of enlargement and some of the challenges that we will experience over the next few years. The first issue is the democratic deficit that many commentators and politicians have described over the years. Ireland is unique in having had a referendum on almost every aspect of the development of the EU, its treaties and its constitution. As a result, we can say without fear of contradiction that our status in the EU enjoys a level of legitimacy that is perhaps not matched anywhere else. Nevertheless, there is still an element of disengagement with the EU among the general populace. I can only imagine the state of affairs that must obtain within the other EU member states in terms of that democratic drift.

I heard today the announcement that the British Prime Minister, Mr Blair, intends to put the EU constitution to a referendum. That is an alarming development in some ways, but in others it is encouraging. We heard a few metaphors earlier about marathon-running and other sporting events. I will use a rugby metaphor in the year in which Ireland beat the English rugby team at what used to be known as "Fortress Twickenham". People might say that Mr Blair is collapsing the scrum by allowing the decision to be taken by a referendum and that the UK is probably not prepared to deal with the public debate on the EU constitution. That, however, is a rather defeatist attitude. If one argues that Mr Blair is almost deliberately trying to undermine the EU constitution, one probably belongs to a body of opinion that barely tolerates public opinion and that sees it as an inconvenience and something that must be avoided.

Earlier today, we talked about the paralysis of the political system in the context of the forthcoming elections. My view is that constant electioneering is going on — among some parties more than others — and that if we were to shrink from making tough decisions because of electioneering or the fear that somebody might seek political dividend from a particular point of view, we would get nowhere.

The British decision to have a referendum on the issue is an encouraging step in the direction of closing what I see as the democratic deficit, especially in countries other than our own, because we have done much to ensure that that does not occur.

I am a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Affairs, which has a subcommittee to deal with EU scrutiny. That was deliberately set up to try to tackle the problem, but it has been 100% ignored since its establishment. Nobody pays a blind bit of attention to what it does. It receives no coverage in the newspapers. It has resulted in little other than another institutional level to end the democratic deficit. What I see in the constitution, however, is a significant power for national Parliaments to analyse EU legislation and simply reject it on the basis of at least one third of national Parliaments coming together within 60 days to argue that the legislation is contrary to subsidiarity.

That is a welcome development, but there is a poverty of ideas about how we are to deal with the lack of democratic accountability, especially in the context of enlargement. There is an argument that the bigger we become the more difficult it is to manage things. A sort of law of diminishing returns applies, in that the larger one gets the less effective one is. As the EU enlarges further, that is one of our greatest challenges. We are conscious of that in Ireland and we have done much to try to deal with it. I would be interested to hear the views of Members from the UK in that regard.

That brings me on to the question of further enlargement. It is accepted that Bulgaria and Romania will probably become EU members in the near future. Then the question of Turkey arises. There are views that surely the EU must have an end to its expansion. I recall, however, in 1989 when the Soviet bloc began to collapse, a friend of mine suggesting that Russia might one day become a member of the EU. We all laughed and considered that ridiculous, but it is now becoming almost a possibility. Some former members of the Soviet bloc are wiping their feet on the welcome mat of the EU in full expectation that they will be welcomed and they may be able to comply with the *acquis communautaire*.

Turkey should be a member of the EU, and we should do everything we can to facilitate that happening. The Cyprus issue is something of a red herring. When our own two countries joined the EU in 1973, we were experiencing the worst political tension for 50 years, but our member-

ship helped us get through that time. We should go back to first principles and remember that the EU is there to act as a civilising influence on states to prevent them from engaging in conflict. It helps countries to pool economic resources and allows development.

There are a couple of other challenges to be faced. One issue is economic migration. There is no common EU immigration policy for citizens of non-EU states, although we have an internal migration policy. The referendum facing Ireland in the next couple of weeks is a consequence of our having no coherent policy. As our borders advance, we will need to tackle the issue, and the EU constitution is the next step to be taken. The Irish presidency may have a key role to play, which would be a positive development. I thank the Co-Chairmen for allowing me the opportunity to speak on the issue.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): I thank Deputy Andrews for a good introduction to this debate.

The Lord Dubs: I am grateful to Deputy Andrews for having set the scene so well, even though he has already covered most of the points in my speech.

I feel that 1 May will be an exciting day and I hope that we are all going to welcome the new countries that are joining. Eight of them were governed under communism for 50 years but have returned to the European democratic tradition, and that is a cause for celebration and excitement. We have shared values of human rights, freedom and democracy, which are all important in the world today.

I note the difficulties with Cyprus and hope the referendum will be positive in both the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot areas, although it does not look too promising at the moment. Cyprus will join anyway, and the question will then be what will happen to Cyprus as a divided island. We can deal with that on another occasion.

I welcome the fact that Britain and the Republic of Ireland have remained true to the belief that there should be freedom of movement within the enlarged community for people to travel for purposes of work. I am sorry that some of the other countries decided not to stick by that and backed off. I am glad we stuck by it, because it is important as a gesture to the new countries that we should stay true to one of the original purposes of the EU.

The Channel Islands are not members of the EU but have an associate relationship with it. I am not clear what the Isle of Man's position is. Is that the right way forward for them? Do they wish to have a closer relationship by way of full membership of the European Union?

Deputy Barry Andrews mentioned some important issues. For those countries coming in, the expectations of EU membership have been raised to such a high level that when they join they will not feel the benefits quickly enough. I hope that the Governments of those countries can deal with that or there will be a great deal of disappointment.

We all face the question of how the EU budget will be managed without becoming too large after accession. There will be a large agricultural sector joining, particularly in Poland. That will have implications for the CAP and regional and structural funds. Deputy Andrews also mentioned further enlargement. I do not share his optimism that Romania and Bulgaria, which hope to be members by 2007, will join so quickly. They both realize, however, that they have much work to do and changes to make before they meet the criteria for EU membership. Croatia is further down the line and, presumably, Bosnia, Serbia and Albania may also wish to join.

Deputy Andrews was right in saying that Turkey is the major issue. I hope that the process of starting negotiations with Turkey will take place at the end of this year. I would like to see Turkey as a member if it can meet the criteria. However, its human rights record and other issues must be addressed before it would be able to join, so it will be a lengthy process.

People have asked where Europe ends and where the process finishes. We should be pragmatic about it: absorb the new members as they arise and then see how much further we should go. We should not decide now how much further Europe should be extended. Getting the Balkan countries in would be a major step, as would Turkey joining, with its population of 70 million people.

2.45 pm

Deputy Andrews talked about the democratic deficit. It looks likely now that the British Government will hold a referendum on the EU constitution. I am concerned about a slightly different aspect of governance — the sense that the EU and the people from the member states are becoming increasingly distant from each other. All over Europe, people do not identify enough with the EU: it is distant and remote and there is a sense of detachment. That can cause problems with the acceptability of EU policy and, if there is a referendum, there is a likelihood that people will say no to it, as they did in Ireland on the Nice Treaty. I am not the best judge of why there was a vote against the treaty in the first referendum. I conducted a survey of Dublin taxi drivers some days later and got some interesting views, but that is not very scientific. People all over Europe, however, feel that the EU is remote and that decision-making is remote. The greatest challenge facing an enlarged EU is to deal with that and bring the whole EU process closer to the people.

Mr Mike German AM: I wish to make an observation and then pick up on three points on the European enlargement issue.

Some of the frustrations aired here are reflected in the nature of the Body's debates. This morning, not one person from the devolved Administrations made a contribution to the debate. That is not because we have not got views on those matters but because, primarily, the locus of why we are here and why we bought into this partnership in

the first place was to influence a sense of normal politics and engagement, which would be the case if we had a working and functioning Northern Ireland Assembly with us. That frustration exists because devolved Administration involves getting things done. That is what politicians are engaged in, and our idea of that is far closer to normal politics of every day. That is why the EU enlargement issue is a locus for devolved Administrations; it is not in the same dimension as that being addressed by parliamentarians from member states.

I want to speak about future regional policy as a result of enlargement. The current debate on the budget surrounds the size of contributions member states are to make. The Commission asked for 1.24% of gross national income, saying that the current 1.11% was insufficient to meet enlargement. Some member states, including my own, are asking for 1%. The consequences for regional development are immense because if a 1% contribution is agreed, given that the CAP currently draws nearly half of the European Union's budget, regional development opportunities funded by the European Union would be far more limited. There would be very little left for distribution through the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund. Both of those contributed greatly to Ireland, as they did in Wales and the highlands and islands of Scotland.

The debate on the budget is not an idle debate. It is a debate on whether there should be a regional development element to European Union thinking. It could be argued that member states could plough the savings that they make — the UK is a net contributor to the European Union — into their own regional development.

That, in turn, raises the question of whether Europe itself provides the flexibility and opportunity for people to undertake projects that Governments have not been able to do. Have the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund allowed member states to undertake activity on the ground that would not be there otherwise? Would that continue if there was an increase in the regional development budget? I would value contributions from colleagues on that issue, because it is the central debate for us in the relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom mainland.

Regionalisation of the European Union is a matter of interest. From what I know of the discussions that took place in the Nordic Council and the Baltic states, there will be increasing regionalisation in the European Union itself as those with like interests move closer together. The Body might want to deal with the question of a region for the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Where would our natural alliances be placed? Some argue that they should be with the Nordic countries, although others urge the inclusion of countries from the southern Atlantic arc. That would be a useful debate.

Lord Dubs is correct that the individual's level of knowledge of and participation in the EU is remote. The Body should look more rigorously to see whether there are proposals on tripartite agreements buried in the materials on governance. That could see an increased role for regions in framing and implementing EU policy, resulting in new partnerships between regions, member states and the EU, and bringing it closer to the ground. In an enlarged EU, people will feel more distant from the Centre. We should therefore be engaging in regional interests — however one defines a region — to develop that aspect of the EU's work. It will also help to bring normality back into politics.

As a Member of the Body, I wish to see the resumption of normal services in Northern Ireland's politics as soon as possible. To achieve that, those of us in devolved Administrations must play the part best suited to us, which is tackling domestic and everyday issues related to the EU's work. If the Body is frustrated by how to generate change in Northern Ireland's governance, engaging in the issues that matter to all us in normal politics means that Northern Ireland can have a crucial role to play.

Senator Paschal Mooney: It would be churlish not to welcome EU enlargement on 1 May. The Irish and UK position has been to encourage enlargement, especially among those states that have emerged from 50 years of totalitarianism. They have all embraced the concept of rejoining Europe through various referenda.

I am concerned, however, about what has been described as the "big bang". On 1 May, we will welcome 10 new countries — unprecedented since the foundation of the EU. In 1973, three states joined: Britain, Ireland and Denmark. Since then, admissions have been of two or three countries at a time.

The economies of some of the 10 accession states are shaky. How will the existing European Union absorb 10 new economies while attempting for them to mirror the success that it has had with the Irish economy? When Ireland joined the EU, it was a backwater of Europe and its economy on its knees, with high unemployment and emigration. EU membership encouraged Ireland, Spain and Portugal to improve their economic status. However, it was not until the late 1980s with the development of regional and structural funds that Ireland's economy began tangibly to benefit.

That is not to say that agriculture — the main plank of the Irish economy — did not benefit from access to new markets and the common agricultural policy (CAP). Many UK Members will testify that Ireland, along with France, was a regular defender of the policy. We saw the emphasis as being on the producer; the UK saw it with the consumer. However, it has changed as the Irish emphasis now tends to be with the consumer as distinct from the producer.

The Irish economy's success happened only over the past 15 years, even though we joined the EU in 1973. Judgment therefore should be reserved as to how the accession states will be absorbed into the EU. The evolution of this magnificent adventure over the coming years offers a great challenge to the existing member states. It should not be taken for granted that, once the flags have been put away after 1 May, everything will continue as it is.

I share the concerns of Deputy Barry Andrews about the UK Government's decision to proceed with a referendum on the EU constitution. I need not remind our UK colleagues that that decision was helped by the anti-European, Murdoch-owned press. In the UK, distortions in the European debate highlight a lopsided view of the EU project. That is what UK politicians will have to face, particularly when referenda are not a normal tradition in British political debate.

Lord Dubs pointed out that the Irish Government lost the first Nice referendum. That was astonishing when one considers that it was more a housekeeping issue than one of basic constitutional change. It was about managing the mechanism of an enlarged Europe. However, every canard and red herring was thrown into the debate such as militarisation. It was claimed that a big military alliance in Europe would absorb Ireland. The spectre was raised of Irish soldiers returning from some foreign field in body bags, having laid down their lives for some abstract notion of European union. The debate did not focus on what the voting mechanisms would be and the effectiveness of an enlarged EU.

3.00 pm

With the waters muddied, the Government lost the first referendum because the majority of people were confused. Turnout was less than 30%, of which only 17% won the argument — less than one in five of the electorate. That is not to diminish the result. Like forcing the Unionists to the table, one cannot force people at the end of a gun to vote. The middle ground of the Irish electorate did not vote the first time but did the second. It is vital that those UK Members who will be engaged in this process tackle not the democratic deficit but the information deficit, as was experienced in Ireland. We handled that by initiating a National Forum on Europe that focused on EU issues for the benefit of the Irish population.

They not only organised an exchange of views between the social partners but with every NGO and civic group that was involved on either the pro or anti side of the European argument. We met in open forum in Dublin and then went to the rest of the country. It is chaired by a distinguished former senior civil servant who is a colleague of ours in the Irish Senate, Senator Maurice Hayes.

I strongly suggest to those who will be feeding into the debate in the lead-up to the referendum that they go about enlightening their people and electorate in that

manner. Unless one does so, considering the tradition of anti-Europeanism in the British media, particularly the tabloids, I would be very fearful, and Barry Andrews articulated that fear. If the British Government lose the referendum, there will be significant downsides, not only for the rest of Europe but particularly for us in Ireland. I say that not as a lecture but as enlightenment. Unless the British Government bring the argument to the people now, there is a very real danger that it will distort permanently part of the debate on Europe, and European institutions in the UK will end up being about the size of the sausage and the length of the banana and all those silly irrelevancies about which one reads in 'The Sun' or the 'Daily Star'.

For a very long time, I and others were of the opinion that it was extremely important — indeed, essential — that the United Kingdom should engage forcefully and centrally with Europe and the European institutions, something that on occasion it seemed reluctant to do. That was primarily because many of us were on the fringes, and those of us in small states were concerned about the Franco-German alliance, the hegemony of France and Germany, and the manner in which that alliance in particular wished to advance into a fast-track Europe and proceed with the larger states. We felt that the UK would be a stabilising factor in that regard.

However, I now suggest that, with enlargement and 10 countries coming in, nine of which are small- to medium-sized states — the exception being Poland — the alliances will definitely shift. There is no question about it. Our Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs with responsibility for Europe, Deputy Roche, led a lobby when debate was initiated on the constitutional treaty following the decision of Spain and Poland not to engage, leaving a need for further debate. There will now be shifting alliances, and Ireland finds itself in an enlarged environment where suddenly the issue is not about small or large states. There will be alliances on an issue-by-issue basis and a lobby by like-minded states.

My final point is that there will be further enlargement, with Bulgaria and Romania. From my experience in Romania, that country has a long way to go.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): As a large number of people are offering to speak, I ask them to confine their remarks to three minutes.

Dr Dai Lloyd AM: Diolch yn fawr, Cadeirydd. What is to happen on 1 May is very welcome. The motion encourages us to take note of the enlargement of the European Union on that day.

I am a member of Plaid Cymru — the Party of Wales — which is the major opposition party in the country. Our whole *raison d'être* is to work towards a full, proper Parliament for Wales, and for Wales to become a full member state. In that context, I obviously welcome the

enlargement of the EU, particularly since, as Senator Mooney has said, five of the 10 new countries — Cyprus, Malta, Estonia, Latvia and Slovenia — are smaller than Wales. Welsh Nationalists must always counter the argument that Wales is too small for anything and will always be dependent. It is therefore particularly pleasing and inspiring that such countries are to be welcomed as full member states and appear to be welcome around the table this afternoon as such. No one has a quibble about size, dimension or economic success.

It is simply taken as a given that Slovenia, with its population of 1.9 million, and Malta, with its population of 300,000, will be full member states. Wales, on the other hand, essentially remains on the margins, with a population of 2.9 million.

Over the years in Wales, we have derived inspiration from the experience of the Irish Republic, with its 3.7 million inhabitants — slightly larger than the Welsh population — and particularly its economic success. I take on board what Senator Mooney said about EU membership, and about regional funding as part of that economic success. In Wales, we look to the Irish Republic as a source of continued inspiration, especially regarding the recent no-smoking legislation. We live in a changing world; with devolution in the United Kingdom, that state is changing, like it or not. The status quo is not an option.

Europe is also changing with its enlargement, and, without constraints, the Body also needs to change — as we argued this morning. We must become far more dynamic and involved so that we cease to stagnate or, dare I say, become harmless. It is a changing world, and people must get on board and embrace that change by welcoming EU enlargement on 1 May. *Diolch yn fawr.*

Mr Alex Salmond MP: The ‘Irish Examiner’ reported that Robin Cook swallowed his tooth on his way to the Labour conference in Dublin but that the Irish health service sorted it out. Senator Mooney is right to be concerned about the atmosphere in which the referendum will be held in the UK, probably in 18 months’ time. Government Ministers fall on how many Romanians may or may not be in the country. If people were asked to name the accession countries, Romania would probably come top of the list, given the publicity. The atmosphere is certainly not conducive to informed debate, although the fact that a referendum is to be held may make the Government approach the situation with a great deal more seriousness than it has shown in the past few years.

Economic migration is an issue. The number of people in Scotland born in accession states, according to the 2001 census, is just over 6,000. There are only 49 Slovenians in Scotland and 123 Slovaks — we could do with many more. If they could play football, that would be an enormous bonus. Most Poles in Scotland were part of the Polish fighting forces stationed there. We could do with more people from the accession countries.

There are issues about the integration of the accession countries. Senator Mooney is pessimistic. Trade rather than aid will change the economic order. There should be much greater celebration than I can detect. I was thinking about wangling an invitation to Dublin but most of the party has been cancelled. That is a matter of great concern, given the scale of the achievement in bringing those 10 countries into the EU. There is not, as there should be, an atmosphere of celebration. Everybody here supports accession, but how many have done something to advertise it? The media’s hostility and Euro-scepticism are to blame, but some is our responsibility. I salute the Irish presidency for what it is doing; I just believe we could all do a great deal more.

Senator Mary O’Rourke: I am glad to contribute to this debate. I noted that Deputy Barry Andrews began by talking about the democratic deficit. For a short time, I thought he was referring to the information deficit. We are inclined to blame Europe for that, but really that is not fair. Senator Paschal Mooney referred to the failure of the first Nice referendum. The phrase “democratic deficit” trips off the tongue. We have to do it ourselves, however, and tell people that Europe is about them. It is not about curved bananas or whatever other dotty measures are being introduced. It is about people’s individual lives, and it affects every single one of us. However, we want to blame Europe if a decision is difficult to sell. If we get a good decision, we want to take the credit for ourselves. We are not being strictly honest about that whole debate.

Individual politicians, Governments and opposition parties should interpret Europe and tell people about it. We do not do that. Were local and European elections not held together, there would not be a sufficient turnout of voters, not that anything is wrong about doing that.

We are all jolly and happy about the so-called “new countries” coming in. However, they are old European countries. They comprised the real Europe many centuries ago. Rather than being condescending by suggesting that we are doing something wonderful by bringing them all in, it should be acknowledged that they were, in fact, “Europe” before many of us woke up to that fact. We do not say that, however.

I believe that 1 May will be a big party day; of course it will. Mr Salmond is welcome to attend. Many towns will be having community celebrations on that day as well. Many town councils have decided to mark the occasion. I suspect, however, that we do not sufficiently applaud the spirit of Europe and what it has given us: human rights legislation; equality of opportunity; et cetera. Those rights were not readily obtainable in individual countries. Certainly we were not getting them. I recall being a secondary school teacher when the then Commissioner Paddy Hillery introduced equal pay.

Europe’s idealism and the spirit should be invoked much more while we reflect on what it has given us in our every-

day lives. I fear the two-speed Europe, however. We saw the carry-on of France and Germany. They would be that way inclined, given their history.

The spirit of Europe means that, regardless of whether they are large or small, member states share the same idealism and have agreed benchmarks towards which they should be aiming. Anything that militates against that ideal should be avoided at all costs.

3.15 pm

Mr Harry Barnes MP: My main concern about the European Union has always been the democratic deficit. The democratic deficit traditionally referred to the European Union itself and the inadequacies of its structure. At the time of the referendum that Harold Wilson gave us, I campaigned for a “No” vote. As we got beaten by two to one, however, one had to become a “Yes” man the following day. However, there was no reason to jettison one’s views about the inadequacies of the democratic arrangements.

Deputy Andrews has pointed out that there are measures in the European constitution that tackle some of the deficit by giving rights to national Parliaments to pull various matters back. Positive democratic elements are needed within the European Union, however. The powers that exist, such as the Council of Ministers and the Commission, need to be configured in terms of Parliament. We should have a federal, social and democratic union within a European Parliament. The democratic deficit means that we also have a social deficit, which relates to certain issues that are not covered. Subsidiarity has tackled that somewhat, but by no means sufficiently.

The European Union is seen as being distant and remote. However, if the focus were on the European Parliament as a major decision-maker, that would help to reassure people about the appropriateness of countries being drawn together in the new Europe. It is ironic that a majority of the new member states are from the former Soviet Union. They have emerged from a history of democratic centralism and controlled economies yet are now moving — despite difficulties here and there — into a highly bureaucratic European Union structure. However, some of those nations must participate in a structure that develops democratic norms and potentials that will feed back into their own systems. Some of them, such as Slovakia, still have a legacy of democratic problems as regards how they function and operate.

The democratic deficit is still high on the agenda. It influences my attitude to any specific set of reforms. Those reforms would lead me, in a British referendum, to support a “Yes” vote, but I would be conscious of the inadequacies in terms of the massive problems that still need to be tackled.

Mrs Margaret Ewing MSP: I agree with much that other speakers have already said. The public debate, as

raised by Mr Mike German and also by Senator Paschal Mooney, is important. We as politicians have a tendency when talking on the European Union to speak in acronyms, which the people do not understand. I serve on the of the Scottish Parliament’s European and External Relations Committee. Often when I am reading my papers and preparing for the Committee meetings or debates, I must refer to the handbook that shows every EU organisation’s responsibilities. That is why, in Scotland, we are disconnected from the public to a certain extent.

In the constituencies of Banff and Buchan and of Moray, which Mr Salmond and I have as adjoining constituencies, people are aware of — in respect of the European Union — the common fisheries policy. Their venom towards that policy is substantive and is having a knock-on effect on other aspects of the voting structures and people’s electoral intentions. I am sure that people from throughout the Body could give similar examples, but in our case the common fisheries policy has presented the most difficulties.

Regional and structural funds were mentioned. We have been told that the Government in the United Kingdom — this does not apply to the Republic — will have the repatriation of structural funds. That would apply to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The net result of a fairly substantial evidence-taking session with members of local authorities, representatives of voluntary organisations and business in the Scottish Parliament was that those people trusted the European Commission more than they did the UK government. That interesting fact might be something for my Westminster colleagues to take away with them.

Paul Flynn and I visited the Baltic states when they were under Soviet occupation. We could amuse Members for hours on end with the stories of what we experienced. He and I came away with the very clear idea that to them the European Union was a Polar Star that would dissolve all their problems. Many accession countries may be disappointed to find that there is no golden pot at the end of the European Union rainbow. Some of the problems will be very difficult to resolve and perhaps should be dealt with by the Body and by others.

Mr John McWilliam MP: I travelled quite extensively in all the former Soviet Union countries and the level of expectation out there is extremely high, both for membership of the European Union and membership of NATO. In fact I wrote the Defence Committee report on the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to NATO. What we determined when we went there was that, politically, Bulgaria was looking at NATO but militarily it was not. The opposite is true of Romania. Not much has changed since.

We should realise with that, with the 10 new accession states, Europe’s economic geography has fundamentally changed. The sheer size of the agricultural sector in Poland will make a huge difference to the size of that sector in the EU. Much political consideration has been

given to the advantages of the increase but not to the economic consequences. It is fundamental that that should happen. The funding proposals do not add up to sustaining the social and structural funds, which areas such as the one that I represent in north-east England rely on because of the relative lack of prosperity.

Most people have a slightly different view of what subsidiarity means on any given matter. It varies according to the particular point of view that a person has. I agree with Harry Barnes that there is a serious democratic deficit. A European Parliament whose only power is to sack the whole Commission is not very useful. That is something we will fail to address at our peril. Eventually our electorate will hold us to account.

Senator Martin Mansergh: I welcome enlargement from a cultural, economic and political point of view. There needs to be proper funding. The structural fund made an enormous difference to Ireland and a large difference to Spain and Portugal. Cutting back to 1% of GNP will send the wrong signals. Polish agriculture was referred to, but I do not think that, in any of the accession countries, agriculture is seen as the economic salvation. I am not sure that I would be overly worried.

The main point that I wish to make is my concern that the gap between Britain and Ireland and Europe should not grow any larger. At one point, there was to be a referendum on the euro in the UK, but that has slid down the scale. A referendum on Europe is in prospect. I believe that this referendum is a political device, which, if adopted, would defuse Europe as a General Election issue in the UK. The success of the referendum would require the British Government to take on Murdoch and certain related sectors of the British press in a manner that they have not shown any willingness to do.

3.30 pm

I would be concerned if any one country were to be the only country to vote no, although the greater danger is that it would be Britain. There would then be enormous pressure for the others to move ahead, since one country can only exercise a temporary veto. Such a country would be pressurised to move to associate status. I really worry about the referendum proposed, unless there is a determination to fight. The British Government must argue with conviction and take on a battle with a willingness that to date they have not shown.

The absence of Northern Ireland from the eurozone has negative consequences for the economy there and perhaps for the island of Ireland. If there is a danger of Britain voting no to the European constitution, that would also have a disruptive effect on political and economic relations within the island.

Dr Jerry Cowley TD: We welcome the accession countries and we hope that they will do as well as Ireland did. It is only right and proper that we should be magna-

nimous because, over the years, our largest export was our people.

Much of what was flagged at that time has come to pass; for example the Mansholt Plan, where small farms were deemed to be unviable and only big, ranch-style farms are viable. On balance, it is much better to be a member of the European Union, but let me sound a word of caution. Regional development in Ireland is unbalanced. Funding from Europe was used to a major degree to shore up areas of large population in the east and on the south coast. Half the graduates from County Mayo have to go to Dublin for their first job. The figures in the mid-term review prove that the gross overspend of structural funds in the south and east of the country and the underspend in the west. We have not the required infrastructure to create a level playing pitch, and that creates a situation in which traffic in Dublin moves at the pace of an ass and cart, whereas the traffic moves in the west. The accession states should be aware that there may be unbalanced regional development. The European Union should take that into account.

Mr Andrew Mackay MP: I am conscious that elected politicians love photo opportunities, and I have not lost the will to live. I will therefore be brief so that colleagues can go outside into the windy sunshine to have their presence recorded for posterity.

I shall comment on what Deputy Cowley has just said. Travelling around the various accession states, I have found that there is a great desire to follow the Irish example. Ireland's success in the EU has been an inspiration to those countries. We all wish them as well.

I thank Deputy Andrews for tabling the motion, as it is right we should debate it. These are momentous times, as he pointed out. The fall of the Iron Curtain was the most exciting event that our generation has seen happen. Expansion is the logical follow-up. Now should be a time of celebration and excitement. Sadly, Alex Salmond was also correct to point out that he had not seen much bunting. It is regrettable, despite what Senator O'Rourke has done to organise many village and town parties for 1 May, that the rest of us have largely failed. We have all been invited to her party.

It is worthwhile emphasising to my friend Senator Mooney that, in my country, all the political parties are totally united in wanting the EU to expand, despite their other differences on Europe. We are equally excited about the latest enlargement. We are not as worried as Senator Mooney that 10 countries are joining at the same time. As Alex Salmond pointed out, most of the countries are quite small, and if Wales were an island like Malta, it would be joining as well.

Dr Dai Lloyd AM: We are like Slovenia.

Mr Andrew Mackay MP: I must take up Alex Salmond's point on Slovenia. I understand why not too many Slovenians have gone to Scotland. If he had been to Slovenia, he would understand why.

I share the sense of other speakers in welcoming Turkey's application. It has been regrettable that, in some circles, there has been a suggestion that somehow Turkey is not European, its religion is not right and it would be unacceptable. We should do everything possible to encourage Turkey's application to proceed as smoothly and expeditiously as possible.

Equally, the admission of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU in the longer term is also to our advantage. I share the view that that will take a long time, particularly in the case of Romania, which is starting to lag behind Bulgaria economically. Senator O'Rourke was right to remind us that there are long-term prospects in the Balkans. To achieve peace and prosperity for the Balkans would be wonderful. Croatia's initial application is progressive so that it can join Slovenia in the EU. Realistically, it will be in the longer term before Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia join.

I shall conclude by talking on the democratic deficit, which many politicians mentioned, and on the referendum that the UK Prime Minister says we are now going to hold.

Senator Martin Mansergh is a shrewd observer of the political scene. He was absolutely right to say that to announce a referendum was a political device. He reminded us that the referendum on the euro, promised ahead of the 2001 General Election, has still not happened. There are not many in this room who would bet their mortgages that there will be a referendum in the UK on the new constitution this side of the next General Election, which will probably take place sometime next year. I am pleased to see Rosemary McKenna agree, as she is another person whose political judgement I admire.

Senator Mooney is right to say that there should not be any red herrings and that it should be a straightforward vote on whether we are in favour of the constitution. For my part, I do not believe that there should be a constitution. The enlargement issues were settled at Nice, largely to everyone's satisfaction. The constitution will move us towards a federal Europe, which takes the people further away, precisely the issue to which most speakers object.

I hope there will not be a red herring whereby a "No" vote means that Britain will withdraw from the EU. That would be wrong. Senator O'Rourke was right to say that there would be a low turnout in the European elections. I fear that the turnout in the UK could be less than 20%, despite the fact that the European elections are taking place on the same day as local elections. As Margaret Ewing said, if Europe keeps speaking in acronyms and does not deal with the issues that concern real people, and if we do not have democratically elected politicians responsible for what is happening in Europe, that is hardly surprising.

I do not want to end on a gloomy note. Senator Mooney and Deputy Pattison, others who are not present and myself, as part of the Body's European Committee, all had the honour to go to the occupation museum when we were visiting Riga last January. This was one of the most moving

experiences that I have had. I advise anyone who is in Riga to go to that museum, which portrays both the German and the Soviet occupation of the country. Anybody who has any doubt about the EU's future and the need to bring in countries from the Soviet bloc and elsewhere need only to visit that inspirational museum.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Body takes note of the enlargement of the European Union of 1 May 2004.

The sitting was suspended at 3.40 pm.

The sitting was resumed at 4.16 pm.

**ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER FOR
AGRICULTURE AND FOOD,
MR JOE WALSH TD**

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Colleagues, I am delighted to welcome the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Mr Joe Walsh TD, to address the plenary conference and to take questions. Joe has been a Member of Dáil Éireann for Cork South-West since 1977 and is a neighbour of this hotel: he lives in Clonakilty. Joe has served as Minister for Agriculture and Food for many years, and we are delighted that he has been in a position to take up our invitation to address the Body and to take parliamentary questions. I invite the Minister to address the Body.

The Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mr Joe Walsh TD): Thank you, Mr Co-Chairman, and thank you for your kind invitation. It is, of course, a pleasure for me to address the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body here in Inchydoney and Clonakilty. I am aware of the Body's excellent work over many years, and this is a great opportunity for me to speak with you. On a personal note, I have the added honour of welcoming Members to the historic province of Munster and, on this occasion, to my constituency, which I share with one of the Body's esteemed Committee Chairmen, Jim O'Keeffe. My colleague Denis O'Donovan is also a representative of this multi-seat constituency.

I hope that during their stay Members will have the opportunity to enjoy the warm hospitality that is accorded to visitors to this particularly beautiful area, and today we have arranged for it to be further enhanced with some beautiful sunshine. This historic province of Munster has a way of welcoming people. Places such as Thomond Park are famous for their close encounters with visiting teams, and in this part of Munster we also like to have a hands-on approach.

Many of the British Members of the Body are frequent visitors to Ireland, and they will have noticed at first hand that the Ireland of today is a very different place from that of a few decades ago. That change has been brought about by co-operation, consensus and partnership. That is very much the theme of the conference, and it underlines the *raison d'être* of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body.

Until the mid-1980s, Ireland was characterised by an economy of low growth: it had a weak trade balance, high unemployment levels and a soaring national debt, which has been modernised and has performed outstandingly in the past decade or so. That change was brought about by consensus and co-operation between Government, the

workers, trade union representatives, farming organisations and employers.

No political party or political leaders have claimed credit for this outstanding performance and phenomenon, and that is because people working together achieved them. I hope that in areas in which Members work there will be similar co-operation with comparably impressive results. For example, the gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of the Irish economy has increased by double figures throughout the 1990s, reaching 11.3% in 1999. Although the recent economic downturn has slowed down that growth from those record highs, Ireland's GDP growth rate was at least double the EU average in 2003; in fact, it was similar to the growth rate of the United Kingdom. Ireland's GDP per capita was 125% of the EU average in 2002; the comparative figure for the United Kingdom was around the same. Ireland now has one of the most open economies in the world; exports of goods and services accounted for 83% of GDP in 2003.

Trade has been important in the growth of the Irish economy. For example, exports have increased sixfold since the mid-1980s. An increasing number of pharmaceutical and information technology companies that are based in Ireland have also contributed to an increase in imports that will be used in the manufacturing process. However, despite the rise in imports, exports as a percentage of imports in Ireland have increased from approximately 100% of gross national product (GNP) in the mid-1980s to over 170% of GNP last year.

Unemployment was a real scourge in Ireland before we embarked on this consensus process. The unemployment rate in the mid-1980s was up to 20% — one person in five was unemployed. A 20% unemployment rate creates serious social problems; however, we had a further difficulty in that our best and brightest graduates were leaving Ireland.

During the mid-1980s, one of the great demands in my constituency clinics was for visas to get out of Ireland and that economy. I remember well, when Donnelly visas became available in the United States, that it was something of an achievement for a public representative to facilitate constituents with visas to get out of Ireland.

During the 1990s, however, employment increased dramatically and as a result unemployment fell from 20% in 1987 to a low of 3.7% in 2001. We now have virtually full employment in Ireland. Not only that, but many of the emigrants who left in the 1980s have returned with the result that, in the last census, the Irish population was at its highest since before the Famine in the 1800s.

Since 2001, a downturn has affected the employment market in Ireland. The large increases in employment growth of the late 1990s have lessened. As a result, the unemployment rate has increased to 4.4% in 2003. At the same time, that compares favourably with the EU15 average, which is almost double that.

A further facet of the low levels of employment and the lack of incentive to work in Ireland in the mid-1980s was the tax system. With that level of unemployment, there were greater social welfare demands and demands for greater tax. It was a vicious circle, and fortunately we changed that to a virtuous circle. For example, in the mid-1980s there were three rates of personal income tax: the standard rate of 35%, a higher rate of 48%, and the highest rate was a punitive 60%.

There were levies for labour and health, which along with pay-related social insurance (PRSI) brought the total take from pay packets to approximately 70%. Today there are only two rates of tax: 20% is the standard rate, and 42% is the higher rate. Such rates act as an incentive to many people; they can keep more of their pay packets, and some people say that individuals know best how to spend their pay packets. For many people, the old system acted as a disincentive to work at all.

The 1980s also saw large deficits in Exchequer balance. For example, in 1987 the national debt stood at 125% of GDP. That figure has fallen continually and is currently 32%, which is the second lowest in the EU; only Luxembourg has a better rate. The EU average is double that of Ireland at 64%, compared to the UK figure, which is 40% of the GDP ratio at present.

Agriculture, which is my particular area of interest, continues to play an important role in the Irish economy. The agrifood sector as a whole accounts for about 10% of GDP, 10% of the workforce and is worth £5 billion in exports. As a result of the low import content, it accounts for about one quarter of our net export earnings. Although the importance of primary production is in decline, it still accounts for a significant part of our economy, more so than in most other EU member states. Most farmers have all-farm income, and at present it is estimated that at least 42% have a further source of income.

The age profile is also positive in Ireland, with 13% of Irish farmers under 35 years of age, which is well above the EU average of only 8%.

On 1 January 2004, Ireland took over its six-month presidency of the European Union. The theme of the Irish presidency is "Europeans — Working Together". The theme is particularly appropriate in the year in which 10 new member states will accede to membership of the Union. The first meeting of the Council in any formation after enlargement will be when the Agriculture Council meets informally in Killarney from 9 to 11 May 2004. It will be my great privilege to preside over that historic meeting, where we will address the issue of how best to communicate developments in the common agricultural policy, including special trade arrangements, to our trading partners, particularly those in developing countries.

My broad overall objective for the Irish presidency is to support the European model of agriculture, which must remain at the heart of all actions of the Council because

it reflects the social, cultural and economic realities of European agriculture and rural life. Within that broad objective, I have identified three specific objectives for the Irish presidency.

First, to facilitate the application of the common agricultural policy to the new member states, which are looking forward to membership of the European Union. Their populations have a much higher percentage of people who are involved in farming and agriculture. They look forward to increasing investment at primary-producer level and to improving their processing operations.

Secondly, the process of simplification of the common agricultural policy must continue. It has been a common complaint in all countries that the EU and its various schemes and structures are extremely complex. Farmers have always complained that there is too much bureaucracy and red tape. I also want to ensure that the mid-term review, which was initiated about a year and a half ago and which reached decisions in June 2003, will be concluded.

Thirdly, I want to ensure that food safety and animal welfare standards are enhanced.

We have been working closely with new member states on procedural and substantive issues that may affect them, with a view to finding acceptable solutions. One of those issues was the funding of on-farm investments in the new member states. I am pleased to say that a Regulation to address that issue has been adopted by the Agriculture Council during Ireland's presidency.

4.30 pm

In that context, I am conscious of the benefits that Ireland has enjoyed from EU membership. Earlier, I referred to the performance of the Irish economy. Undoubtedly, membership of the EU underlies that quite stunning performance to a substantial extent. The EU has been extremely supportive of Irish investment in education, for example, which underpins much of our quite dramatic investment in modern technology and investment by IT companies and pharmaceutical companies in Ireland, because there are no circumstances under which mobile international investment would be attracted to any economy unless it had graduates from a modern education system to improve and enhance their operations.

The current programme of EU enlargement, when complete, will add over 100 million people to the population of the EU. That will create a new impetus for growth in the market, with increased possibilities for all member states. The absorption of such a huge addition to the Union's population and land area, with all the economic, social and cultural diversity that it will bring, will, of course, be a challenge.

An enlarged EU will also bring many opportunities for new and existing members. The simplification of the common agricultural policy commenced with the reform decisions taken in June 2003. That process is continuing

with the negotiations on reform proposals for olive oil, tobacco, cotton and hops. Early tomorrow morning, I will go to Brussels; this week there will be intensive negotiations on those products, some of which are extremely sensitive areas of activity. For example, tobacco is one of the largest and most strongly supported sectors in the entire European Union. Cotton is also a sensitive area, particularly for the least developed countries. I hope that we will secure agreement on these proposals at the special session on Wednesday and Thursday this week.

The enhancement of food safety is a major element of the Irish presidency programme. The Commission, the European Parliament and the Council on the successive presidencies have worked hard to implement the demanding and comprehensive programme of work set out in the Commission's White Paper in 2000. When this programme is complete, the EU Commission will be able to offer consumers in Europe the most comprehensive and up-to-date food safety standards and controls in the world for their protection. It is, therefore, one of my priorities to maximise progress on the legislative measures before us in this six-month period.

I am happy to say that we have already made substantial progress; we have, for example, secured the First Reading agreements with the European Parliament on official animal feed and food controls and on feed hygiene Regulations. In a nutshell, we are working to enhance and simplify legislation and to provide a higher level of consumer protection from farmer to final consumer.

I also hope to reach a satisfactory agreement in the second Council meeting this month, on 27 April, on the important proposal on animal welfare during transportation. Animal welfare is a key area of activity, of which we must be mindful. My objective in securing agreement will be to put in place standards that are reasonable, scientifically based and which do not disrupt legitimate trade patterns. All the countries of the EU — Ireland in particular because we have a sea journey before we reach mainland Europe, and areas such as Scotland that are some distance from the market — have an interest in animal welfare during transportation. I hope to conclude that dossier by the end of April while allowing legitimate transportation and trade to continue to enhance animal welfare.

There are many other detailed issues that we intend to progress. The programme of work is challenging, but I am confident that we will have a productive presidency and that measures that I have outlined will make a significant contribution to the well-being of European agriculture, safeguard the health of consumers, preserve the environment and enhance animal welfare.

We also have important world trade talks. The new World Trade Organization (WTO) round will have a major impact on the future for all of us. Ireland is an open economy, and we have much to gain from a well-ordered, rule-based world trading system. We remain committed,

therefore, to the multilateral process and to securing a new world trade round.

I was disappointed that the fifth WTO ministerial conference in Cancún in September 2003 broke down. Contrary to some reports, the EU was not responsible for the breakdown, nor were the negotiations on agriculture the stumbling block. Rather, it was due to the cumbersome structure and decision-making procedures of the WTO and the complexity of the issues involved. The EU participated in the negotiations in a constructive manner and will continue to do so.

The negotiations resumed at the end of March with renewed impetus to reach accord on a framework agreement for the next round by the end of the summer. That would represent a significant step forward. However, I am sure that the political systems in several areas will have some part to play. For example, a US presidential election is due and, later this year, a new EU Commission will be appointed. There is, therefore, a reduced prospect of a new agreement being finalised this year. However, that will not stop progress being made towards that goal. During Ireland's EU presidency, I shall do what I can to facilitate that process.

I turn to the new era for farming and agriculture in the EU. Detailed rules for the single farm payment system have recently been agreed. As Members probably know, we in Ireland have opted for the full decoupling system, including the dairy sector, from 1 January 2005. I intend that that system will be operated by the Department of Agriculture and Food in a simplified and structured manner. England and Northern Ireland have opted for different hybrid models, but Scotland and Wales have opted for a system almost similar to Ireland's. There will be major benefits from the new system where payments to farmers are decoupled, or the link is broken between production and payment of subsidies. Farmers will have the opportunity to consolidate their income support payments and tailor their production enterprises to the quality and food-safety end of the market. That system will have benefits for farmers and consumers because farmers will get a single cheque in the post: one application, one cheque. They will have the freedom to farm, and their only focus will be on the consumer. Any enhancement of their income will be based on a return from the marketplace. The endless bureaucratic form-filling for a whole array of schemes will be abolished. The single payment will be made simply through one application.

The common agricultural policy will of course continue to play an important role in the economic life of the Irish agriculture industry because it contributes 16 billion euros annually to Irish farmers — that is about 16,000 euros on average per farmer. As a logistical extension of the introduction of the single payment system, the Government will lead the change agenda to enable the agrifood sector to adapt to the new common agricultural policy architecture, with the emphasis on the marketplace and

sustainability. For that purpose, additional finances were provided in the Estimates and the Budget for expenditure this year on agriculture and food. It is also important to note that the mid-term review agreement protects the future framework of the common agricultural policy until 2013. An added bonus of that decoupling from production is that, in the context of the WTO talks, those payments will go from what is called the “blue box” into the “green box”, therefore avoiding challenge. Payments will no longer be linked to production, whereby some farmers maintained a surplus of livestock — cattle and sheep — in order to draw payments. They will no longer have to do that, which will avoid over-grazing and the erosion of hillsides and landscapes, which, from an environmental point of view, will be very important.

I look forward to working with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland. I have already agreed with the Minister, Ian Pearson, to set up a working group to consider various issues arising from the single farm payment, with the desirability of taking a joint approach to this issue on the island of Ireland.

We all share with our neighbours the threat posed by animal disease — for example, bovine tuberculosis. We have acknowledged for some time the role that wildlife plays in the spread of that disease. Carwyn Jones, the Minister for Environment, Planning and Countryside in the National Assembly for Wales, recently visited Ireland to view the management of our wildlife research programme into the spread of animal disease. The Government of the Welsh Assembly is consulting on a new long-term strategy that was published in February, and I hope that the Minister’s visit to Ireland will have helped in that process.

Like us, Scottish farmers are concerned about the effects of the EU Commission’s proposal on the welfare of animals during transportation for similar reasons. I understand that our presidency proposals have gone some way towards addressing those difficulties.

In the island of Ireland context, we are developing a co-ordinated animal health strategy with our colleagues in Northern Ireland. To date, we have engaged in developing complementary approaches towards preventing the introduction of animal disease through strengthening co-ordination and co-operation on issues such as contingency planning, BSE and cross-border fraud.

From speaking on areas within my responsibility for agriculture and food, it is obvious that there are many issues and challenges common to us, which we must all deal with in today’s global economic environment. It is also clear that, in recent years, a much deeper and constructive partnership has emerged between us, which can address these challenges to our mutual advantage. What is true of agriculture is also true of many other sectors of mutual economic interest. Some exotic animal diseases initiated in the Far East and came into Europe,

Ireland and the UK. It was only by concerted action and co-operation that those diseases were dealt with, but they are a constant challenge, the most recent one being avian influenza.

4.45 pm

I now turn to the Good Friday Agreement. A new political landscape was created by the agreement of 1998, which provides a historic and innovative framework for institutional relationships within Northern Ireland, on the island of Ireland through the North/South Ministerial Council and on an east-west basis through the British-Irish Council. Through these institutions, we have seen the very real social and economic benefits that have been delivered through the working of the agreement. The North/South bodies established under the Good Friday Agreement have made significant progress in recent years, delivering practical benefits in a wide range of areas to the people of the island of Ireland.

As Minister with responsibility for agriculture and food, I have seen at first hand excellent work in the development of food safety promotion and all-island animal and plant health strategies. The new North/South agency, Tourism Ireland, has also been actively marketing the island of Ireland as a single tourist destination to the global tourist market with considerable success. For example, 7.2 million visitors were welcomed to the island of Ireland in 2003. That was an 11% increase in visitors to Northern Ireland, which was of tremendous benefit to the economies and to the lifestyle of citizens throughout Ireland.

In the British-Irish Council we have also seen excellent co-operation between the peoples of these islands as members continue to work together to develop co-operation in a wide range of areas including drugs — where the Irish Government take a leading role — environment, social inclusion, minority and lesser-used languages, transport and the knowledge economy.

The Irish Government look forward to the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland and to the fully inclusive operation of the agreement’s institutions as soon as is practicably possible. The Irish and British Governments remain committed to the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. They both clearly recognise that at the very core of the agreement is the principle of partnership — a partnership that I have talked about throughout my contribution. They also recognise that permanent peace in Northern Ireland can best be achieved by the full and inclusive participation in the governance of Northern Ireland of all parties whose mandate gives them a right to participate. Those issues are at the heart of the ongoing review of the Good Friday Agreement.

Both Governments are equally clear that just as there must be inclusion and partnership in Government, there must be an end to violence and paramilitarism of every description. Paramilitarism has no place in a peaceful,

stable and democratic society. We are determined to push ahead and to overcome the obstacles to achieving those objectives. The two Governments are continuing to implement the elements of last May's joint declaration that are not dependent on acts by others. Those elements include rights, equality, criminal justice and the Irish language.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Brian Cowen, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Paul Murphy, will jointly chair a meeting of the British-Irish Inter-governmental Conference in London later this week to review progress in this broad range of areas.

The Independent Monitoring Commission, established under the joint declaration, has also presented its first report to the two Governments. The report will be considered carefully and published shortly.

We have come a long way in developing the new relationships envisaged for the mutual benefit of all our people. This period of suspension should not cloud the fact that the record of the institutions since December 1999 is a source of considerable encouragement as we address these difficulties. Although there is some way to go before we achieve lasting peace, we are confident that, given the foundations that we are now building on and the commitment and determination of the democratically elected parties and the Governments, we will find a way to resolve the current impasse.

I assure Members that the Government continue to give the peace process the highest possible priority. The Taoiseach, despite his heavy commitments in the EU, has made it abundantly clear that his commitment has not diminished. This is evident from the fact that both Governments are still engaged in the ongoing review. The Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair met in March in Farmleigh House and at Hillsborough Castle, and they have also been in contact today. This is just a brief indication of the Governments' ongoing and continual commitment to the peace process.

I know that the framework for deeper and closer relations, as laid down in the Good Friday Agreement, has the goodwill and encouragement of Members of the Body. Indeed the interaction and work between Members of the Body is excellent proof of the many benefits that can flow from closer relations. I am delighted to have the opportunity to record the Irish Government's deep appreciation for the support the Body has always given, and continues to give, to the vital work of implementing the agreement in full.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): Minister, thank you very much for your detailed contribution. You covered important issues very well in your speech.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): Thank you for your very comprehensive talk. The questions are before you on the Programme of Business, and the Minister will decide whether they are to be linked.

Oral Answers to Questions

Political Situation in Northern Ireland

1. **Mr Kevin McNamara MP** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food if he will make a statement on the progress being made by both Governments towards the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

7. **Mr Michael Mates MP** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food if he will make a statement on the peace process.

22. **Mr Jim O'Keeffe TD** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food if he will make a statement on the political situation, the decommissioning of weapons and the restoration and full operation of the institutions in Northern Ireland.

The Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mr Joe Walsh TD): Mr Co-Chairman, since you have kindly given me the discretion for coupling some questions — I was decoupling others — I will take advantage of your generosity and take questions 1, 7 and 22 together.

The Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair met the political parties that were elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly at Hillsborough Castle on 23 March. These meetings were designed to find a collective way forward and in particular to focus on two key outstanding issues in order to find a way of resolving them. Trilateral meetings were held with the DUP, the SDLP, the UUP, Alliance, the PUP and Sinn Féin. During the meetings the Governments heard the views of each of the parties and listened to their proposals for addressing the current difficulties. Both Governments also made it clear that there were two key related issues that had to be resolved so that progress can be made.

As we have stated on several occasions in recent months, these outstanding issues are: a definitive end to paramilitarism in all its guises from every quarter; and a commitment from all the parties to participate in inclusive politics to ensure sustainable political institutions across all three strands of the agreement.

As you are aware, the agreement contains a commitment to the decommissioning of illegally held arms in the possession of paramilitary groups. Both Governments have welcomed the three acts of IRA decommissioning — verified by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning — which have taken place to date. In addition, paragraph 13 of the joint declaration sets out detailed requirements on the cessation of all forms of paramilitary activity. We will continue to avail of every opportunity to engage with the parties to ensure that paramilitarism from all quarters is brought to an end and that the process of decommissioning is carried out in a way that maximises public confidence and is advanced to completion.

The Independent Monitoring Commission, which was established formally in early January, is tasked with overseeing the fulfilment of commitments on ending paramilitary activity, security normalisation and full participation in the political institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. The two Governments are carefully examining the commission's first report, which was received last week and which focused on paramilitary activity. Democratic political institutions operating on behalf of the people in Northern Ireland, between North and South and between these islands, are, of course, at the heart of the agreement. Dialogue is continuing to work towards the full restoration of these political institutions on a sustainable basis.

In addition, both Governments have acknowledged the need to continue to meet their commitments on the full implementation of the agreement, particularly in areas of rights and equality. Work on this agenda is being actively advanced within the framework of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. A meeting of the conference is, as you know, scheduled to take place on Wednesday of this week in London, and both Governments will avail of the opportunity to review progress made on the implementation of the agreement and on the joint declaration, which was published on 1 May last year.

As outlined by the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair at Hillsborough on 23 March, we are keen to see early progress on the key issues, preferably before the local and European elections on 11 June. Both Governments will remain in close contact with all parties over the coming weeks to advance all opportunities for progress, including the ongoing review of the operation of the agreement and, if judged appropriate, by the personal re-engagement in discussions of the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair.

Mr Kevin McNamara MP: Thank you, Mr Co-Chairman. I thank the Minister for his very full and comprehensive reply and I would like to say that I am jealous of the beauty of his constituency. My constituency does not even have a single farm, never mind all this beauty. The River Hull is not without its attractions; however, I cannot remember what they are.

I draw the Minister's attention to the grave concern expressed at our discussions this morning that Members elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly have nothing useful to do at present. I ask the Minister whether the two Governments have considered altering the legislative arrangements to the Assembly to enable it to meet, elect a Presiding Officer and act as a pre-scrutiny legislation committee for matters concerning Northern Ireland until it is possible to elect an Executive.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: The current review of the Good Friday Agreement is examining several aspects of its operation, particularly those that he has raised. I shall convey his suggestion to my colleague, the Minister for

Foreign Affairs, Brian Cowen, to see whether he can advance it.

5.00 pm

Mr Michael Mates MP: The Minister mentioned the good intentions of everyone to ensure demilitarisation. During this morning's debates on political developments, Deputy Morgan told us unequivocally that demilitarisation of the IRA is not going to happen. Those were his exact words, which I wrote down as he said them. What is the Minister's view on that?

Mr Joe Walsh TD: Both Governments' view is quite clear on that matter; there must be full demilitarisation in all aspects. Private armies or militias have no place in a modern democracy. There must be full adherence to the sentiments in the Good Friday Agreement, which means there must be full and total demilitarisation in every aspect before any realistic progress can be made. The good offices of the Taoiseach, Prime Minister Blair, both Governments and all the supporting structures are spending considerable time seeking to achieve that end.

Mr Jim O'Keeffe TD: I particularly welcome my constituency colleague, Mr Joe Walsh, to the BIIPB conference. A subject of debate this morning was the lack of a sense of urgency on anyone's part to get the devolved institutions up and running as quickly as possible. As the Minister is aware, the devolved institutions have been suspended since October 2002. One view expressed was that an agreement might not be possible until after the next UK general election, which was announced this morning and will be held on 5 May 2005, if I recollect correctly. Has the Minister formed a view on the restoration of the devolved institutions, the timing of that and the need for an attempt to inject a sense of urgency into getting that under way? How can the Governments help to inject that sense of urgency?

Mr Joe Walsh TD: Deputy O'Keeffe and I share our constituency in a curious way. We have a great old battle for it a few weeks before each election, and then we settle down to enjoy a period with me in government and Jim in opposition. [*Laughter*]. That is the way that I like it, but in or out of government, it is a spectacular constituency. Its coastline, landscape and seascape are unparalleled anywhere. I am very pleased that all the delegations will have further opportunity over the next 48 hours to enjoy this unspoilt part of the world.

Let me allay fears that there is any let-up in the degree of urgency given by both Governments to see devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. As I said in my address, both Prime Minister Blair and Taoiseach Bertie Ahern are giving unstinting commitment to restoring the institutions. They had meetings at Farnleigh House on 11 March, at Hillsborough on 23 March and, as we speak, are in further contact with each other, so there is full and total commitment, and a degree of urgency. There has been an election and, as Kevin McNamara said, after an

election, it is expected that people will embark on the democratic process in the Assembly. It is not good to have this impasse. The matter is being treated with great urgency. It is extremely important to get the institutions up and running again at the earliest possible opportunity.

Ms Liz O'Donnell TD: Does the Minister accept that the biggest obstacle to the re-establishment of the institutions is the absence of trust between Sinn Féin and the DUP, who, after the election, are in the ascendancy and are numerically stronger in the Assembly? What efforts have the Irish Government made to build confidence between Sinn Féin and the DUP? Does the Minister agree that trust is critically absent at the moment and that both parties must accept, respect and value each other's mandate and accept the responsibility — the responsibility to govern that they sought through that mandate — that comes with electoral success?

Mr Joe Walsh TD: It is extremely important that trust be built up between Sinn Féin and the DUP. A tremendous amount of work is being put into that, particularly since the election. I know from statements by the leaders of both parties that a degree of progress has been made in that regard. Throughout history, after periods of conflict, sooner or later representatives of the extreme views get elected and have to sit down and talk with one another, and it is not unusual for them to learn to work together for the betterment of the people they represent. I think that the same thing will happen in Northern Ireland, but it needs to happen sooner rather than later. I look forward to a day very soon when both sides will work together in democratic institutions; they owe that to the people who elected them. They have to accept that they have been given a mandate to get on with the job of improving the lot of Northern Ireland and its citizens.

Mr Alex Salmond MP: The Minister will know that it is of great regret to the Body that we do not have among our number all the parties that represent the people of Northern Ireland, and, of course, there is a particular difficulty at present with the suspension of the Assembly. When that was discussed this morning, there was a consensus that, to help the process, the Body should invite each of the Northern Ireland parties to make a presentation on their views of the way forward to this parliamentary forum as a means of helping that conversation to take place. Does the Minister support that idea? Does he think that it would be helpful in getting more people to talk to one another in more places?

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I support that idea, but in the first instance it is a matter for the esteemed Co-Chairman to consider. I would not be as adept at punting as the Member — I have occasion to see and hear him on Channel 4, sometimes to the betterment of my bank balance — so he is the ideal person to table an early day motion that could facilitate such an event.

Smoke-Free Workplace Policy

2. **Mr John Griffiths AM** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food what the smoke-free workplace policy will mean to Ireland.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: The Department of Health and Children's smoke-free workplace policy was commenced on Monday 29 March 2004, and from that date smoking tobacco products in enclosed workplaces, with limited exceptions, is prohibited. In fact, if you now want a decent smoke in Ireland, you have to get yourself into jail.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): We are obeying the law here.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I noticed at an early stage of proceedings that there was full co-operation with and adherence to the smoke-free zone in this building.

The smoke-free initiative is positive and progressive. It is designed for indoor workplaces to ensure that all employees are protected from toxic tobacco smoke. It is a unique health and safety measure that will bestow positive benefits on workers and on the general public.

The majority of people in Ireland, smokers and non-smokers, support the important tobacco-free initiative. The good state of Members' health here today has nothing to do with tobacco smoking — alcohol intake, perhaps — but tobacco smoking did not contribute.

The response from employers has been helpful in ensuring compliance with the measure. The trade union movement has also been proactive in supporting this important workplace health measure. Thousands of workers in offices and factories all over the country will benefit from the measure. The Minister for Health and Children is confident that people will adapt to the new public health measures. Most people are, of course, law-abiding and responsible, and Minister Martin is confident that the vast majority of employers, employees and the public will respect the new measure.

During the first days of its implementation, compliance with and support for the new public health measure appear to be very high. Anyone who wants further information on the measure can log on to the dedicated web site, www.smokefreetatwork.ie, and they will learn everything they want to know about smoke-free zones.

Mr John Griffiths AM: Diolch yn fawr. I thank the Minister for that response. I would like to congratulate Ireland on what I think is a very progressive and important policy for good health that shows Ireland to be leading the way.

It has been estimated that around 7,000 lives a year in Wales are lost to smoking-related diseases, and the dangers of passive smoking are well documented. I certainly believe that people should not have to choose between their health and their job if they work where smoking is allowed. In Wales we have voted for a

phased ban on smoking in public buildings, and we have now put forward a Bill that we hope will be given legislative time at Westminster at some stage.

Of course, we do not yet have primary law-making powers in the Welsh Assembly, although we hope that that will change soon following the publication of the Richard Commission report. What is the Minister's assessment of the early success of the initiative? The Minister has already touched on that. For what it is worth anecdotally, since I have been here a taxi driver and a coach driver told me that the legislation has been well observed and accepted, as the Minister suggested. I will be visiting the web site, but in Wales we would be really interested to have feedback from the Irish Government on the effectiveness of this progressive and important policy.

Mr Seymour Crawford TD: I too would welcome a comment from the Minister regarding an all-island approach to this issue. I worked very closely with the then Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Bríd Rogers on foot-and-mouth disease. Could we not have a similar situation with smoking? I supported the smoking ban in principle, with the exception that it does cause difficulties in the border regions: somebody can smoke in a hotel or restaurant on one side of the border but not on the other side. Is the Minister making any move to encourage his colleagues in Northern Ireland to make it an all-Ireland ban? It is the only border that we have now.

Ms Cecilia Keaveney TD: I simply want to make a comment following on from Mr Crawford's question. Living on the Donegal/Derry border, we have our own problems with the different currencies, and I hope that there will be a move towards a pilot zone in the North to see how the euro works there.

Similarly, there is a potential difficulty with smoking. In practice, there has been far more worry and concern about what could happen. In fact, people are saying — and I am sure the Minister will agree — that the legislation has worked straightforwardly so far but that it is not known what will happen in a few months' time. If it has worked well until now, in a few months' time the matter will look after itself, but I do agree with the idea, which the Minister may well endorse, of implementing it in Northern Ireland or other parts of the UK.

Ms Helen Eadie MSP: I too would like to congratulate my colleagues in Ireland on the courageous decision that they have taken; I am sure it will have a big impact. Tomorrow there will be a debate on the delivery of health issues to rural populations. I have read Committee C's report, and I notice that one issue is the shortage of skilled clinicians across the United Kingdom. That is a particular problem in Scotland.

Given the scarce resources that we must target, is the Irish presidency of the EU thinking of how tobacco producers are subsidised to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds? It is always controversial to talk of taking

people's livelihoods away but, picking up John Griffiths's point, when we consider the numbers of lives lost to the tobacco industry, surely the EU really needs to grasp this nettle very firmly and ask, if people's lives are lost as a result of smoking, whether it is ethically responsible of us to subsidise the tobacco industry to the extent that we do?

5.15 pm

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): Minister, may I just say that we hope to get through a few more questions. We always have difficulties with time, so perhaps you will bear that in mind.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: Thank you, Mr Co-Chairman. I shall be very brief.

First, we have had early success with this scheme; many people have been surprised at that, and I have no reason to believe that that will not continue, as Cecilia Keaveney said. Pursuing this matter on an all-Ireland basis has worked, although it was bound to create some anomalies in border regions. Although we have made much progress on animal health, I see even more reason to pursue human health on an all-Ireland basis, and I will raise the issue with my colleague, the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Helen Eadie talked about the incompatibility in Europe and the EU between good health programmes and heavy support for the tobacco industry. In fact, tobacco growing is one of the most heavily supported production operations in Europe, and we will be discussing that issue on Wednesday and Thursday of this week.

I hope that we will get a resolution that will see an end — although it may not be an immediate one — to tobacco growing in Europe.

Review of the Good Friday Agreement

3. **Mr Joe Sherlock TD** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food whether the Minister believes it necessary, in order to inject a sense of purpose and urgency into the political process in the North, that the two Governments indicate clearly when the present review of the workings of the Good Friday Agreement must be concluded; to indicate the precise conditions for the restoration of all the institutions created under the Good Friday Agreement; and, in the event of failure to have these conditions met, that the two Governments will produce proposals for the maximum implementation of the agreement.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: The review of the operation of the Good Friday Agreement, which was convened on 3 February 2004, has provided the two Governments and the parties elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly with a valuable opportunity to discuss all aspects of the operation of the agreement and to examine ways of resolving the outstanding issues collectively.

As Members know, the review is provided for in the agreement itself. From the outset, it has been stressed

that the review will not alter the fundamental principles that underpin the agreement. However, six years after its signing in April 1998 it has become apparent that there may be practical, sensible proposals that would improve what, we will all agree, has not been the optimum operation of the agreement. To achieve progress it is important that the participating parties advance proposals that can attract wide consensus and which do not affect the fundamental principles of the agreement.

The review meetings have provided all the participants with an opportunity to discuss a broad range of issues relating to the operation of the agreement, including institutional matters. As a result of the alleged abduction of a man in Belfast on 20 February, the review meetings on 24 February and 2 March focused primarily on paramilitary activity. After discussions with all parties, both Governments asked the Independent Monitoring Commission to bring forward from July to May its final report covering all paramilitary activity since the commission was established in early January. The report was received last week; it is being considered by the two Governments and will be published shortly.

On 26 March, both Governments wrote to the parties requesting them to submit further proposals by 8 April on the operation of the agreement that they would like to discuss as part of the review. In the light of these submissions, both Governments will consider the timetabling of further review discussions.

There are two key issues that must be satisfactorily addressed to resolve the difficulties. We need a commitment from all parties to participate in inclusive politics to ensure sustainable political institutions across all three strands of the agreement.

Mr Joe Sherlock TD: The Minister mentioned that there would be a report. The British and Irish Governments and the political parties in the North have been engaged since February in a review of the working of the Good Friday Agreement. However, Assembly elections were postponed for a year; the internal competition on the Unionist side between Trimble's UUP and Paisley's DUP is ongoing, as the UUP try to prevent more members of the party defecting; and Trimble was subjected to a leadership bid by lesser members at a recent meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council. Those are the events that are known to the people in this part of the country. Moreover, the European election will take place in June and the four main parties will compete with one another for votes, rather than working together to find a solution to the present impasse.

There has been little input or action on the part of either Government; the Minister mentioned that, and I would like him to elaborate on it. The focus of the two Governments has undoubtedly been elsewhere. The Irish were preoccupied with the EU presidency and with the impending local and European elections, while the British continue

to have serious problems in Iraq. In the background, the Independent Monitoring Commission that was established to monitor the paramilitary ceasefires is set to report in the coming days.

The Government must be asked what plan B is. They have not given any sign that progress is possible, nor have they injected any urgency into seeking a solution to the problems in the North. The Taoiseach said that June would be the deadline for the review, but nothing has been done to impose a firm time line to devise an agenda, and I should like to hear that.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I do not accept that both Governments are not giving this issue the highest priority and treating it with the highest degree of urgency. I outlined the number of meetings that have taken place and the weekly — sometimes more frequent — contact between the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair. All the structures put in place are working assiduously and with some urgency to bring about the restoration of the institutions; of that you can be sure.

The Independent Monitoring Commission that oversees the fulfilment of commitments regarding the ending of paramilitary activity, security normalisation and full participation in the political institutions of the Good Friday Agreement has issued its first report, and that will be published soon. The two Governments are considering the IMC's report and will respond to it over the coming days. The report will be published in the next couple of days.

The Lord Temple-Morris: Strand three of the Good Friday Agreement mentions the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, both of which were referred to by the Minister in his excellent speech. There is also an oblique reference to the BIIPB in connection with them. Does the Minister see any case, or has he any thoughts on bringing the work of the Body closer to the governmental and other work done in the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, bearing in mind that at the moment our relationship, if it exists at all, is very loose.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I agree with Lord Temple-Morris, and I will bring his sentiments to the attention of the appropriate people.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): Minister, I hope you will do that. It is hoped that the Ministers on both sides will bear in mind the strong feelings regarding the points that Lord Temple-Morris has made, because we have made them repeatedly. I hope that they can be taken on board.

Peace Process

4. **The Lord Dubs** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food if the Irish and British Governments have any proposals to restore the confidence of the Unionist parties in the peace process.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: It is the intention of both Governments to work closely with all the parties elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly in order to restore confidence in the process. In this context, we are currently engaged in a round of meetings with the parties to collectively devise ways to resolve the current difficulties and to find a mechanism to restore the political institutions. Both Governments have indicated that they wish to see an early resolution to these matters, preferably before the local elections, which are only a few weeks away.

Our Government are encouraged by the constructive dialogue that they have been engaged in with all strands of Unionism in their efforts to resolve the current difficulties. Through the mechanism of the review process, and in partnership with the British Government, we have held several trilateral meetings with the Democratic Unionist Party, the Progressive Unionist Party, the United Kingdom Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist Party. The Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair also held meetings with the Unionist parties at Hillsborough on 23 March. In all our meetings we have made it clear that in order for progress to be achieved, the two key issues that I referred to earlier must be resolved and firm commitments must be given by all sides.

As I have already outlined, those two issues are the definitive ending of paramilitarism and assurances of stable and inclusive political institutions. In tandem with this engagement, and as the Taoiseach has recently stated, the Governments are committed to continuing their work with leaders in the Loyalist community as they strive to build vibrant and confident communities and to ensure full participation by this tradition in a new era of partnership on this island. Such a process of transformation must also involve the issue of Loyalist paramilitarism being addressed and resolved.

The Lord Dubs: I am grateful to the Minister for his full and frank answer. He has dealt with any possible supplementary question I could have asked, so I will forego that.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I was hoping that Lord Dubs would ask a supplementary, because I was pleased to renew my acquaintance with him here in Clonakilty, and to say that we had a fruitful engagement on his last visit to this part of Munster.

For the benefit of the audience, Lord Dubs and I visited the Listowel Races on that particular occasion. The following day, we attended the Leopardstown Races. Lord Dubs told me afterwards that we had a funny way of supporting the equine industry in Ireland. I asked him why. He replied that at Listowel he had lost on every tip that I had given him and that I had, therefore, contributed to the industry; and at Leopardstown, the Brits had supported every race on the racecard. It was the UK's term of presidency of the EU, and as a gesture they had sponsored the entire meeting. I thought that that little anecdote might be of interest to some of our colleagues.

The Lord Dubs: I thank the Minister for that. Those were very happy days, although they were expensive days for me. We had a lot of craic.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I might say that you were only making up for my occasional visits to places like Cheltenham, Newbury, Ascot, York and Epsom, where I make my little contribution to the British racing industry.

The Lord Dubs: I will intrude on this for a bit longer. Minister, that is not accurate. When the bookies at Cheltenham see you coming, they run away.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): If you are very fortunate, Lord Dubs might have a collection for you.

5.30 pm

Transport Connections Between Wales and Ireland

5. **Mr Dai Lloyd AM** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food what the prospects are for improving transport connections between Wales and Ireland.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: The establishment of new air routes or, indeed, the cessation of any existing routes is a matter for commercial decision by the airlines. Since the early 1990s, air transport within the EU has been fully liberalised, and European carriers may introduce or, indeed, cease air services on any route, subject only to the availability of airport slots at either end of the route and, of course, overall safety considerations. As a result, there is full liberalisation of the European aviation market. There are no Government or EU controls, and the provision of air services on any particular route is essentially a matter for the commercial judgement of the individual airlines.

Mr Dai Lloyd AM: As somebody who represents Swansea in Wales, which is at the end of a 10-hour ferry journey or a 40-minute plane journey from Cork — depending on your preference, obviously — I want to push a bit further with regard to the Government enabling a more co-ordinated transport response across all modes of transport — ferries, rail and buses — between Wales and Ireland to boost tourism ventures. With such a co-ordinated transport response, we could boost bilateral ventures in Wales and Ireland by better transport arrangements.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I have noted the Member's comments. There is much compatibility and similarity between Wales and Ireland. I will certainly bring it to the attention of the Minister for Transport that, although he does not have any direct involvement and state aids in the European Union are out of the question, services could be encouraged, to say the least. It is important for both economies and regions that that be done. I will convey the Member's point to the relevant Minister.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP):

Question 6 stands in the name of Mr Tony Killeen TD. Mr Killeen is not present, so we shall move to the next question.

Tourism Industry

8. **Mrs Margaret Ewing MSP** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food what impact the tourism industry has had on the economies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; what changes the establishment of a cross-border tourist board has made in attracting additional tourists; and which countries have shown a significant increase in inward travel to Ireland.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: Tourism is a cornerstone of economic growth, employment generation and regional development on the island of Ireland. In the South, for example, the sector is now a 5-billion-euro industry. I suspect that after this weekend's conference that will improve considerably. The tills in the bar last night were quite active, I was told. Tourism provides 12% of employment and represents 4.4% of Irish GNP. Over the past decade, visitor numbers to Ireland grew by an average of 7%, compared to a world average of 4%. Although this trend has stalled somewhat over the past three years, for reasons well known to us, the most recent figures for 2003 show positive signs of recovery with a return of 5% growth in overseas visitor numbers.

In Northern Ireland, the story has been similar in many ways, particularly with its inherent appeal as a tourist destination and the significant investment from public and private sources in the development of a quality tourist product. It was also evident, however, that the international perception of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination was impeded by the negative images broadcast around the world as a result of the conflict between the two communities. That negative image was significantly reduced with the peace process and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement six years ago.

Indeed, in recognising the mutual benefits to be derived from closer co-operation and tourism, the agreement identified tourism as an area for formal co-operation. Although co-operation in many forms is already under way in the tourism sector, the agreement gave a vital impetus to both Administrations, and the industry as a whole, to work even closer in developing its full potential.

A key synergy was, and remains, the presentation of an integrated and cohesive image and a message internationally in relation to the island of Ireland as a tourist destination. It was in this context that Tourism Ireland was formed as an all-island international marketing company with its staff, expertise and intellectual property drawn primarily from the two tourist boards in the North and South. Despite the unfavourable market conditions for tourism internationally over recent years, overseas tourism to the island of Ireland has performed remarkably well,

increasing by 2.4% in 2002 and an estimated 5% growth in 2003 to an estimated 7.4 million overseas visits. That number of visitors to the island of Ireland puts a considerable strain on many parts of our services, but it is one that we embrace, and we endeavour to give the best possible service. The year 2003 proved to be particularly good for Northern Ireland, with an estimated increase in visitor numbers in excess of 11%, which is very good indeed.

Mrs Margaret Ewing MSP: Has there been a substantial increase in the number of people coming from the UK because of the advent of budget airlines? As a frequent flyer to Ireland, it seems to me that the planes are becoming increasingly crowded. I have flown to Derry and travelled on to Letterkenny, and I fly often into Cork and Dublin. Many people from the UK are taking short breaks, which can only help east-west relations.

My colleague Dai Lloyd spoke about co-ordinated transport. Is the Minister satisfied that the ferry services are good? For example, is anything being done about the Campbeltown to Ballycastle ferry?

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I do not have a breakdown of the figures, but I know that visitors from the UK are substantial and growing. Until 1969, visitors from the UK were the backbone of the Irish tourism industry, and they were outstanding tourists. There was some decline for a decade or so, but fortunately the numbers are rising again. That is partly due to cheaper fares, and therefore cheaper entry into the island of Ireland, better marketing and a better product as well. The tourist product in Ireland has improved substantially.

I will get a breakdown of the figures and ensure that they are forwarded to the Member without delay.

Mr William O'Brien MP: In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a great deal of money was spent on the inland waterways between the Erne and the Shannon rivers to try to stimulate the economy between the North and the South. Has the Minister any views or information on the progress of that tourist attraction?

Mr Joe Walsh TD: That has been a hugely successful project. Considerable progress has been made, and considerable numbers of additional visitors have been attracted to that region because of the enhancement of the product. It is a classic example of a rural development project benefiting a fairly depressed area, and it is a model that could be used successfully in many other areas.

Dr Jerry Cowley TD: With regard to deprived areas, I noted that money was available from the National Development Plan. Seventy entries competed for funding; there was only one new project, with which I am involved in my community, and it is now in profit. However, Fáilte Ireland has moved the goalposts, and it now wants the local authority to underwrite the project even though it is in profit.

That is one individual situation, but it is the only hope that we in the west have of a proper project in County

Mayo. However, because Fáilte Ireland is changing the rules under the National Development Plan, the whole situation has changed. Will the Minister look at Fáilte Ireland, the National Development Plan and the limited tourism opportunities? Mayo is not a border county — fair play to the border counties — so it depends greatly on new projects such as this.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I will certainly bring that issue to the attention of my colleague, the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, John O'Donoghue.

May I say in passing that Mayo has not done badly; it is a beautiful county from Louisburgh right up to Killala. Areas such as Westport are outstanding, and much of that has been achieved by local community effort. The work of the Tidy Towns voluntary committees, for example in Westport, has transformed the place. Dr Cowley represents a privileged area with a great community ethic.

Dr Jerry Cowley TD: Thank you. It is hard to persuade people to stay outside Westport, especially when it rains. They will not come to Achill, and when it rains, we need something to keep people in the area — not just in Westport.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I will work on the ozone layer, and maybe a visitation to the shrine at Knock would help.

Ms Cecilia Keaveney TD: I am tempted to say that the answer to that is the same as in Donegal: give them an umbrella.

Does the Minister agree that some areas, particularly all of Ulster, still need their tourism infrastructure to be developed? Golf tourism is huge, and from Scotland through Northern Ireland and back up to Donegal, it has seen a massive increase. We are an island, and I wonder whether we are doing enough for marine tourism. With regard to the infrastructure for marine tourism, the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources says that it cannot provide any money because it is a tourism issue. However, the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism says that it cannot provide any funding because it is a marine issue. Thus many tourism projects, particularly marine tourism projects, fall between two stools. There is still a deficit with regard to infrastructure. It might be helpful to know that the latest statistics show a 6% increase in the number of UK visitors to Ireland in 2003.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: In many regards we have neglected marine activities across the board. Donegal has done a fair bit better than we have down here in Cork. As far as I can see, Killybegs gets the lion's share of allocation so it is not doing badly at all.

In relation to marine tourism, we could have done far better with the provision of marinas and facilities. Members will have seen here today people surfing and enjoying the seascapes and services, but we must invest heavily in the future. I will talk again to the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism and the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources to see whether they can co-ordinate

their activities to give Cork South-West, never mind Donegal, a bigger slice of the cake.

5.45 pm

British Government Files on Dublin, Monaghan and Dundalk Bombings

9. **Mr Arthur Morgan TD** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food what efforts have been made to get the British Government to reveal files which they are retaining relating to the Dublin, Monaghan and Dundalk bombings; what further measures are intended to be taken to obtain these files; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: The Government wish to place on record our deep gratitude to Judge Barron for all his work in preparing his report, and to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights for its detailed and sensitive consideration of the report. The Taoiseach gave evidence to the subcommittee of that Joint Committee when it was considering the Barron Report, and he went into considerable detail on the efforts made to support an independent commission of inquiry in its attempts to get full information from the British authorities.

Throughout almost four years when Judge Barron was undertaking his inquiry, the Government sought to ensure that the commission received all the co-operation it required. The Government's contacts with the British authorities in support of the inquiry were undertaken primarily in response to requests for assistance from time to time by the inquiry itself. Specific requests for assistance were also reinforced in the context of frequent contacts that the Taoiseach had during the period of the inquiry with Prime Minister Blair.

Mr Arthur Morgan TD: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Thank you very much, Minister. Unfortunately, I did not get an answer to the question, which related to the efforts being made to get that information from the British Government, because, clearly, they have it. That is the key element, which the Minister should address.

In relation to the British response to date, I am curious as to whether the Minister believes what they say. If he does believe them, what further can be done? More importantly, if he does not believe what they are saying with regard to freeing up this information and fulfilling the Barron Report, because it is clearly incomplete without that information, what further steps will he take to get this information from them?

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I honestly believe that I answered the question, although it is said that in the best parliamentary practice people do not answer the question at the first go, they sidestep it at the second and then they might get down to some serious answers.

Anyway, having given my reply, the facts of the matter are that the Taoiseach has been in constant contact with Prime Minister Blair in relation to the Barron inquiry, and at their meeting on 19 January this year, the Taoiseach urged him to extend the fullest possible co-operation to the work of the Committee. On all occasions throughout the period, the British authorities would have been left in no doubt that the Barron inquiry was receiving the fullest possible co-operation and was of the highest priority for us.

The Taoiseach's efforts were also complemented at other levels in the course of contact with the British authorities, whose first response to a request for co-operation from the Barron inquiry was that it would take time for the relevant records to be researched and examined. Judge Barron subsequently requested the use of normal Garda/RUC channels to obtain answers to specific questions as they arose, and a response was received to the effect that there was no objection to that proposal.

The Taoiseach also wrote to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and spoke to him personally in support of the Independent Commission of Inquiry, and the Secretary of State reaffirmed the commitment of the British Government to treat all requests from the commission sympathetically.

I believe that every possible effort is being made to get the greatest possible amount of information. Every single avenue has been used — for example, Secretary of State Paul Murphy wrote to the Oireachtas Sub-Committee on the Barron Report insisting that all the potentially relevant information that had been uncovered had been shared with the inquiry, including information from some very sensitive sources.

In answer to the question, I believe that that has been the case. That is important, because we need confidence in this regard. I believe that both Houses of the Oireachtas should have an opportunity to consider the report, and I hope that a full debate will give Mr Morgan, as a Member, an opportunity to participate in that debate and that the debate would be facilitated very shortly after the Easter recess, which concludes next week.

The Government will then consider the Committee's recommendations, having heard the views of the Oireachtas Members. We have the Barron Report and the report of the Committee. We will, of course, consider those carefully, and they will be of considerable assistance to us in deciding what further action could be taken that will advance the matter. The Government objective, in short, in setting out this process, is to try to find the truth of what happened. In that regard, I believe that we have made considerable progress.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): We must leave it there. I understand, Minister, that questions not answered will get a written reply.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: Excellent.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): My Co-Chairman would like to thank you as well. I certainly do, both for your address and the manner in which you handled quite a number of questions in a relatively brief time.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): Co-Chairman, I want to reiterate our thanks to the Minister for his attendance this afternoon, and indeed, as David said in his opening remarks, he very comprehensively covered several issues that are of major concern to all of these islands. We appreciate your dealing in such detail with all the questions, Minister. We are very grateful as a Body for your participation this afternoon.

The sitting was suspended at 5.49 pm.

Tuesday 20 April 2004

Report from Committee A (Sovereign Matters)

The sitting was resumed at 10.03 am.

DEATH OF LORD WALKER

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): I should like to begin by mentioning the death of Lord Walker. Harold Walker was a Member of Parliament from 1964 to 1997. He was a Minister in a number of Labour Administrations. He then became a Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons and was held in high regard. When he went to the House of Lords after 1997, he was a member of the BIIPB, and at a number of plenary sessions and in Committees he made useful contributions to our proceedings. Therefore I thought it would be appropriate that Lord Walker should be duly remembered by the Body.

BUSINESS REPORTS FROM CHAIRMEN OF COMMITTEES

Report from Committee C (Economic)

The Shadow Chairman of Committee C (Mr William O'Brien MP): Thank you for allowing me to present Committee C's report first this morning, because I will be leaving the debate early to go to the airport.

The Committee considered the question of family farms and agriculture after yesterday's debate on the enlargement of the European Union. Committee C would like to do some research and present a report on the possible effects that the enlargement of the EU will have on farming, particularly on family farms, because most of the countries coming into the EU are agricultural countries. Therefore, we wish to look at the economic impact that that will have on some of our smaller family farms.

Committee C also wants to examine the pensions of people who are involved in agriculture. Four years ago, the Committee compiled a report on small farms, and we found some shocking cases of farmers who were on social benefits because there was no real economic benefit from their farming, and there was also a lack of capital investment. This will be a follow-up of sorts to that report. We are looking at the future of farming — particularly smaller farms, hill farms and family farms — and it is hoped that we will present a report at a future meeting.

We have completed a successful programme which will be reported this afternoon, but I want to advise, on behalf of Committee C, that we will be looking at agriculture in the coming months.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): The Chairman of Committee A, Jim O'Keeffe, is not here as he is on parliamentary business. I therefore call Michael Mates.

The Shadow Chairman of Committee A (Mr Michael Mates MP): Jim O'Keeffe has asked me to present this brief report with some thoughts that have arisen from our Committee meeting this morning.

The Committee went to Northern Ireland to talk to the various political parties — I was not able to go — and it will not surprise Members to know that while the Committee had no trouble talking to the SDLP and Sinn Féin, it did have a problem talking to the Unionists. Instead, Committee members spoke to Prof Paul Bew, who gave them an update on the situation.

We had a discussion this morning to try to respond to the strength of feeling that there was yesterday about the lack of Unionist presence. That is a matter for the Steering Committee. Committee A strongly recommends that it writes formally to the leaders of the five principal parties inviting them to brief the Body at the autumn conference in Chepstow. If either of the Unionist parties refuses — I do not believe there will be a refusal from the others — Committee A's suggestion is that, as a follow-up, the Unionist parties be invited to brief the Committee informally, which they might find easier to do; to put a toe in the water, if you like. Whether that would be successful is a matter for debate. However, it is Committee A's best plan, which it recommends to the Steering Committee for discussion and early action in order to give those parties plenty of time.

Another point that will be recommended to the Steering Committee is that the Body should, as a separate initiative, try to make absolutely clear that its status comes from the Good Friday Agreement rather than from the Anglo-Irish Agreement. That has always been the formal objection of the Unionist parties. It is not entirely true that the Body is the creature of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which is why Unionists have boycotted it from the start and why they have always hung on to that as a peg. The Body is mentioned in the Good Friday Agreement. If it can be made clear to Unionists that it is now part and parcel of the Good Friday Agreement and nothing to do with the Anglo-Irish Agreement, that might help. I will make that recommendation to the Steering Committee, on which I also happen to sit.

The Committee's plans for the summer include meeting the Human Rights Commissions in Belfast and Dublin, with the accent on Belfast, where there are problems. It wants to talk to the commission, and to those who have resigned from it, in order to find out their difficulties. At some stage, but probably not until the autumn, it wants to meet the International Monitoring Commission to see

how it is getting on and whether it has any problems. Committee A hopes to report on those matters to the next plenary in Chepstow.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): The origins of the Body — and Peter Temple-Morris is the number one authority on this subject — is, as I understand it, the Intergovernmental Conference of 1982, which led on from the Haughey–Thatcher talks —

The Lord Temple-Morris: Mr Co-Chairman, the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference is what we out of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. However, if we can lock onto the Good Friday Agreement, I agree entirely with what Mr Mates said. The way we did it before the Good Friday Agreement was to go back even further to 1982.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): The Body's origins are sometimes obscured, particularly by those who want to boycott it. Committee A's recommendations are duly noted and will be given to the Steering Committee.

Report from Committee B (Committee on European Affairs)

The Chairman of Committee B (Mr Andrew Mackay MP): Co-Chairman, Committee B will later move the motion on its report on the Nordic Council, which was concluded in February. The Committee has moved on to a new inquiry into the prospects of a common European defence force and has already started to gather evidence. Last month, it took evidence in London and will take evidence in Dublin and elsewhere during the next six months. It plans to report to the Body next year. There is more on the agenda later.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): That is a long, controversial subject to take on. Certainly, the Body awaits the report with much interest.

Report from Committee D (Environmental and Social)

The Chairman of Committee D (Mr Kevin McNamara MP): Committee D is winding up its report on waste management and hopes to have a meeting in Dublin to go through the report and move amendments so that it will be ready for Chepstow. We have had evidence from all the sovereign Governments, the Governments of all the devolved Assemblies and Parliaments and the self-governing islands. The Clerk has prepared a summary of that evidence and it is available here; however, I do not think that colleagues would want to take back with them enormous wads of paper that might end up in the wastepaper basket. Therefore we intend to send a copy of the replies that we receive to the libraries of the various Parliaments and Assemblies, so they will be available to anybody who wants to see what other people are doing and how they are dealing with the problems.

As part and parcel of making that report we visited Brussels where we had a fruitful meeting with representatives of the Commission and the waste management industry under the Irish presidency.

10.15 am

We are preparing the ground for two further reports. The first report is to see where the peace and reconciliation proposals are going, what the Governments are doing, the reaction of the various political parties to those proposals and whether there would be substance for a short report on that to the Body. There is always the difficulty in those situations that we might be overtaken by events, but we will wait and see.

The more substantive matter that we are going to embark upon is to examine two aspects of education and to take the Committee away from its recent environmental focus. The first is to see how special needs education is dealt with in the various Administrations and, after that, to see whether there are examples of good practice in different Administrations. We also want to see how the Governments look at those matters, in particular, the thorny question of whether special schools are the way forward or whether children should be brought into mainstream education where some of their needs would be met by classroom assistants and mentors. It is a matter that arouses considerable controversy in all areas.

Coupled with that, and because we think it is associated, we want to look at how Governments are tackling the education of nought to three-year-olds. Recent research — particularly in the United States — has tended to suggest that rather than spend all our money on secondary and tertiary education, the first three years are of the utmost significance to the development of children. We shall see how that develops.

The United Kingdom has the experience of Sure Start, which is aimed specifically at the nought to five-year-olds, and we will see how that has or has not been successful in improving the life chances of the disadvantaged. Certainly as a result of the five or six years of Sure Start, the first years of primary schools in my constituency are now showing considerable improvements.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): Thank you very much, Kevin. Do Members have any comments?

Mr Tony Cunningham MP: There have been rumours circulating from the Commission that it was looking at reclassifying spent grain from breweries as waste. Spent grain is normally used for animal feed; if it were reclassified as waste, it would have to go into landfill. Several breweries in Ireland and in the United Kingdom were concerned about those rumours. Did Mr McNamara hear those rumours during his discussions in Brussels?

Mr Kevin McNamara MP: No; that was not mentioned at all. However, we will find out and put something in the next report.

Another matter that I should have mentioned is that we have two standing rapporteurs in Mary O'Rourke and Jeff Ennis who are looking continuously at the problems of Sellafeld, which are not going to go away.

We particularly wish to obtain a report on the rumours that circulated about three or four weeks ago that the Commission is to come down heavily on the United Kingdom Government due to their handling of waste ponds.

Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP: When the Committee and I met the Secretary of State last week, we canvassed him informally about the possibility that the Prime Minister address the Body. He was favourably disposed to that idea and said that he would "feed it into Number 10". It would be helpful if you and your colleagues on the Steering Committee pursued that matter. A head of Government may not commit himself too early to such a course — or may abort at the last minute — but the Secretary of State was favourably disposed to the idea.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): When Number 10 realised that it was Andrew Mackinlay who suggested that the Prime Minister address the Body, the instant response was a refusal. *[Laughter]*.

Mr Jeff Ennis MP: I invite the Committee Chair to address the forthcoming meeting with Mr Kristoffersen of the Standing Committee of the Nordic Council.

Mr Kevin McNamara MP: I am happy to do that, but I do not wish to take up too much time; I have already taken up a lot of time.

A meeting was held among Mary O'Rourke, Arthur Morgan and representatives of the Nordic Council. Jeff Ennis was also involved to find out whether the two Committees could arrange a joint meeting on matters of mutual interest concerning environmental matters. However, those discussions were informal and tentative, so I cannot answer specific questions. It would be excellent if Mary and others could say that they have reached agreement.

Senator Mary O'Rourke: We had an informal meeting this morning and expect them to contact us by September, at which time we shall contact you, Kevin, about a joint meeting.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): Before I return to formal business, a suggestion has been made. The British delegates' flight is at 5.00 pm. There is a significant gap between the end of lunch and departure for the airport, and it has been suggested that, as it is a nice day, we should use that time to see some of the surrounding sights, rather than stay in the hotel or sit on the coach. Our Irish colleagues are invited to come along with us, and we would be very pleased if they did. Are the British delegates in favour?

Some Members: Yes.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): There will be no compulsion, which we are against, are we not? That means that we shall leave at 1.45 pm. To give credit where it is due, that was Michael Mates's suggestion.

Mr Arthur Morgan TD: Is the other option a visit to the bar?

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): That is one possibility, but we do not wish to encourage that, do we?

Returning to formal business, before we debate the interesting reports on the Nordic Council in Committee, I have great genuine pleasure in inviting the president of the Nordic Council, Mr Gabriel Romanus, to address the Body.

[Applause].

LINKS BETWEEN THE BRITISH-IRISH INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY AND THE NORDIC COUNCIL

Mr Gabriel Romanus: Thank you, Mr Co-Chairman, dear fellow parliamentarians and other friends.

First, thank you for the invitation to members of the Nordic Council to come to this beautiful place, to be subject to the famous Irish hospitality and to listen to your interesting proceedings. I feel as though I am being treated as a king, even though I have been president for only one year. I am convinced that we have much to learn from each other. I was convinced of that before I came here, and that has certainly been confirmed.

First and foremost, we in the Nordic Council must learn from the Body's style of debating. Yesterday's debates on the problems in Northern Ireland and on the enlargement of the European Union were very lively, informative and constructive. We in the Nordic Council tend to read written speeches, so our debates are prone to be a series of isolated speeches that put non-participants to sleep very quickly. I hope that we can change our debating culture in that respect. I do not know how it will go, but that is the first lesson that I have learned from being here.

My second lesson is that the Body seems to be more focused on the few issues that it treats thoroughly, while we tend to deal with too many things more superficially. I am not sure what Members can learn from us — that is not for me to say — but I hope certainly that there is something.

I shall briefly describe how the Council works as well as its experiences from the 52 years over which it has been working. Some of those points are in your report, which is very good.

First, to legitimise the Council's expenses we feel that we must deal with problems that are relevant to the everyday lives of our citizens. For example, the current focus of our attention is the 40,000 people who live on one side of a Nordic border and work on the other and who go back and forth every day. Two hundred and fifty thousand citizens of one Nordic country live in another. The Council has addressed the many practical problems that are connected with that type of lifestyle, and we have had a particular focus on those for the past few years.

Passports are unnecessary in our system; we have one labour market and one social convention, which is now, of course, the case in the European Union, although we have had it for many years. However, there are still unresolved matters. For example, we cannot view Nordic television channels all over the area. When people want to send money from one Nordic country to another, particularly those Nordic countries that are not members of the European Union, they encounter very high banking fees.

We must also be ready to change our ways of working, particularly as the world around us is changing. When

the Council was established in the 1950s, foreign policy, defence or security were not discussed because some countries were members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and others were not, and that was a very touchy subject. Nowadays, foreign policy and security are standing items in our sessions.

10.30 am

Another favourable change is that co-operation between members of the same party groupings in different countries has gained an increasing importance. I know that the party structures of the British and Irish Parliaments are quite different; however, we have four groups: the centre group, the social democratic labour group, the left-wing socialists and the conservatives. The centre group, to which I as a liberal belong, is the biggest, and we comprise 17 national parties, including the Centre Party, liberals, the Green Party and the Christian Democrats. To the surprise of many outside that group, we find that we co-operate quite well on political matters. Of course, the fact that our being together makes us the biggest group is also a very good way of promoting co-operation.

We are very often asked whether we need the Nordic Council now that we have the European Union, particularly as three of the Nordic countries are Union members and the other two are associated. My answer, and the answer of many others, is that we need it even more now. The Nordic countries that are in the Union must be the voice of those who are not. The Council can also ask small countries to join forces where there are common interests or values, which is very often the case.

We also find it necessary and valuable to co-operate closely with the Baltic states; there are also at least three important areas in north-west Russia. The Nordic Council played the catalyst role when the Baltic states were freed from Soviet occupation. The Council co-operated with the Baltic states early on, helping them with parliamentary procedure, building Western-style democracy and so on.

There are now three important areas of co-operation where north-west Russia is also included: the environment — obviously, the Baltic Sea is a sensitive area; combating crime — organised crime such as trafficking and drug smuggling has grown in ex-communist countries; and economic development. Big economic differences between the European Union and adjacent areas on the eastern border will create great problems. Therefore, the Nordic Council takes part in trying to stimulate economic growth in north-western Russia and the other border countries.

One experience of the Nordic Council, which is also highlighted in the Body's report, is the necessity to co-operate with Governments and Executives. The Nordic Council of Ministers is similar to the Council of Ministers in the European Union. In fact, there are 17 Nordic Councils of Ministers, each one corresponding to a national department or ministry. There is also a special minister for Nordic co-operation. That portfolio is carried by some-

one who has another portfolio, which varies. The Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers have offices in the same building in Copenhagen, as noted in the report. Not only do we share a web site, but the entire information unit is a joint venture, which has been a positive experience.

The differences in resources between the BIIPB and the Nordic Council were mentioned, but we did not have those resources when we started. There was no secretariat when the Nordic Council began 50 years ago, but it has grown gradually with the increased appreciation from those who have the money and the work. The Nordic Council of Ministers now has a larger budget and runs projects on a Nordic basis. The Council of Ministers implements the Council's suggestions and what the national Governments agree.

The Nordic Council, like the BIIPB, is an advisory body. It cannot compel Governments to do anything, but it adopts explicit recommendations. The Council of Ministers has undertaken to formally report to the Nordic Council every year on what it has done with the Council's recommendations. The Nordic Council can then say whether it is satisfied or if it wants to keep a particular issue on the agenda for the next session. The Nordic Council therefore creates political pressure on Governments through those recommendations.

We are also putting more emphasis on the follow-up in national Parliaments, so we are experimenting with models. Several delegations have adopted a system using rapporteurs, where each recommendation adopted in the Council has a rapporteur in each national Parliament. For instance, the Swedish delegation has a rapporteur who conveys the Council's recommendations to its national Parliament. It is the duty of that rapporteur to follow up, ask questions of Ministers, produce private Members' Bills, newspaper articles and ask the Government what they are doing with the Nordic Council's important recommendations. We do not know how that is going to work yet. However, it is the way that we are trying it at present.

We are eager to progress closer co-operation between the two bodies. I understand that the proposal that the Body is dealing with will be referred to the Steering Committee for further work and will be brought back to the Body with specifics. I will do the same. I will take this report to our Standing Committee, which is called the Presidium. The report's proposals are both creative and constructive. I agree with the analysis in paragraph 56 of the report, which states that

“all of the Nordic and Baltic countries were similar to the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands. There are, therefore, eleven alike countries at the northern and western edges of Europe; it must, surely, be in all our interests to work more closely together.”

I second that wholeheartedly.

I do not think that anyone from the Nordic delegation would have had much to contribute to yesterday's debate on Northern Ireland. However, EU enlargement is an issue of mutual interest on which we can share our views.

Finally, I want to say a few words on a matter that is increasingly of common interest, and which was referred to this morning: the environment and the energy supply. We have already acted together on the issue of emissions from the Sellafeld installation. My colleague Asmund Kristoffersen, Chairman of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee, is here today and has taken part in previous plenary and Committee meetings. We look forward to continuing along those lines.

We are also organising with the Baltic Assembly and the Benelux Interparliamentary Consultative Council — one of these wonderful acronyms, BICC — a conference in Oslo in December on political and financial tools to promote sustainable and secure energy supplies. On behalf of Mr Kristoffersen and myself, I invite the Body to take part in the conference. I hope that it will be able to send delegates there as one further step in our ever-closer co-operation.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): Mr Romanus, on behalf of the Body, I thank you and your colleagues for your attendance at our plenary conference and for your informative contribution this morning. It is clear from your remarks that the work of the Nordic Council has evolved over the years. Likewise, we hope that the work of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body will evolve, with different items becoming the issue of the day. We look forward to closer co-operation. Your remarks will stimulate debate on the need and potential for closer co-operation between the two bodies.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): We now come to the report from Committee B, which has been circulated, on the links between the Body and the Nordic Council.

REPORT OF COMMITTEE B (EUROPEAN AFFAIRS): LINKS BETWEEN THE BRITISH-IRISH INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY AND THE NORDIC COUNCIL

The Chairman of Committee B (Mr Andrew Mackay MP): I beg to move

That the Body takes note of the Report of Committee B on Links Between the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body and the Nordic Council [Doc. No. 95].

I endorse what Brendan said about Gabriel and his colleagues: it has been great to have them with us for the whole plenary session. What Gabriel has just said underlines why it was right for my predecessor and colleagues to set up this inquiry. It is important that we should have closer links, but more of that in a moment.

I thank the two Clerks, Michael Clark and David Keating, who have done sterling work on the Committee over and above what would normally be expected, and I would like to place that on record. I also want to thank my colleagues on the Committee who have had to work very long hours, often at antisocial times, sometimes having to leave their families to fly to places on Sundays. I thank particularly my Irish colleagues because the travel links have not always been easy, and they have been assiduous about their attendance.

Members have the Committee's report, and I am sure that they have read every word of it. So they will be glad to know that I do not intend to go through it paragraph by paragraph. I want to make just a couple of points. First, we were impressed with the way the Nordic Council works. As Gabriel said, it has done some very practical things, particularly concerning the Baltic states with the emergence of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia from the Soviet yoke and the setting up of the Baltic Assembly. We in the West cannot praise too highly what our Nordic friends did at that extremely sensitive time. It was very well handled, and I know from our visit to Riga that it was hugely appreciated by our Baltic colleagues.

The second point, which again was underlined by Gabriel, is that there is a natural link between the countries of northern Europe and western Europe, and that link can be more formalised by much closer co-operation between the Nordic Council, the Baltic Assembly and ourselves — and possibly at some point even the Benelux countries. That was why the most important conclusion reached was that the Steering Committee should push forward as quickly as possible with those closer links. We believe that members of the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly should attend not just as distant observers, as they are at this plenary session, but as special guests so that they may speak and take part in some of our Committees where appropriate.

There has been an interesting illustration of that with Kevin McNamara's Committee and the mutual interest in the environment that Gabriel touched on. I hope that that can be implemented quickly. We have much to learn from one another, and there is great value in our having as many common policies as possible. It is in the interests of the whole of Europe that we work closer together. I hope that the report will be considered favourably by the Steering Committee and that its recommendations can be implemented quickly.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): The Steering Committee, in anticipation of this debate, decided on Sunday evening that it would ask the two Clerks to draw up a paper for urgent consideration. As delegates realise, the proposals, which are bold and interesting, would change the Body in some respects and widen its responsibilities considerably. This will be done in much the same way as when we decided in principle that the devolved institutions should become part of the Body. We proceeded by getting a report, followed by a working group that made recommendations to the Steering Committee and then to the Body. Members can rest assured that those proposals will be considered very seriously.

Mr Murray Tosh MSP: I had the honour at Manchester to move the motion on the Nordic Council, which led to Committee B taking up this work. Having moved that motion, I am delighted with the quality of the report that has been produced and congratulate the Chairman, members and staff of the Committee on their work. The report's recommendations contain several stimulating ideas that offer a considerable prospect of progress to the Body and perhaps to the Nordic Council as well.

I am conscious of the fact that we have focused heavily at this plenary on our frustration at the lack of progress in the political situation in Northern Ireland. Another major frustration during my time on the Body has been the increasing difficulty in reconciling our role with the lack of any meaningful contact with the Council of Ministers and the lack of a parliamentary dimension to Irish-British dialogue. A great strength of the report is the way in which it addresses that problem by looking at the situation in the Nordic countries; it not only analyses how the Nordic countries do that but it tries to identify ways in which we might reorder and rearrange our work to try to build better relationships with the Irish and British Governments.

10.45 am

The report picks out several areas of common interest and where joint work might be done. Both Gabriel this morning and Andrew in his introductory comments have pointed to areas in which a community of interest exists and where it is sensible for us to operate in tandem with the Nordic Council.

The third area in the report that interested me is that the recommendations for ongoing engagement with the

Nordic Council and the British-Irish Council afford us a way to continue to illuminate our discussions and considerations by looking at the issues that the Nordic Council and the British-Irish Council are looking at and by continuing to exchange ideas, perhaps to give us better insights into the type of practical issues that we could address. I was struck yesterday by the amount of sympathy for Cecilia Keaveney's comments on the need to get to grips with issues that affect people and to look at cross-boundary issues and so on. The work that has been done in analysing the working of the Nordic Council has shown ways in which it has successfully been tackling those issues, something from which we might benefit.

I have little more to say on that, Mr Co-Chairman, other than to pick up on the comments that you made about the Steering Committee giving the report its early and detailed consideration. Clearly some aspects of the recommendations, which I will not go through blow by blow, are entirely within the Body's competence, and I hope that we can make quick progress on agreeing the steps forward to broaden our base and to reform our workings.

Other more sensitive areas require the co-operation of Governments, but the Steering Committee, with the support of the Body and backed by this report and the thinking that has gone into it, will be in a good position to tackle those issues at governmental level to try to create for the Body a relationship with the Governments that would do much to increase its relevance. Perhaps that would also make it more attractive for those political forces on these islands who, for their own reasons, see no benefit in participation but who might find that, among the other manoeuvres that we might suggest to lure them in, the chance to engage with the Government might be an additional stimulus to their participation.

I welcome the report and urge the Steering Committee to work quickly to seek the maximum degree of implementation that it can.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): I will call David McLetchie next — I suspect that I have mispronounced his surname, for which I am sorry — and Michael German, whose surname I have had no difficulty in pronouncing all my life, will follow him.

Mr David McLetchie MSP: I join Murray Tosh in welcoming the excellent and informative report that has been presented to us by Andrew and his Committee. I congratulate them and the authors who have put it together.

For me, as for Murray Tosh, the most instructive section of the report is how we as a Body can learn from the working practices of the Nordic Council and perhaps incorporate some of those practices into our programme of work and development. The most important challenge that faces this organisation is how we engage as an inter-parliamentary body with the Executive branch of our national Governments and devolved Administrations.

In particular, I think it is important that we improve the scrutiny that we undertake of the work of the British-Irish Council, which the report quite properly identifies in paragraph 55 as a priority, enhance dialogue with Ministers in national Governments, including from time to time, we hope, the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, as well as debating and examining topics and issues of current and common concern to us and the people that we represent in our various Parliaments and Assemblies.

As a representative of the Scottish Parliament, and as a new boy, I believe that developing and deepening the work of the Body is particularly important because there are no formal inter-parliamentary links between the Scottish Parliament and Westminster, or the Scottish Parliament and the Assemblies in the form of Joint Committees. The joint action, if you like, comes through the Body rather than through bilateral arrangements that have not yet evolved in the five years of coexistence since the devolved Parliament was set up in Scotland and the Assembly was established in Wales. That is particularly important in areas where there is a very complex division of responsibilities in the United Kingdom between Westminster and the devolved Administrations in areas such as the environment and transport, in which we would benefit from some joint working. That is one of the strengths of the Body; it provides a forum and an opportunity for Members of the Parliaments and the Assemblies to do so.

The origins of the Body were identified and clarified earlier. Although it may have been born out of the peace process, and even if there were no Northern Ireland question — and let us hope that there will be a day when Northern Ireland is not a subject on the agenda of the Body — an inter-parliamentary body, involving the representatives of the people of these islands, would still be highly desirable.

The report has much to commend it in the development of our own working practices and relationships. That is the biggest challenge that faces the Body in the years ahead. The specific proposals about the change in status of the Nordic Council and future links are to be commended. The vogue word at this forum over the past two days has been "harmless". The proposal is certainly harmless, but we hope that it will be beneficial as well.

This process of enlargement, albeit to a modest degree, should not deflect or distract us from the priority, which is to deepen our relationships with our own national Governments. That is the real challenge and, welcome as it is to have good relationships and co-operation with bodies such as the British-Irish Council and the Nordic Council, we must not get to the stage where that distracts us or changes the nature of the agenda that we set ourselves in future years. That is not the top priority for this organisation.

Mr Mike German AM: In international circumstances, it is always very good to say, "My name is German. I am from Wales and I am not English." That usually gets a

good start, and I have no relationship whatsoever with the Federal Republic of Germany either.

The Co-Chairman made the comment that this was an interesting report. People always use the word “interesting” when, in a way, they mean “significant”, and this report is wide-ranging and significant. It looks at and addresses the fundamentals of what the Body is about, and previous speakers have referred to the role of the British-Irish Council and its relationship with it.

I was a Member of the Body at the beginning, and then I spent an interregnum period as a member of the British-Irish Council. Therefore I have had the unique opportunity of seeing how that body operated internally as well as seeing how the BIIPB operates.

It has been clear since the British-Irish Council was established that the Ministers and the devolved Administrations were going to take a regular look at bringing normality to the politics of this region. They were also going to take specific topics and consider them in depth, with the lead taken by an individual Administration. The British-Irish Council has covered a range of topics, all of which have relevance — and this ties in to the issues that we discussed yesterday — not only to international affairs and global issues such as defence but to the everyday politics in which all of us are engaged. For instance, the British-Irish Council has looked at tourism, minority languages — which is important to some — combating drugs and the treatment of drug users, and each Administration has taken on leadership in that. In the time between each British-Irish Council meeting, the Governments looked closely at those matters and produced reports, which Ministers took on board.

Gradually the British-Irish Council is moving towards its own internal recommendations that influence Government action across the board. That is why recommendations 2 and 3 on page 15 of the report are, perhaps, the most wide-ranging and fundamental, because they seek to emulate the work of the Nordic Council in scrutinising Governments and in making recommendations to them.

I was interested in what Gabriel said about the role of rapporteurs in Administrations. That is a new and unique concept that ought to be rolled into the discussion that the Steering Committee is to have. It is a means for the dynamic of the programme and the activities and recommendations of the Body to be progressed in each of the areas concerned.

Paragraph 37 on its own sums up a little of what the temperament was here yesterday; it also conveys the fear that some people expressed on the future of the Body. That feeling is clearly laid out in paragraph 37, and it is the nub of the recommendations.

I would also like to consider our relationship with the Nordic Council. I make no apologies for my reference yesterday to the enlargement of the European Union and

the subsequent increasing areas of common interest looked at by member states and regions around Europe. My question yesterday, although we did not get as far as it, was to ask Joe Walsh what region of the EU he would least like to be associated with and who he would like to be in it. There is an obvious element in this report of moving with the Nordic countries. I have no fixed view as to whether that is an end point, a start point or an intermediate point, but it makes for commonality of interest. If that link exists between the scrutiny and recommendations of Governments, we will get action that finds its way into the European dimension as well. That is to be welcomed.

However, when the Steering Committee looks at this issue it may want to consider what would constitute an appropriate region if one were to look slightly wider and broader; and it might consider whether alliances would be temporary, permanent or engaged as necessary. That raises another fundamental issue that may be, perhaps, too much for an immediate step. However, in the longer term that is perhaps how Europe is developing. It is certainly how some of the Baltic states see it happening; as they join, they have their views on coming in with the Nordic members.

This is an important report that ought to be commended. I look forward to the development of the work of the Steering Committee, which may allay many of the fears expressed yesterday. That underpins many of the comments that Members have made during the past 24 hours.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): I ask Members to limit their contributions to two minutes, because there is another report to deal with. Mr Salmond smiles, but I am sure that he is capable of making a pithy contribution without any difficulty.

11.00 am

Senator Martin Mansergh: I welcome that interesting and valuable contribution. However, it does not address the fact that the Nordic Council model is at the origins of the Body. That is important historically. I was involved in a minor way with the Anglo-Irish studies of 1980-81. Undoubtedly, the model that was examined most closely was that of the Nordic Council. In the autumn of 1981, an Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council — a slightly shadowy body — was established. It was recommended that a parliamentary tier be established. I wish to make that historical point; that the Nordic Council influenced the creation of the Body.

With respect to paragraph 37, it is correct that there is no relationship between the Body and the British-Irish Council. When we are in Ireland, we meet Ministers who represent the Irish Government — as a partner with the British Government — but in the plenitude of their authority. Similarly, when we are in a UK jurisdiction, we meet Ministers from the British Government in the plenitude of their authority. The danger of substituting the British-Irish Council for that is that the Council is

— to borrow a phrase from Conor Lenihan — a fairly “harmless body”. It carries out useful studies. I am wary of substituting interaction with the British and Irish Governments for interaction with the British-Irish Council. However, there is no reason why those relationships should be mutually exclusive. The Body could have a relationship with the British-Irish Council and with the British and Irish Governments.

The Lord Temple-Morris: I congratulate Andrew Mackay and his team for an excellent report, which draws attention to the future of the Body and its purpose. It follows the interesting debate and suggestions that we held yesterday. There is much in the report for the Steering Committee to consider, and I invite it to do so. I agree with David McLetchie’s emphasis on the Steering Committee’s consideration of the report. Undoubtedly, the Body has much to learn from the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly. Observer status and contacts, as recommended, will help the Body in its task.

However, there are only 24 hours in the day. We already have difficulty with attendance on Committee visits, because, in particular, the two national Parliaments are occupied with other matters and other international relations. It is well and good to deal with Nordic Council relations, but we must consider that there is a European Parliament, a ministerial council attached to the European Union, a Council of Europe and bilateral routes, many of which are extremely active. The Spanish and Netherlands groups that I belong to hold two conferences each year. We have ad hoc contact with Select Committees of the European Parliaments in particular, and with the Nordic Parliaments.

The fundamental point is that the Body has unfinished business. It is all very well to describe Parliaments and bodies such as this as “talking shops”; indeed, they are. However, the fact that they exist is important. Anyone who has attended a recent vote in the House of Commons knows that, despite the Government’s majority, we deal with serious business. The existence of the Body is relevant should relations not be as good in the future as they have been in the immediate past.

Our early debates in the Body were not without tension. The good relations that the two Governments enjoy mean that Members are led into what some people call “bland debates”. The British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference have covered those relations. Colleagues can rest assured that if those relations were to deteriorate, the Body would immediately become extremely important because it would be involved in the initial testing to put things right between the Governments. A situation with Britain and Ireland remains that we must be ready to deal with; therefore we must not lose sight of the British-Irish dimension. We do not yet have the declared peace, and I underline that. As David has said, that has yet to develop.

The Body has very important work to do with regard to the respective domestic Parliaments and Assemblies. That is a crucial dimension that has been touched on. Through us, the domestic Parliaments and Assemblies can get a national and even an international expression of themselves.

I urge members to take care, view matters in their overall context and realise how busy colleagues are. Last but not least, we have much unfinished business with which we were set up to deal and which is not yet concluded.

Mr Steve McCabe MP: I thank Andrew and the other members for that useful report. I shall comment on two aspects of it.

Other Members have covered the first part of the report. Paragraphs 37 and 38 are useful, and I was struck by how they describe the relationship between the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council. There is something useful in that for the Body, and to some extent recommendation 4 covers part of what we can learn. However, paragraph 38 caught my attention. It states:

“Members can even propose legislation to be introduced in countries other than their own.”

The Alex Salmond part of my personality was quite captivated by that, and I wondered whether perhaps that point deserved more consideration by the Steering Committee.

Paragraph 33 also struck me. It refers to non-political matters as well as the cultural dimensions of the Council’s work. During the European debate yesterday, Members talked about matters being a bit remote and not sufficiently relevant or in touch with people’s immediate needs. It occurred to me that there may be scope to do something about that, and I wonder whether the Steering Committee might also give that more consideration.

Mr Alex Salmond MP: I have three points to make in two minutes. First, however, we are all delighted to hear that Steve has a really attractive part to his personality to go along with the rest of it.

Taking the Nordic Council as a model, we should remember that it existed for 20 years purely as a parliamentary body before it had a ministerial counterpart. It is understandable that when people and parliamentarians seek to make a difference, they automatically think how they can influence Ministers. As Peter Temple-Morris reminded us, there are things that parliamentarians should do that Ministers and Governments cannot do. The Body seeks greater impact and greater relevance, therefore it should zero in on those areas in which parliamentary representatives could perhaps take a flyer and in which governments would find it more difficult to move as quickly.

Although I am in favour of the report, I do not approve of the logic of demeaning the Body as a harmless “talking shop”. I agree with Peter Temple-Morris that talking shops can be extremely important. They can produce some creative initiatives, and the parliamentary side of the Body could be enhanced to have repercussive effects on Ministers.

Secondly, paragraph 61 proposes “special guests” status, which I support, for the Nordic Council and for the Baltic Assembly. Presumably, our special guests going to the Nordic Council would reciprocate that work. Can we therefore ensure that our special guests represent the component parts of this organisation?

I say so particularly because there have been a series of questions in the Scottish Parliament, the answers to which suggest that the links between it and the Nordic Council occur via this Body. If that is being suggested in the Scottish Parliament, we had better ensure that it is a reality. That also applies to the National Assembly for Wales, the Northern Ireland Assembly when it comes back into operation, Dáil Éireann and Westminster.

Thirdly, I thought that David McLetchie was slightly too restrictive about the types of debate that can be enlightened by special guests, for example from the Nordic Council. At the last plenary conference in Ireland, we held a good debate on fishing. That debate would have been considerably enhanced by the experience of the Nordic Council representatives, in the sense that there are major fishing nations in the European Union, but more so because there are major fishing nations outwith the European Union. Indeed, the single most important reason why Iceland and Norway or, for that matter, the Faroe Islands’ special status are not within the context of the European Union is because of the common fisheries policy. That is just one issue; I can think of many others.

As our guest speaker said, the Body’s aim is to focus on issues that are important to people, thereby making the Body relevant to that process, rather than helping in the general normalisation of political relationships. Our debates on such issues — and I can think of at least half a dozen others — would be considerably enhanced, not diverted, by the presence of special guests from the Nordic Council.

Senator Paschal Mooney: On behalf of colleagues, my friend and colleague Andrew Mackay and the Chairman of the Committee, I thank Members for their considered contributions. I am aware that coffee is pending, so I will try to be as brief as I can. This reminds me of those late night political meetings when someone is asked to speak, and there are only five minutes left to closing time; it is highly unlikely that anyone will listen.

Without going into great detail, there are two or three broad issues that have been brought to the debate. There certainly seems to be a feeling, and it is articulated in the recommendations and conclusions of the report, that there should be closer links between the British-Irish Council and the BIIPB. It is also important to reflect Martin Mansergh’s point that we should be wary of placing too much emphasis on the links with the British-Irish Council at the expense of deepening relations with the two sovereign Governments. He, because of his last experience there, conveyed the sense that the Council

might not be all that it is shaped up to be by those who are not part of it. That appeal seemed to underlie many of the contributions here.

My vastly experienced friend and colleague Peter Temple-Morris made a valid point that there is already a plethora of parliamentary groupings in which we are involved and perhaps we should not get too excited or enthusiastic about embracing yet another, with all the consequent commitment, which is what I assume he was talking about.

It is important that Peter and others took us back in order not to lose sight of the fundamental reasons why the Body was set up and the fact that there is unfinished business. I am paraphrasing Roy Keane’s comment on his re-entry into the international soccer team, when he said that there was “unfinished business”, and there is undoubtedly unfinished business for the Body.

I think that we would all agree that although it is easy to suggest that it is little more than a talking shop — and I speak not only for myself but for many of my parliamentary colleagues on this side of the Irish Sea — that the Body should have been set up long ago, and we have all been enriched as a result of it.

References were made to many of the report’s conclusions, and I wanted to bring one point up again, but I know that the Steering Committee will look at that in detail: paragraph 37, which emphasised that advances should be made in strengthening the links with the British-Irish Council, notwithstanding the caveats that have been entered into in this debate. For example, it is ludicrous that, as has been pointed out in the report, the British-Irish Council’s web site has no links to the BIIPB. It is as if we do not exist. If we consider the wide-ranging debates that take place in the Council, we can see that there is an overlap with some of the debates that take place in this Body, and there should be an interrelationship. What form that should take is a matter for the Body.

Steve McCabe made a point about cultural issues. The Body has never really talked about these matters; we have never really got involved, because our debates have tended to focus on the pressing issues of the day. We should not lose sight of the cultural links that exist between all the countries of these islands, and it is an issue that the Steering Committee might accommodate in some form in the future.

Our Scottish friends made an interesting point — David McLetchie initiated it and Alex Salmond touched on it — about the lack of formal links between the Scottish Parliament and Westminster. I presume that the same is true of the other regional Assemblies. Notwithstanding the points that were made by our distinguished friends who have been here from the beginning about the fundamental reasons for setting up the Body, perhaps there is also a need for the Steering Committee to consider the possibility of widening the Body’s remit to include more links that

the regional Assemblies and Parliaments could feed into by using the Body a bit more as a debating vehicle.

I appreciate that it is highly unlikely that anything that takes place in the Body could enhance the relationship between the Scottish Parliament and Westminster. Indeed, that may be something that Alex Salmond does not particularly want. However, there are opportunities to do that.

I am sorry that because of limited time I may not have touched on all the matters raised. Finally, to return to Martin Mansergh, who is always a wonderful source of historical context, we should keep in mind the historical context in which the Body was set up. Once again, without wishing to re-emphasise the point, which Peter Temple-Morris also touched on, we should consider the fundamental reason for the Body's existence. Overall, the general trend and tenor of the debate has been that we strongly welcome and encourage the broadening of links between the Body and the Nordic Council.

Question put and agreed.

Resolved:

That the Body takes note of the Report of Committee B on Links Between the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body and the Nordic Council [Doc. No. 95].

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): We will now break until 11.30 am. I hope that Members will come back on time. The incentive is that there will be another chance to have a go at the Steering Committee.

The sitting was suspended at 11.14 am.

The sitting was resumed at 11.44 am.

EIGHTH ANNUAL REPORT

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): I beg to move

That the Body takes note of the Eighth Annual Report of the Body [Doc. No. 98].

This is a concise report of the work of the BIIPB in 2003. The deliberations of our plenary sessions are brought to the attention of the relevant Ministers in all jurisdictions and to the Ministers in the different Administrations. By and large, we get back detailed responses to the matters raised.

During the course of the year, once again, efforts were made formally and informally to try to get the Unionist parties to participate in the BIIPB. Unfortunately, those efforts have been unsuccessful to date. The issue has arisen for a number of years, and there is understandable concern that a major segment of public opinion, particularly in regard to the North of Ireland, is not represented at our meetings. Therefore, I want to state — as David did yesterday evening and Michael Mates did in his winding-up speech — that we will continue our efforts through different channels to try to get the Unionist parties to participate. It was also mentioned yesterday that we might ask the individual parties who are represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly to make presentations to the Body if they are not prepared to partake as Members.

11.45 am

In 2002 the Steering Committee decided to try to activate some of the Committees of the Body that had not been as active as they should be. It laid out specific parameters and time frames for reports to be compiled and presented to the Body. In the past two years, the Committees have become more active than they had been previously. The work of the BIIPB is important, and the work of the Committees is crucial to the ongoing work of the Body. Greater activity by the Committees contributes to the overall work of the Body and enhances the work of the parliamentarians involved.

Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP: I welcome the annual report. I am a member of Committee A, and a while ago I suggested that we should produce a report on any visits we make. However, I was told by a distinguished colleague that that does not happen; that is a pity. If we meet key people in Northern Ireland, there ought to be a piece of paper concerning the visit coming to the Body. It would stimulate questions of the Committee, and it would be informative. So I lob that in gently: when there is a visit, there should be a note written on it that is brought here.

On another matter, when replies are received from Ministers in the various jurisdictions on issues such as Sellafield, they should be an item on the Programme of Business so that we can either accept them and move on or say that we are not satisfied. I guess that in all the jurisdictions Select Committees have replies from time to time as items on the agenda.

The Body must keep building and, with regard to issues we discussed earlier, gradually try to ensure that the Executive Ministers of the various Governments take us seriously and know that we will bounce back if we are dissatisfied. I do not want to labour the point. However, it seems that if the agenda could have these replies early enough, it would be helpful.

Finally, I, and others, can table original motions for the Body. However, my understanding of Standing Orders is that doing so takes some organisation. There must be a cluster of supporters and signatories. I wonder whether, when examining the ground rules for the Body between now and the next plenary conference, it would be easier if people were able to table substantive motions with shorter notice. If the agenda became overloaded, there could be arrangements as to what priorities there would be. The Body could vote on what Members wanted to discuss at the beginning of the plenary. Certainly, issues have occurred immediately before a plenary, which, if there had been the opportunity of tabling a motion on them, would perhaps have been prioritised by colleagues.

Mr John McWilliam MP: Further to Mr Mackinlay's first point, I am not a member of Committee A, but I was for most of the last Parliament, and I was a very regular attendee. One reason why there are no written reports from Committee A is that some of the people the Committee sees do not want it written down anywhere that the Committee has actually seen them. Occasionally, the Committee sees some pretty sensitive people at some pretty sensitive places.

I remember one morning when the Committee met the committee of Loyal Orange Lodge No. 1, and that afternoon it met the Garvaghy Road Residents' Association. The Committee has seen all sorts of people. One gentleman, who shall remain nameless, had advised the Government on peace and reconciliation operations in South Africa, and he was very anxious not be in any written record of that meeting. That is why, for practical reasons, there are few reports from Committee A. It is not because the Committee does not want to make anything known.

The Lord Brooke: I have no authority to say this on behalf of Committee A, but neither the Chairman nor the Shadow Chairman, who chaired the meeting this morning, is present. I must say diffidently to Mr Mackinlay that he was not present at the Committee meeting this morning, and had he been, it would have been quite helpful if he had indicated that he was going to raise the subject that he did. It was discussed; and if he was present when Mr Mates delivered Committee A's report, he will have

heard it being discussed and heard a specific suggestion about how we bring the Unionists on board. I can only refer to what Mr McWilliam said about the reasons why the Committee does not have reports. However, I am quite sure that other members of Committee A would be happy to have a discussion with Mr Mackinlay on that subject if he wants to raise it with us when we are in session.

Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP: Point taken. I apologise: I meant no discourtesy. However, that issue was raised some time ago. I do not raise it as a point of criticism. Clearly, the Committee meets people about whom it would be insensitive to report and who would not wish to be reported. However, the Committee also meets people who would welcome such a reference. I do not want to labour the point.

Mr Alex Salmond MP: The SNP and Plaid Cymru co-ordinate the representation of minority parties in the Westminster Parliament to the Government Whips, which means that we have weekly business meetings with both the Democratic Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist Party. That relationship works well. Recently, we managed to get agreement on who should lead on Unionist supply day. It took some time, but agreement was eventually reached.

I do not want to cut across anything that has been done elsewhere, but if the Body so wished, those situations cropping up, even informally in the business meetings, might be a vehicle for input. I am reasonably optimistic that, phrased in the right way with the various redefinitions of the origins of the Body and other matters that people with long experience have suggested, both Unionist parties might feel a presentation of their ideas would be useful.

The Lord Temple-Morris: I support what Alex said. It would be admirable. The more approaches that go to the Unionists the better. There is some evidence that they are nibbling a bit. They are more interested and less vindictive, which they originally were. I use that word quite deliberately; they were vindictive towards the Body. That is no longer the mood. With regard to defining the nibbling, admittedly they are not in the front rank, but they are quite prominent in the House of Lords as Unionists. There are several Unionists there and according to one of them, there are least two, if not three, who would like to come to the Body and who would be quite willing to go to Mr Trimble about it; and the more approaches the better. Indeed Lord Laird went so far as to write to the Steering Committee, but no action was taken. It would have started the ball rolling — no more than that. It would not have started at the very top level, but at a good level, which would not commit them too much.

Mr Kevin McNamara MP: The Lord Laird matter came before the Steering Committee. Lord Laird was asking to come in his personal capacity and not as a representative of the party, and he also wanted to sit as a Member. It was felt that that was not the proper way of doing things. There were places for Unionists, but they

were for the Unionist parties. In one sense it was felt that he was not a typical representative of Unionist opinion.

Mr John McWilliam MP: That is an understatement.

Mr Kevin McNamara MP: He was told that he could make representations, and some matters were referred to my Committee and replied to. It was not a question of the Committee not doing anything.

I am associated with an organisation in the House called the Agreed Ireland Forum and Gregory Campbell addressed a meeting recently, which was attended by 80 or 90 people from both inside and outside the House. I spoke to him about membership of the Body and about the fact that Paul Bew had attended and stated an opinion, and I am certain that we would want to hear what they had to say.

Two matters have emerged. The DUP has become far more confident now that it is the larger party. It does not feel that it is subject to the same sort of strains and it can, perhaps, take more risks. It is interesting, as colleagues have observed, that members of the DUP are prepared to put forward their new policy positions on web sites and speak about them in a way which they would not have done in the past, so that is a degree of confidence. Gregory Campbell was not certain to what extent the top parliamentary leadership would want to be actively engaged and so on. However, at his level — he is very modest about that sort of thing — he would have no difficulty in speaking, although he would obviously have to refer it to his colleagues. He is very articulate and can put forward a very convincing and reasoned case. He is rather like Enoch Powell: if you accept his premise, everything is absolutely logical. The premise would be the difficulty.

The Lord Temple-Morris: I do not want the Body to think that I was accusing the Steering Committee of not doing anything. It was just the nibbling point. It has led on to a very constructive suggestion from Kevin McNamara. If we start at an appropriate level, there may be some future in it.

The Lord Brooke: I do not want to get into an argument with Peter Temple-Morris, but as a bystander, I sense that having a whole series of approaches from all quarters of the globe to the Unionists is probably not the most helpful thing to do. If David Trimble is actively interested in coming in, that is his problem to manage. Matters should be left with the Steering Committee, and if that Committee wishes to use someone on the Body, such as Alex, to take an initiative, I have no problem with that. However, to have everyone on the Body unilaterally taking private initiatives in talking to Unionists — and one has just been mentioned who is not regarded as wholly representative of Unionist opinion — seems counterproductive. A more disciplined system would be better.

12.00 pm

Mr Alex Salmond MP: It was mentioned so that it would not be a unilateral initiative. It is an offer to the

Steering Committee to take up, if it chooses. I am sure that Peter Temple-Morris made other approaches in the same direction; but in order to take up such approaches, the Steering Committee must be made aware of them. That is what I did.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): Thank you, Alex. I will ask David to wind up this debate.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): Whether there is a report is a matter for Committee A.

Mr Dominic Grieve MP: I agree with Peter Brooke. I am satisfied that David Trimble has no real objection to attending the Body, but every time the subject has come up, it has been a difficult time for him. However, it may be easier for him since the election, as most of those in his party who were creating tension have gone elsewhere. The opportunity exists.

I also agree with Peter Brooke, however, that there is no point in our bouncing around asking the Unionists why they do not come to the Body. We ought to seize the opportunity, but the best way to go about that is simply to decide informally who are best placed to make the approach.

The Lord Smith: As Deputy O'Donnell said yesterday, the people have spoken, and the main Unionist party is now the DUP. It is much more important to land the DUP than Trimble and Co., because they are yesterday's men; and although people might have friendly relations with the Official Unionists, pursuing the likes of Gregory Campbell, as Kevin has done, would be more germane to our deliberations. I would make them our priority rather than the Official Unionists.

Mr John McWilliam MP: I want to sound a quick word of caution. There is a major fight going on between Unionists over the European elections, and I suggest that nobody do anything to anybody until after 10 June.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): There ought to be a curfew on elections for several years in all jurisdictions. May I ask David to resume?

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): I shall repeat myself: we should leave Committee A to decide whether it should submit a written report to this plenary conference, and the sensitivity that John McWilliam and Peter Brooke have mentioned is obvious. That is a matter for the Committee.

Similarly, we should not automatically put replies from Ministers on the agenda unless there is a particular reason for doing so. It is up to Members, if they so wish, to submit motions to the Steering Committee.

I have two points to make before I come to the representation of Unionist parties. First, we want to improve Question Time, which has remained largely the same ritual since we began. Perhaps we could take steps to improve Question Time and make it more spontaneous.

Paragraph 26 of our report deals with the non-relationship between the Body and the British-Irish Council. It is totally inappropriate that the British-Irish Council should adopt a policy of virtually refusing to recognise our existence. After all, 13 Ministers on the British side have fully supported the Body and from the beginning recognised our importance, and that we are to a large extent the parliamentary tier to those Ministers who are discussing matters on the British-Irish Council.

Whatever can be done, not only by the Steering Committee but by the devolved institutions — the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales — to put pressure on the British-Irish Council to end an attitude which is wholly negative and which, in many respects, is disrespectful to the sovereign Parliament as well as the devolved institutions would be welcome.

The remaining point is an obvious major cause of concern, today or previously. We shall take any appropriate steps to try to persuade the Official Unionists and the DUP to attend, if only to make representations. We shall try to twist their arms, we shall write, and speak to them as we have done informally. However, as everyone appreciates, they will make their own decision. John McWilliam mentioned the European elections; it is clear that no progress will be made before 10 June.

I am sure that Conservative Members will not misunderstand me, but in the light of Michael Mates's work, a step forward would be made if Conservative Members of the House of Commons could try to persuade David Trimble, Ian Paisley and others to at least be willing to make representations without necessarily indicating that they wish to participate fully.

We have always recognised — not just in the past few years — that from the beginning in 1990, we have been weakened as a Body by the absence of those parties that represent the majority community in Northern Ireland. If we can rectify that, it will not only be useful for the people of Northern Ireland in many respects, it will certainly be useful for the Body.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Body takes note of the Eighth Annual Report of the Body [Doc. No. 98].

PROPOSED AMENDMENT TO RULES

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): I beg to move the following amendment:

That Rule 31 be repealed and proposed new Rule 31

“31 (a) Four committees at any one time may be appointed by the Steering Committee, which shall assign to each its order of reference, place of meeting, and budgetary limit and shall determine the date by which the committee's report is to be made.

(b) Up to eighteen Members or Associate Members may be nominated by the Steering Committee to each committee, one-third of whom shall be Members of the Oireachtas, one-third Members of Parliament, and one-third Members of the other participating institutions.

Up to fifteen Members or Associate Members, one-third of whom shall be Members of the Oireachtas, one-third Members of Parliament, and one-third Members of the other participating institutions, may be nominated by the Steering Committee to each committee as a panel of Alternates for that committee: and such Members or Associate Members shall receive all papers of the committee to which they are nominated as reserves as if they were full Members of that committee.

The Chairmen of the Body shall be members of all four committees *ex-officiis*; but they shall not vote nor be counted in the quorum.

Notwithstanding the provisions of paragraphs (b) and (c) above —

any committee appointed by the Steering Committee to consider matters exclusively the concern of the two sovereign governments and parliaments shall consist of equal numbers of Members of the *Oireachtas* and Members of Parliament; and

up to ten Members or Associate Members may be nominated to that committee under the provisions of paragraph (c), half of whom shall be Members of the *Oireachtas* and half Members of Parliament.

(f) The chairman of a committee may at the request of a Member or Associate Member nominated under paragraph (b) or paragraph (e)(i) above who is unable to attend a meeting of the committee nominate an Alternate to replace that Member for the duration of that meeting; and such nominee shall be taken from the panel of Alternates nominated to that committee for that purpose and shall have the right to vote at the meeting for which he or she is nominated and shall be counted in the quorum.”

be adopted with immediate effect [Doc. No. 96].

The purpose of the new rule is to increase flexibility of Committee membership by allowing full Members of the Body to be Alternate Members of Committees. It also simplifies the language by replacing the phrase “panel of reserve Members” by the more commonly used “Alternate”. We are trying to get ahead of the EU by ruling out some of the phraseology.

Question, That the amendment be made with immediate effect, put and agreed to.

REPORT OF COMMITTEE C (ECONOMIC AFFAIRS): DELIVERY OF HEALTH SERVICES TO RURAL POPULATIONS

Mr Seymour Crawford TD: I beg to move

That the Body takes note of the Report of Committee C on the Delivery of Health Services [Doc. No. 97] and the conclusions and recommendations of the Report should be forwarded to both Governments and the devolved administrations for their observations.

I have great pleasure in moving this motion and thank those who helped us in any way in this inquiry. The Committee visited three sites including the Isle of Man, site of a new acute hospital, and the Southlands Clinic. I pay special tribute to Mr Donald Gelling MLC, who not only met us at the airport and took us on a tour of the island, but looked after us in every way while we were there.

One of the benefits of the Committee's structure is that we now have strong contacts in regions such as the Isle of Man, Scotland and Wales. We were given tremendous help, especially in the Isle of Man and Scotland, from the local people whom we deal with on a regular basis.

The visit to the Isle of Man was very interesting because a new hospital had been built on a greenfield site and was about to go into service. Some of the wards were occupied, but the general hospital was getting ready to go into service. I understand that it is in service now and is doing very well. Donald might comment on that later.

The hospital has 314 beds, 24 consultants, six operating theatres, six intensive therapy beds and six special coronary care beds, and all other services are available on site. The new hospital will deal with almost all aspects of medical care, with the exception of neurosurgery. That will be dealt with in Liverpool, which is only a 45-minute helicopter journey away.

Nurses used to be trained in the old hospital, but that was dropped. It was then restarted because there was a problem in getting sufficient numbers of nurses to man the health service in the Isle of Man. I understand that the new training takes place in the new hospital.

The hospital is of a modern design and was built in a relatively short time at a total cost of £112 million. The accident and emergency (A&E) department has a throughput of 30,000 cases, and 55,000 people go through the outpatient department. The hospital obviously has a high seasonal aspect to its medical care, treating holiday-makers, et cetera.

The hospital aims to have all patients see a consultant within 13 weeks and for all patients to receive the appropriate hospital treatment within 13 weeks. Staff apologised to us about the fact that when we visited, some people had been waiting for up to six months for hip operations, et cetera. As the Irish part of the delegation, we consider

that if our waiting list were down to six months, we would be very lucky.

We later visited the Southlands Clinic in the south of the island. It is a new residential home with 86 beds, and it deals with the aged and those with mental illness and disability. It is a modern building with four GPs who are in an adjacent practice and who are contracted to work at the clinic. There are two other community healthcare sites: one in the north of the island at Ramsey and the other in the old Nobles Hospital site in Douglas. That means that the elderly, disabled and so forth can be treated within a few miles of their own homes. I now understand that the new Southlands Clinic is in full working order and doing well.

In Wales we visited a new birth centre that is adjacent to Caerphilly District Miners Hospital, which is 20 miles north of Cardiff. It became fully operational in 2002. Its management and services are self-standing, and it is staffed by a fully trained midwifery team and operates without a consultant or paediatric unit. There are approximately 1,350 births in the area, and in the first nine months that the centre was in operation it dealt with 435 births in the unit and 55 home births.

The services available in the unit are: midwife-led service for delivery; water bath delivery option; pre- and post-natal services; breastfeeding support and baby massage service; early pregnancy testing; and emergency contraception. As Members can gather, it provides a comprehensive service, and the new water bath birth service is an added advantage for those who want that option.

The benefit of the hospital is that midwives are under less pressure than those in the bigger hospitals, and there appears to be a more relaxed atmosphere in which women can give birth. As well as that, patients are not under the same pressure to leave the day after delivery. The main advantage in that midwifery-led unit is that it is only 12 miles from the nearest major hospital.

There is also a rapid reaction unit in the major hospital to deal with emergencies or critical cases. Although we enjoyed the visit and learned much from it, it was not a peripheral area like my area of Monaghan or anywhere else that the Committee was considering. To rectify that, the Committee decided to travel to a more peripheral area, and I thank the secretariat and the Scottish health services for making that visit possible.

12.15 pm

The group travelled on a Sunday to Inverness, and on the Monday went a further 108 miles to Wick, which is just 14 miles from John O'Groats. The hospital service there looks after 35,000 people, and the area includes the largest bog in Europe, which gives some idea of its sparse population. Wick has a population of 8,500, and some of its health problems are dealt with by another hospital

in Thurso, which has a population of 9,000. The rest of the area is made up of villages, crofts and so on.

When the Committee visited the area, a review of maternity services in Caithness was in progress. I understand that that service has been withdrawn from the hospital, because when two of the hospital's three gynaecologists left, the remaining one felt unable to cope. That shows the difficulties in peripheral areas.

The Committee had long discussions with the hospital's management and some of its consultants, who made clear that they would need to make arrangements and decisions with regard to other services. Those of us who have dealt with hospital closures know that they have a ripple effect. There is a question whether there will be enough general services for the anaesthetists to keep them employed at the hospital. They form quite a small unit at present, which deals with all services in the hospital.

During the Committee's visit, there was no great pressure on services, although we were advised that it can get quite busy during the summer, when there are many holiday-makers and more road accidents.

The hospital also deals with many problems that are found in rural areas. It has a 23-bed medical unit, an 18-bed surgical unit and a 25-bed rehabilitation unit for the elderly. A former 11-bed maternity unit is now a four-bed renal-dialysis unit, which is vital in that sort of area. The hospital also has an X-ray service, a palliative care service, anaesthetists and so on. However, staff are currently very anxious, a point that Members may wish to pick up afterwards.

The staff provide an excellent service to a low-paid and elderly population. The Committee visited a GP area where six GPs work together and deliver a very good service under a brand-new structure. The major thing that I learned was that the provision of free primary medical care meant that patients went to the doctor earlier and did not clog up A&E units to same extent as in Ireland currently. Yesterday's 'Irish Examiner' stated that

"one-in-ten 'cannot afford a visit to the GP'".

It struck me that the free GP service certainly relieves much of the pressure currently witnessed in Ireland's hospitals.

One GP was strongly of the view that there was a need for some recognition of the situation, such as tax breaks and so on to encourage consultants and doctors to provide a service and to live in such areas. Some politicians in the area said that they got cheaper houses and other perks, so the situation is not black and white. However, there is certainly a great need to address the social as well as the medical issues for people working in remote areas.

One person suggested that if people wished to live in rural and remote areas, they would have to accept the fact that services would not be available; they would have to accept the risks as well. We heard both sides of the argument.

I want to raise the matter of the problems at Monaghan Hospital. It is clear that consulting organisations and enduring issues will mean changes to the services that will be available in future. Decisions must be made at a political level as to what specialist support will be given to encourage services in difficult, isolated rural areas, or we will witness the depopulation of those regions. The people in Caithness made it clear that it would be very difficult to encourage young people to start families and set up businesses in the area given that they would have to travel at least 108 miles to hospital for the birth of a child or for any other medical problem.

Proper reconfiguration and relocation measures should also be in place before wind-down processes or closures are imposed. The situation in Caithness was that a report was on the table; two members of staff had already gone; another was going; and no alternative measures had been put in place.

The Isle of Man, where a good service is available, is a case in point. It raises many questions about the extent to which our nations have mismanaged their health services and any transition of services. The Isle of Man built the new hospital before it closed the old one so that the service was transferred from one place to the other. However, the services in Monaghan Hospital were removed and no alternative was provided. Today, even in a hospital of excellence in Drogheda, there are no gynaecological or paediatric services because of the lack of staff. The political system must address those matters. We know from the consulting bodies what lies ahead, and it is impossible to understand why we cannot take action accordingly.

Ms Cecilia Keaveney TD: Go raibh maith agat, a Chomh-Chathaoirigh.

I agree with Seymour that carrying out this study of the delivery of health services to rural areas has been a very good experience. One of the first things that we learned was that Monaghan is not as peripheral as some places: we had a flight to Edinburgh, a three-and-a-half-hour train journey to Inverness and a two-and-a-half-hour journey north to Wick. However, it gave us a good feeling for the topic, which was the delivery of health services to people in rural and remote areas. The lesson that I learned was that not everywhere can have every facility that it needs, which is something that is very difficult to grasp politically. We saw the political fallout where people were going to lose maternity services in very remote areas, and we also saw it from the gynaecologists' and consultants' perspective.

Some people say that we need a consultant of every type in every hospital. However, we discovered in Wick that there had been three consultants and that they had not been prepared to be the only consultants. They said that they wanted time off and professional development, which are valid demands. When only one consultant was left, she said that she could not, and would not, work

on her own. She was getting out so that she would have a chance to have a job somewhere else; she loved the place and wanted to be there, but it was not practical.

The birth rate was in the high 200s; therefore they could not keep up their skills. Suddenly we were seeing the situation from a different perspective to that sometimes taken by politicians who want everything everywhere. We talked to the professionals who said that it cannot happen like that. However, there is a problem.

I am not ignoring the Isle of Man or the Welsh situation, but if we had gone all over the world to try to find a place that encapsulated all the different issues, we could not have found anywhere better than Wick. People there said that economic investment in the area was due to the good health service, but they highlighted the gap that exists now between the under-18 and the over-40 population in the area, a situation that can only get worse. Young people came back to or stayed in the area because factories moved in or because there was a good maternity service. Now that the maternity service has gone, will the young people go too?

I know we were not supposed to be examining the social issues, but they are utterly intermeshed. It was not simply about a maternity service in a rural area but about the fabric of the society and how that was made up. It reminded me of programmes such as Ceantair Laga Ard Riachtanais (Clár) that have been run in the Republic. As part of that, we looked at areas of declining population and tried to pump a little more money for infrastructure into them as a measure of our acceptance that we want to keep our rural populations.

It is similar to the farming argument: do you pay farmers to stay on the land because you want to have people on the land or do you treat farming as a commercial venture and say that it makes no sense to have them there, so we should move them all somewhere else? I found that argument fascinating, although we did not come up with all the solutions.

In Wick the children do not have access to either a paediatrician or to an intensive care unit. On the weekend we were there, there had just been a major viral outbreak. All the children had gone down with it, and most of them required cannulation. Ambulances travelled up and down the road to Inverness for five hours at a time with as many babies as they could carry. When the ambulance staff got too tired to travel there and back, the GPs started to cannulate them. One GP told me that he nearly missed a case of meningitis because the baby did not look as bad as the others.

It is hard to explain to somebody who was not there, but it was a fascinating experience. The situation in Wick is a microcosm of the larger problem, so if we could solve the problem for somewhere like Wick, we could solve it for many other places. Therefore I commend the report to Members and welcome any feedback. I know that we

are under time pressure, so I will not go into more detail. I would just like to thank all those who helped to make it possible.

Dr Jerry Cowley TD: I am pleased to speak on this important issue. It is unfortunate that there are time constraints because this is of the utmost importance to people. The Body could play a major role, and I regret that there will not be adequate time for a proper discussion.

It was interesting to listen to Cecilia Keaveney talking about a viral outbreak and very ill children who might die because the area does not have a proper health service. To have to travel 108 miles to the nearest paediatrician is disgraceful and utterly unacceptable, but that is the situation that exists on the ground.

The question that must be asked — and it is in the report — is: do we want people to stay in rural areas? If so, we must give them a proper health service. Whether it is the Hanly Report in Ireland or the Hayes Report in Northern Ireland, there is currently an agenda to deprive rural areas of an adequate health service. Members might ask what I know about the subject. I was a rural general practitioner, working 168 hours a week — there are no more hours in the week — so I know what I am talking about. I am also chairman of the Irish Rural Doctors Group, and I have been involved in depopulation issues. If you remove services from an area, people will not stay.

Cecilia talked about the young people coming back. Of course they are not going to stay. How could you expect them to stay, when their child may be in danger of dying? If they have the means, they will go to a hospital 108 miles away. What kind of service is that where there is no paediatrician to back up the obstetrician? I have worked in hospitals: it is a recipe for disaster.

Do the people of Wick matter? Of course they matter, just like the people of rural Ireland matter as well. These are the issues that we should be talking about. The other issues are very important indeed, but this is about people. I am involved in politics, and I am glad to have the opportunity to say a few words about this, because I think that there is an agenda going on here.

It is a vicious circle. If we remove the services, the people go, because no one is going to stay where there is no post office, or where there is no protection from criminals and all the rest of it. If a consultant does not have enough time to get experience, he is not going to go there because he will not have the backup that he needs. If I were an obstetrician, I would not go to a place that did not have a paediatrician. Nobody in their right mind would.

They expect them to stay, but there are terrible recruitment problems in rural areas. It is as if the powers that be know but will not give adequate backup and services to rural areas or put money into the services. The problem in the rural areas of Ireland is one of capacity. It is about money and lack of investment. It is about an agenda that gives a level playing field to both urban and rural areas.

12.30 pm

There is a very good point in the report about Government policy taking cognisance of the fact that urban and rural areas are all part of the one spectrum. There has to be a minimum standard. We are all being driven into urbanisation, with drugs and crime and everything else. It is much better to support the rural areas.

I have criticised the Hanly Report in Ireland, which is just like this. I have criticised it, because it refers to a nurse-led unit, and if you read this report, there is even a suggestion about putting a nurse-led obstetric unit some place other than right beside the hospital. That could not be done, because people have basic rights, and there are minimum standards that have to be maintained.

There are several agendas going on here, and it is a problem that has to be addressed with proper policy. The problems in Wick are the same problems that we have in Ireland. I congratulate Donald Gelling on the wonderful situation on the Isle of Man, but that is a small island. My own area of the barony of Erris is as big as Northern Ireland, and they are talking about one major hospital in Galway. That does not make sense.

The money that has been put into the health service on the Isle of Man is noteworthy. The money that is put into the Irish health service is ridiculous compared to it and has been so over the years. There has been a total lack of infrastructure in my area down through the years. Because of that we have had urbanisation. There is also a note here about supporting the rural areas by day services and by consultants coming on day visits. That smacks of Hanly and Hayes and of closing down local services. That is not what is needed.

People say that if we are criticising all these things, what is the alternative? The alternative is to support local services. Where we have consultants in our area we have literally no waiting lists. Where people have to wait for a consultancy in Galway, which is 160 miles away, people wait for six years for a first appointment to see a rheumatologist. That is totally disgraceful when your joints seize up after a few weeks, never mind six years. The answer is very simple: take cognisance of rural areas and of the fact that they pay the same taxes, which is also mentioned in the report. Those people deserve the same rights.

The Isle of Man has a service that we do not have in Ireland. It has a helicopter medical service. At our last meeting, I made the point that the North/South report by both health services into a feasibility study has never been published by the Government. Why? Because they want to deprive the rural areas of the services they need.

Mr Donald Gelling MLC: I thank Seymour Crawford for his compliments on the visit to the Isle of Man. Size is relevant, obviously, as Jerry Cowley has just said, but people become used to a service, and the demands are getting greater.

The Isle of Man, which measures 33 miles by 11 miles, has an acute hospital that cost approximately £117 million and two smaller hospitals in the north and south of the island. Unfortunately, the consultant surgeons are reluctant to use the wonderful theatres in the north hospital, because — in these days of litigation — the facilities for resuscitation in the new state-of-the-art acute hospital are better. That puts us under pressure, because people have to travel. I listened to an example of 108 miles to a hospital; a 20-minute ambulance journey is the longest a patient on the Isle of Man has to travel. Therefore we have the same pressures, because the island is small and people always liked to be able to pop into the hospital in five minutes.

The hospital is running and working well, but the GPs on the Isle of Man — and I noted 168 hours as another example — will work only from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm, when their services are withdrawn. We have had to introduce a national service DHSS scheme where other doctors are brought in to bridge from 6.00 pm to 8.00 am. However, we have found that that is being abused, because people can be seen more quickly using that service than by booking an appointment with their regular doctor during the day. It will always be a problem with the health service because the demands are becoming greater and medical treatments are getting better.

We were delighted to bring the Committee to the island, and I am glad its members appreciated what they saw. It was a part that the Isle of Man could play even though it is so small.

Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP: It occurred to me when listening to Members' contributions, particularly to that of our colleague Jerry Cowley from County Mayo, that although there is a problem regarding priorities — and we as politicians ultimately decide what share of the national cake is allocated to health services across the range of services and its distribution — there is an underlying problem in western Europe about the reservoir of skilled doctors, nurses and other medical people, and we are not beginning to meet that. A system of bonuses and various packages to attract people would be one area's gain and another one's loss, unless the question of the reservoir of the skilled people who are going through the medical schools, et cetera, is addressed.

This issue is pertinent to the Irish presidency of the European Union and to both our Governments. With the enlargement of Europe on 1 May, and without stealing their skills and talents from the countries of central Europe, there will be several areas with a rich reservoir — and what is considered to be a surplus — of key staff, for instance, dentists in Poland. However, the European Commission has been tardy in examining the training skills of these people to satisfy itself that their qualifications are of mutuality or comparable to those which exist in western Europe. I think they do, but the Commission is slow to address that.

There is also the built-in selfish interest of what in the United Kingdom are called the Royal College of this and the Royal College of that — I am not sure what

they are called in the Republic of Ireland. They have a vested interest in these people not having access, particularly where there is a profit motive. This is especially the case in dentistry, but there will be others. That issue must be urgently addressed.

In some areas there is a reservoir of skilled people who would be delighted and privileged — and we should feel privileged to have them — to come and work in these islands. They would be pleased to have access to the new technologies, because they have received the training but in many cases they have not had that access. It would be of mutual benefit to us and to their countries if they were given access.

It is an impediment to the labour marketplace. It is partly because the Commission has been tardy. It is also because, as we saw in the press a few days ago, the Royal Colleges are, insultingly, producing a thousand reasons why some of those people's credentials are not comparable to the qualifications and disciplines that are gained in these islands. I hope that that will be addressed.

Mr Alex Salmond MP: I wish to pick up on something that Dr Cowley said: the Committee's report is fascinating with regard to Caithness. I followed the debate with interest because I also represent a rural community — not as rural or as distant from services as Caithness — but, nonetheless, a rural community in the north-east of Scotland.

I would not only underrate the lack of political will of central government and of the Scottish Executive but of the Highland Health Board. Some of the difficulties in recruiting the relevant specialists have come about because the Highland Health Board has given no indication that it wants to continue services in Caithness. People will not go to places where they may be left out on a limb, unwanted or not catered for. It is a serious point, about which the Committee is absolutely right: the economic and social fabric of a fragile rural community are interrelated.

The Highland Health Board spends much of its time explaining to a reluctant and dissatisfied population why services cannot be provided, instead of, for example, mobilising a national campaign to demand financial support from central government to provide services. Given that message, I am not surprised that two consultants have gone and the other is about to go. They are in an impossible position: they are trying to serve a community and to pursue their careers; they also provide services to a community that wants them, but the Highland Health Board gives no indication that it wants to provide those services. As Dr Cowley says, we should not underrate whether it is the agenda or just a lack of imagination or political will. That lack of political will is what the Body should be aiming to address.

Finally, it would be useful if the Body could find an area in which problems in the provision of services have been successfully tackled and overcome. That would be a good example to advertise.

Mr Hugo Swire MP: I will keep my comments brief, because I am in that nice position of agreeing with all

those who have spoken. The report is interesting; however, I find it strange that it is entitled 'Report on Delivery of Health Services to Rural Populations', because dentistry hardly features in it at all. In my part of the world there is an acute problem with dentistry. There is much discussion about people's entitlements and rights and the fact that they are taxpayers, whether they are in Caithness or elsewhere. There is now an acute crisis in dentistry and access to it in rural areas.

It is, as Dr Cowley said, wholly unacceptable that a person suffering the onset of rheumatism must wait six years. However, one can suffer very badly from dental decay. I have met many people in my surgeries who are in acute pain, which, of course, affects their quality of life. Therefore, although the study is useful, it would have been more useful had it addressed access to dental services.

Finally, I agree with Andrew Mackinlay about the retention of nurses. The problem is not necessarily confined to EU access countries; it goes into the Third World. He was right to say that one hospital's gain is another's loss. That applies internally and externally: one country's gain can be another country's loss. For example, it concerns me that the Philippines, in particular, lose many of their nursing staff to Great Britain, which has an adverse effect on the indigenous populations of those islands.

Career development in remote areas — be it Caithness or elsewhere — is addressed on page 18 of the report, at paragraph (f). If, for example, one operates at a hospital in Wick, it is difficult to envisage any career development, or to keep one's skills up to date. Those people provide vital services in remote and rural areas, and they should not feel isolated. They must be integrated into the body corporate of the health service, have their skills brought up to speed and shown that they are as important as those working in urban areas, on which, unfortunately, we agree that we concentrate too much.

Mr Harry Barnes MP: It was appropriate that Seymour Crawford introduced the report as the "midwife" of the investigation. He is a member of the Committee with a 100% attendance record, unlike some of us, on the three visits that he described in detail. He felt that what he had seen, especially during the visit to Wick, had helped him to understand some of the problems in the Monaghan area.

12.45 pm

Two of the contributions stressed — mirroring the conclusions of the report — that some of the health problems in rural and remote areas are not only concerned with provision. The fabric of those areas is a wider issue, as Cecilia described. Issues include whether provisions are viable and running, whether development could be encouraged or people sustained in those areas, and whether members of the medical profession have a job and a future so that they feel attached to those communities.

Andrew Mackinlay's suggestion that there should be a reservoir of available trained skills is appropriate, given developments in the European Union. Although he was

critical that the report did not cover dentistry — especially the existence of surplus provisions — the problem with a report of this type is that it could go on for ever and investigate masses of appropriate areas. It is difficult to decide what a report should select to hit and get hold of. Perhaps we should have thought about the scope of the investigation.

However, it is not the case — as Alex Salmond suggested — that there are no successes in the story that unfolded. The visit to Caerphilly, and the midwife-led maternity facilities there, was a success. It might have been that the area was not sufficiently distant and rural, but there were lessons to be learned. There were communities that were fairly stable and had people involved whose views about the type of provision they wanted were being listened to.

We have been involved in a valuable investigation, which has resulted in the emergence of side issues. Not only did we meet Donald Gelling on the Isle of Man, but when we went to Wales we met John Marek, David Melding and Brian Gibbons, who are involved with the Body. Getting around and meeting people in various settings who were the hosts of the areas of our activities was valuable to the Body's work.

When I visited the Isle of Man I was particularly fortunate to be the first to arrive and the last to leave. Donald took me around everywhere, and not only was I able to pick up information on the developments in the Isle of Man's health service, but I discovered much more besides. I now have some interesting information about the housing policy on the Isle of Man that the United Kingdom Government could perhaps pick up and run with. However, perhaps that is appropriate for another time.

Jerry Cowley mentioned the problems involved with providing resources in rural areas, and he displayed strong feelings and emotion in his contribution. If the major ideologies of the twentieth century are considered — capitalism against communism — it will be found that capitalism is about making profit. Rural areas do not produce as much profit as urban development. Through Marxist writings et cetera, communism stressed the importance of the proletariat. That ideology dealt with people in rural areas as though they were sunk in rural idiocy: rather than maintaining those areas, people had to be drawn out from them. We must develop alternative perceptions of those two overriding ideologies to what we still carry around in our heads. Perhaps the report in some small way contributes towards that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Body takes note of the Report of Committee C on the Delivery of Health Services [Doc. No. 97] and the conclusions and recommendations of the Report should be forwarded to both Governments and the devolved administrations for their observations.

Motion made:

That the Body do now adjourn. — [*Mr Kevin McNamara MP.*]

ADJOURNMENT DEBATE

Mr Kevin McNamara MP: The Irish have done it again. Members of the Body have gone from place to place and visit to visit and thought that we would never get as good a place again. Yet, here we have a lovely hotel, lovely sea coast and a lovely part of Ireland. We have had great craic, great food, comfortable beds and everything that one could possibly want. The hotel staff have been second to none, meeting our every whim without being in any way obtrusive. We convey our thanks to the hotel, its staff and to our colleagues from the Irish delegation for having arranged such a splendid place for us to stay.

I am sorry that Deputy O'Keeffe is not present to hear our words of thanks, but I am sure that I speak on behalf of everyone. I wonder what future venue the Irish delegation will select for this time next year, which may well be the last time that I attend, to titillate our senses in all sorts of ways. We have gone from stately home to castle to five-star hotel to this splendid hotel, and it has been first-class.

Secondly, on behalf of the Members and the delegates, I thank the shorthand writers from the British-Irish Parliamentary Reporting Association (BIPRA) for the excellent work that they have done for us at our conferences. I also thank the Clerks of our respective Parliaments, who have done a great deal of work in organising this meeting and ensuring that it would be successful. They do a great deal of work and prepare good bolts for us to fire, and we must recognise that.

Cecilia Keaveney, who sadly is not here, gave a completely different interpretation to the idea of a politician on the fiddle last night; she was very good, and the craic was great. Jim Mulkerrins was another of our guests. It is sad to think that he will not be gracing us again in the future, but when he was Clerk of the Irish side he was extremely good.

This is also the last visit of that well-known English-Irish family, the Obornes. John is going into retirement, and we will miss him and his good-tempered dealing with some irascible Members on occasion. We are also indebted to his wife for her work in helping in that arduous task of accompanying her husband to examine future venues for the delegation. There are some sacrifices that people make for the Body that we must appreciate.

I thank colleagues for taking part in the debate. To those who are still here and have lasted it out — although we know that colleagues have good reasons for returning to their own Parliaments — I will say that this has been a very successful few days. The quality of the debate has been extremely good. We have thumped the Steering Committee as only it deserves to be thumped — and I say

that as a member of the Steering Committee. We are, in fact, going to form our own organisation, which will be known as the Andrew Mackinlay Hate Squad.

A Member: There is a queue.

Mr Kevin McNamara MP: Somebody said that there is a queue to join.

Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP: I did it for Ireland.

[Laughter].

Mr Kevin McNamara MP: Yes. Last night, all of us were dining for Ireland.

It is important that the Steering Committee should be kept on its toes and that we should get flows of new ideas and suggestions. We hope that, having heard as much as we have during yesterday and today, we will be able to bring good ideas to the Body, taking up suggestions and finding ways to implement what Members want. The Steering Committee exists to ensure that the thing works smoothly and that delegates feel that their interests and wishes are being considered and that their ideas to improve the Body are examined. Unlike Cabinets, the Steering Committee actually wants to listen to Back-Benchers and carry out their wishes, which is a complete change of philosophy and ideas from normal democratic Parliaments, but we will do our best.

Thank you all very much indeed. Thanks to all those whom I have mentioned, and if I have inadvertently omitted any person — yes, I should have mentioned the people working the microphones — I apologise and trust that you will forgive me.

The Co-Chairman (Mr David Winnick MP): I would like to thank my Co-Chair, Brendan, for the very able way in which he has presided over our proceedings, as usual. I echo all that Kevin has said about the generosity and hospitality of the Irish side.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Brendan Smith TD): Thank you, David. I reiterate the words of thanks and appreciation to John Hamilton and Alda Barry, the joint Clerks, for so efficiently organising this plenary conference. I also thank their support staff; Veronica Carr had to do most of the work in arranging today's proceedings.

I thank the officials from the different delegations, the embassies and the Department of Foreign Affairs who have been with us for the past few days. We appreciate their ongoing work and support for the Body.

I also thank Deputy Jim O'Keeffe and local officials from the tourist authority and the County Council for their assistance in hosting this plenary in Clonakilty. A word of appreciation also goes to David for his co-operation, help and advice in running this session.

I now declare closed the 28th plenary session of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body. The Body will next meet in plenary session in the UK from 17 October to 19 October.

Adjourned at 12.58 pm.

Written Answers to Questions

The following questions were not answered during Oral Answers to Questions on Monday 19 April owing to time constraints, and accordingly received a written answer.

Agriculture and Food

6. **Mr Tony Killeen TD** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food to outline recent initiatives in North/South cooperation in the area of Agriculture and Food.

The Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mr Joe Walsh TD): Under the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, in addition to the North/South Ministerial Council and the implementation bodies, six areas were identified for co-operation between existing Government Departments. One of those areas was agriculture. What was meant by co-operation in this regard was that, effectively, common policies and approaches in these areas would be agreed, but implemented separately in each jurisdiction.

Before the suspension of the Assembly, the agriculture sector of the NSMC had progressed:

- the development of an all-island Animal health strategy
- the development of an all-island plant health and research strategy, including co-operation between both jurisdictions in relation to plant protection products.
- liaison on issues arising at WTO, EU enlargement and the mid-term review of the CAP.

Since the suspension of the Assembly in Northern Ireland, co-operation has been continued on a “care and maintenance basis”. However, this has not had any detrimental effect on relations between my Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and I will briefly outline progress to date in the areas that I have mentioned. In a separate question I will deal with developments in the Animal Health sector.

I am pleased to report that progress has been very good on both the plant health and pesticides sides. Areas for co-operation have been identified and meetings, workshops, et cetera, have taken place or are planned, and a structure has been put in place to continue co-operation. In the pesticides area, contacts were further developed and maintained. The first phase of a four-year cycle of usage surveys for plant protection products, conducted on an all-island basis, was initiated. The first phase is due for completion this year and relates to use on grassland and forage crops.

In relation to the liaison on EU and world trade issues, the position is that DARD in Northern Ireland and my Department have taken somewhat different approaches to the single payment issue. Nevertheless, I have agreed with Minister Pearson to set up a working group to consider cross-compliance issues arising from the implementation of the mid-term review, given the desirability of taking a joint approach to this within the island. As you are

probably aware, the detailed rules for the implementation of the single payment system have been recently agreed. These are quite complex, and I would expect that these would also be the subject of discussions between DARD and my Department.

In addition to those areas in which co-operation is formalised, there is considerable contact between the two Departments in other areas in particular:

- farmer training
- organic farming and
- crop-variety testing.

Immigration and Asylum Applications

10. **Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food whether he will make a statement on discussions between the Republic, the UK and the immigration authorities of the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man in order to achieve and maintain parity of (a) controls and inspection as regards immigration and (b) the treatment of asylum applications in order to maintain the integrity of our common travel area.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: Ireland and the United Kingdom have operated an arrangement for many years known as the “common travel area”. Both states co-operate to ensure that their respective immigration procedures prevent persons from being allowed to land at the first port of entry if they would not be allowed to enter the other state and if it is suspected that they are likely to exploit the common travel area in order to do so illegally. As a result, citizens of both jurisdictions enjoy passport-free travel within the common travel area. We recognise that the common travel area with the UK is of enormous value and relevance to this state.

With regard to immigration controls and inspections, close co-operation with the immigration authorities in the UK is obviously an essential element in combating illegal immigration and maintaining the integrity of our common travel area. The Garda National Immigration Bureau has established effective operational co-operation with immigration and police authorities in the UK and a Garda liaison officer has been assigned permanently to London for the purpose of interacting with relevant UK personnel on immigration and trafficking matters. The officer plays a critical role in maintaining liaison between our immigration and police services on issues concerning illegal immigration and in particular on liaison between police and immigration services at ports and airports.

The Government recognise that maintaining effective liaison with the UK is important in identifying immigration trends and flows and other immigration-related activities. To that end, therefore, there is regular contact between the relevant officials of both jurisdictions to discuss matters of mutual interest, including further co-operation in immigration matters generally.

In regard to asylum applications in Ireland, applicants are dealt with in accordance with the provisions of the Refugee

Act 1996, as amended. The Act provides a strong foundation for meeting Ireland's obligations under the 1951 Geneva Convention, to which the state is fully committed. The scope of the Act is wide-ranging, dealing as it does with first-instance decisions, appeals, the right to legal representation and providing specifically for a direct contribution to be made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to the determination process.

In relation to other EU member states, including the UK, Ireland participates fully in the application of the Dublin II Regulation (Council Regulation (EC) No 343/2003 of 18 February 2003 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national) and the EURODAC Regulation (Council Regulation No 2725/2000 of 11 December 2000 concerning the establishment of "Eurodac" for the comparison of fingerprints for the effective application of the Dublin Convention).

Ireland maintains ongoing contacts with the UK in relation to asylum issues generally and legislative initiatives on asylum having regard, inter alia, to changes in legislation in the UK.

Challenges for Europe's Atlantic Edge

11. **Mr Mike German AM** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food what are the shared challenges of enlargement to Europe's Atlantic edge.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: This forthcoming enlargement of the European Union constitutes one of the most exciting and positive developments since the foundation of the EEC in 1957. Each country has made enormous efforts to qualify for membership, and their hard work has been recognised in the annual reports published by the European Commission and endorsed by the member states of the EU.

Geographically, we are located far from the 10 new countries that will be joining the EU in a few weeks' time. We have relatively few historical connections with the central and eastern European countries. However, it is a reflection on the dramatic changes which have happened in Europe over the past decade that we have become more involved and affected by this, the most ambitious enlargements of the EU.

By enhancing the stability and security of these countries, all EU member states can enjoy better chances for peace and prosperity. A strong and united Europe is more important than ever before to ensure peace, security and freedom.

We also stand to gain much from a greatly expanded marketplace. Assured and free access to that new market will bring substantial opportunities. The potential for improved employment prospects, as a result of this enhanced trade, is also very significant. The decision by Governments on both these islands on Europe's Atlantic edge to extend

the right to work here from the first day of accession to the citizens of the new members shows that we also consider that they have an important contribution to make to the further development of our economies.

The addition of a large number of member states with whom we have interests in common is to our advantage. We are already aware of this synergy and co-operation in the deliberations on the Convention on the Future of Europe and the subsequent Intergovernmental Conference on the Constitutional Treaty.

All-Island International Soccer Team

12. **Senator Paschal Mooney** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food whether, as a result of the success of the Irish rugby team, which is representative of the island of Ireland, he would consider joining with his colleague Mr Brian Cowen TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and/or Mr John O'Donoghue TD, Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, in initiating a dialogue between the Irish Football Association and the Football Association of Ireland towards the eventual establishment of an international soccer team representing the island of Ireland and so end the historic split between the two associations.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: Responsibility for the administration and organisation of the various sports in Ireland, including issues related to national teams, rests entirely with the governing bodies of these sports.

Any question, therefore, of establishing an all-island international soccer team would be a matter in the first instance for the governing bodies concerned, the Football Association of Ireland and the Irish Football Association, and is not one in which the Ministers mentioned by the Senator could become involved.

Loyalist and Republican Paramilitary Violence

13. **The Lord Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food, in view of the increasing levels of Loyalist and Republican paramilitary violence, what further action is needed to counteract such outrages in addition to the scrutiny being undertaken by the International Monitoring Commission (IMC).

Mr Joe Walsh TD: The Government have repeatedly stated that there is no place for the use and threat of paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland. The operation of paramilitary organisations is clearly contrary to the democratic will of the people and erodes the primacy of politics reflected in the Good Friday Agreement.

The Government have consistently called on members of all paramilitary groups to end all illegal activities, and to make the definitive transition to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. Working towards this goal has been a crucial element in the Government's overall approach to the peace process.

The Government has also consistently stated that the full rigours of the law will be brought to bear against those who continue to engage in the destructive agenda of paramilitarism and sectarianism. Combating the illegal activities of paramilitary groupings is a top priority and remains a focus for the close security co-operation between the two Governments.

The Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland have had much success in reducing the capacity of paramilitary organisations to carry out illegal activities. There is also tremendous co-operation between the Criminal Assets Bureau and the Assets Recovery Agency, borne out by the inroads they are making into the funding of paramilitary groupings.

The Taoiseach has made clear that there can be no half-way house between violence and democracy, nor can there be a comfortable resting place between exclusion and partnership. We will therefore continue to work with all parties to bring an end to paramilitarism in the context of our overall efforts to put the Good Friday Agreement on a stable and lasting footing.

The IMC report will be published by both Governments on the 20 April.

Draft European Constitution

14. **Mr David Melding AM** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food to update the Body on prospects for completion of the draft European Constitution.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: In fulfilment of our mandate from December, the Irish presidency submitted a report to colleagues on prospects for progress in the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) ahead of the meeting of the European Council in March. This report provided a basis for the discussion among Heads of State and Government.

In the report, we set out our assessment following the intensive process of consultation which has been under way since the start of the year. We said that there continues to be consensus on the importance and value of the proposed constitutional treaty and that there is a strong shared sense of the desirability of concluding negotiations as soon as possible. There is a widespread view that delay would make agreement more difficult to achieve. We also said that we expected that an overall solution covering all remaining points of difficulty could be found if there is sufficient political will and flexibility.

In presenting the report at the meeting, the Taoiseach outlined further our general approach to some of the key outstanding issues.

On the Commission, he expressed our view that the mutually valid requirements for effectiveness and legitimacy can be met and that this can be done through maintaining, for an extended period, a Commission comprising one national of each member state, moving thereafter to a reduced size.

On voting in the Council of Ministers, the Taoiseach set out our assessment that only a system based on double majority can command consensus and that it should be possible to reach an outcome that meets the concerns of all through some adjustment of the population and member state thresholds and through arrangements for confirmation of the transition from the current system.

On the European Parliament, he said that it should be possible to reach consensus on a modest increase in the minimum threshold of seats per Member State.

He did not ask colleagues to discuss these matters in detail. However, he did ask partners to commit themselves to a firm timescale for agreement.

The presidency report was warmly welcomed by partners. Following a very positive and constructive discussion, the European Council reaffirmed its commitment to reach agreement and, on the basis of the presidency's report, requested the presidency to continue its consultations and as soon as appropriate to arrange for the resumption of formal negotiations in the IGC. It decided that agreement should be reached no later than the June European Council.

This is very welcome and positive progress. However, we are far from complacent. A considerable amount of work remains to be done if agreement on the constitutional treaty is to be reached under the Irish presidency. If we are to resolve all outstanding issues, everyone will need to approach the task with a shared spirit of compromise and flexibility.

It is not yet possible to say with certainty that agreement will be achieved by June. However, I can assure the Body that the Government will continue to do everything they can to facilitate and encourage a successful outcome.

PEACE II

15. **Mr Jimmy Devins TD** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food whether it is the intention of both Governments to support, at EU level, an extension of the Peace and Reconciliation Programme.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: The existing EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (known as PEACE II) is a unique EU-funded programme for all of Northern Ireland and the border region of Ireland (the six counties of Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo).

PEACE II aims to help Northern Ireland become a peaceful and stable society and to promote reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the border region of Ireland. The programme runs from 2000 to 2004 and will provide around 707 million euros for projects of which 141 million euros will be spent in the border region. The EU contribution is 531 million euros. The programme represents a continuation of PEACE I, which covered the period 1995 to 1999 and to which the EU contributed 500 million euros.

The Government believe that PEACE II and its predecessor PEACE I have been of great benefit in

supporting the peace process in Ireland. For this reason, the Government, alongside our colleagues in Northern Ireland and Britain, are currently exploring with the European Commission the possibility of securing an extension to the current PEACE programme so that this very valuable work can be consolidated.

Monserrat

16. **Mr Jeff Ennis MP** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food whether the Irish Government are considering giving any financial aid or assistance to Montserrat.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: Montserrat's tourism industry was severely affected by a series of major volcanic eruptions during the late 1990s. In 2000, the former Chief Minister of Montserrat, Mr David Brandt, visited Ireland. He met representatives from Development Cooperation Ireland (DCI) and requested assistance in rebuilding the island's tourism industry. In 2001, a grant of 190,461 euros was allocated by the Department of Foreign Affairs (Development Cooperation Ireland) to the authorities in Montserrat for assistance in the development of a national tourism strategy document for the island. It was agreed with the Chief Minister at the time that the follow-up and implementation of this strategy document would be a matter for the Monserrat authorities.

Cross-Border Rail Services

17. **Ms Cecilia Keaveney TD** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food, given that the Department of Transport and the Department for Regional Development co-operate on projects to the benefit of both jurisdictions and that several opportunities for co-operation have been identified including the further development of cross-border rail services, how a Dublin–Derry train service will be realised if the current threat to close the line from Derry to Coleraine is allowed to happen; and if he will make a statement.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: The strategic rail review provides a strategic policy framework for the future development of the rail passenger and rail freight sectors in Ireland. The recommended investment strategy in the review will form an input for all major decisions in rail investment over the next 20 years.

As part of the work of the review, a public consultation process was undertaken. The Minister for Transport understands that no proposals were submitted for a direct service between Dublin and Derry nor did the review make a recommendation for such a service. However, the Minister has asked the implementation group on the review to consider the proposal in conjunction with the relevant authorities in Northern Ireland.

The implementation group has not yet reported to the Minister. The Minister proposes to raise the matter in any meeting he may have with his counterpart in Northern Ireland.

Fuel Smuggling

18. **Mr Harry Barnes MP** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food whether he will make a statement on measures taken and measures proposed to curtail paramilitary groups raising funds from fuel smuggling and from the excise differential on fuel between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: Smuggling is a phenomenon which has been prevalent in border areas for a long number of years. By its nature, it is difficult to quantify.

It is known that paramilitary organisations have become involved in acts of organised crime and in aiding persons involved in criminal activities. In particular, it is the case that dissident Republicans are primarily funded by smuggling activities in border areas, although individuals and "ordinary" criminal gangs are also involved in such operations. Criminal and subversive elements along the border, particularly around the Armagh area, are known to smuggle tobacco and alcohol products from Africa, Asia and Europe on a commercial basis. Seizures of tobacco products over the past few years have indicated that the quantities involved can yield substantial profits on investments. Diesel smuggling is also prevalent, and diesel laundering facilities — whose function is to remove the dye from agricultural diesel — have been discovered. Other smuggled commodities include beer, spirits, CDs and electrical goods.

Primary responsibility in this area rests with our customs and excise organisation, but the Garda Síochána makes every effort to disrupt and prevent such activities.

As regards the issue of excise duties on fuel, oil revenues provide an important source of funding for the Exchequer, which amounted to about 1.7 billion euros from excise duties collected on mineral oils in 2003. Consequently, oil fraud and smuggling figure prominently in any threat assessment carried out by the Revenue Commissioners. While the Revenue Commissioners do not have any direct role in tackling paramilitary groups raising funds from oil smuggling, which is a matter for the gardaí and the PSNI, it does have a primary role in protecting all sources of revenue from fraud irrespective of whether the perpetrators are paramilitary groups, criminal gangs or individual smugglers or fraudsters.

A limited cross-border survey of prices carried out by the Revenue Commissioners on 12 February 2004 indicated that while petrol and auto diesel were dearer in Northern Ireland by about 26 cents and 36 cents per litre respectively, kerosene and home-heating diesel (both of which are marked for non-auto use) were dearer in the South by approximately 117 euros and 83 euros per 1,000 litres respectively.

Given the higher rates of excise duty and consequently higher prices of petrol and auto diesel in Northern Ireland, there is no evidence of smuggling of such products from

the North of Ireland into the South. However, there is clear evidence that the sale and distribution of laundered oil is posing problems within both jurisdictions. Nine large-scale commercial oil laundries were detected here in 2003 and a further three laundries have been detected so far in 2004. The marked gas oil required for laundering is sourced on both sides of the border and the resultant laundered oil is also distributed both North and South of the border.

A number of successful prosecutions have taken place, and other prosecutions are pending. In addition, covert checks are carried out on both retail outlets and oil distributors to ascertain where the oil is being sold or distributed as auto diesel. In one operation conducted last year, laundered oil was detected in nine filling stations and three oil companies. It was also being used by five hauliers. Prosecutions are pending in these cases.

Meanwhile, the revenue authorities on both sides of the border continue to exchange information and intelligence in connection with such activities and to provide assistance on a reciprocal basis as requested. These include specific cross-border operations which occur on an ongoing basis. There is also ongoing co-operation and exchanges between the gardai and the PSNI.

Task Force and Policy Regarding Emigrants

19. **Ms Liz O'Donnell TD** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food whether he will address the isolation and poverty experienced by elderly Irish emigrants living in the United Kingdom, outline the funding and activities currently provided by the Irish Government and address his response to the task force on policy regarding emigrants report and the call therein for increased funding by the Irish Government; and if he will make a statement.

24. **Senator Brian Hayes** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food how many of the recommendations in respect of the recent task force on policy regarding emigrants have been acted upon by his Government and to state the total level of support given by the Irish Government to groups working with older Irish emigrants living in Britain; and if he will make a statement.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I propose to answer questions 19 and 24 together.

The Government have been providing assistance to Irish emigrants in Britain for many years. Britain continues to have the largest number of Irish emigrants and the largest proportion of vulnerable emigrants who require special assistance and support. The largest share of the resources provided by the Government for welfare services for the Irish abroad is, accordingly, allocated to Britain.

The total amount allocated by the Díon Committee since 1984 is now almost 18 million euros. More than half of this has been allocated since the present Government took office in 1997. The Díon fund has increased by more than 350% since 1997.

In 2003, 57 organisations received Díon grants totalling 2,573,000 euros. This was 5% less than the total allocated in 2002. However, later in the year this was corrected when a further 150,000 euros was allocated directly to the Federation of Irish Societies in London from savings. This brought the total allocation to emigrant services in Britain to €2,723,000 in 2003, representing overall a slight increase (15,000 euros) on the 2002 figure.

In 2003, 873,000 euros was spent on projects to support older Irish in Britain and 119,000 euros on projects for returning emigrants. This represents 43% of the Díon fund in 2003. Several of these projects involve social activities which have added health benefits, helping older people to continue to live independently for longer. In addition, older Irish people have access to welfare organisations assisted by the Díon fund, which provide advice on welfare and health benefits available to them.

This year, the Díon Fund will increase by a further 30% to 3.57 million euros. Included in this amount is funding for a project by the Federation of Irish Societies to provide greater support to their affiliated organisations to improve their capacity to manage their services and secure funding from local sources in the UK. This capacity-building support is vital to enable the Irish welfare agencies to make the most effective use of the funds provided by the Government and to assist them in broadening the base of their funding to encompass other available sources.

As regards the implementation of the report, action is currently being taken on over two thirds of the recommendations. Some of the recommendations fall within the areas of responsibility of other Departments and the Minister for Foreign Affairs has asked those Departments to examine them to determine what progress has already been made in implementing them. In this regard, I would like to mention that my colleague the Minister for Social and Family Affairs organised a presidency conference on reconciling mobility and social inclusion at the beginning of this month to implement the recommendation that the Government give priority to the link between migration and social exclusion during our presidency of the EU.

As regards other recommendations, the following examples will illustrate the progress that is being made.

- A key recommendation of the task force was that all funding for emigrant services abroad should be brought together under the Department of Foreign Affairs. This was done last year with the transfer of the Díon Fund from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.
- The Minister for Foreign Affairs secured an additional provision of 1 million euros in the Vote for Foreign Affairs for services to emigrants in 2004. This brings the overall expenditure by the Department on emigrant services this year to just over 4 million euros, an increase of one third on 2003.

- The task force recommended that financial assistance be given to the Emigrant Advice Network (EAN), the umbrella group for voluntary agencies providing information and advice to potential emigrants, to enable it to provide more effective support to its member agencies. The Minister for Foreign Affairs recently announced that part of the additional funds made available this year will be allocated for this purpose.
- The task force also recommended that the Government continue their political engagement with the Authorities in the United States in relation to the situation of undocumented Irish people in that country. During Minister Cowen's recent visit to Washington, he met with a number of prominent members of Congress with whom he discussed a draft Bill which would regulate the status of undocumented Irish immigrants in the United States.

As the Taoiseach mentioned in the Dáil on the 10 March, an intra-departmental group, chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs, is meeting on a fortnightly basis to monitor progress in implementing the recommendations.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs intends to establish a dedicated unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs when the EU presidency is over to work with the voluntary agencies at home and abroad to maximise the impact of our collective efforts.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs also intends that, in allocating the additional funds which he has secured, priority will be given to improving services for the neediest and the most vulnerable among our emigrants, particularly in Britain, in line with the recommendations of the task force report.

Finally, I can assure the Members that this Government will continue to implement the report of the task force and to work in partnership with the Governments of the countries concerned and with voluntary Irish agencies at home and abroad to support our emigrants overseas.

All-Ireland Youth Council

20. **Senator Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food whether he will consider endorsing an all-Ireland youth council, based on existing models of best practice in County Fermanagh and County Donegal.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: While I am not aware of the specific details of the arrangements mentioned by the Senator, I am aware of a number of initiatives taking place on a cross-border co-operative basis in the youth sector.

A major initiative at strategic level commenced a number of years ago, the North/South Youth Work Alliance, which engaged key stakeholders in the youth sector, North and South, with the aim of establishing a new entity to develop strategic relationships between the youth sectors.

In November 2001, the first meeting of the interim executive committee of the North/South Youth Work Alliance was held in Dundalk.

The membership of the interim executive committee was drawn from the following partner organisations:

- education and library boards
- Irish Vocational Education Association
- National Youth Council of Ireland
- Northern Ireland Youth Forum
- Youth Council for Northern Ireland
- YouthNet.

The context for the development of the alliance includes the deepening relationships between various youth bodies, voluntary and statutory, on a North/South basis over the past number of years. The Good Friday Agreement has also encouraged the development of common work and policy-making in the education area on a North/South basis. Developments in the youth sector, including the policy review process in the North and the Youth Work Act 2001 in the South, have also encouraged greater engagements between the various actors, North and South.

It is intended that the North/South Youth Work Alliance will work to strengthen North/South relations and mutual understanding. This will enhance the contribution that the youth sector makes to the development of young people throughout the island.

The principles underpinning the alliance include: young people as active citizens; social inclusion; partnership and co-operation; common approaches; mutual trust; equity and fairness; diversity and pluralism; interdependence; independence; participation; and good governance.

The EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland 2000-2004 (PEACE II), under priority 5, 'cross-border co-operation', provides a funding mechanism for initiatives promoting cross-border co-operation. The overall aim of the priority is to promote economic, social and cultural cross-border co-operation and to provide a strategic framework for support to cross-border strategies and projects across a variety of sectors and organisations. Measure 5 of this priority relates specifically to cross-border school and youth co-operation. Two projects covering Donegal and Fermanagh and involving schools and youth groups are currently being funded under this measure.

There are already statutory bodies — the National Youth Work Advisory Council in Ireland and the Youth Council for Northern Ireland — which provide advice on youth work issues to their respective Departments.

Having regard to the foregoing, I would consider it appropriate to await developments under the North/South Youth Work Alliance and then to review the matter in the context of the Senator's suggestion for an all-Ireland youth council.

Dundalk–Castleblayney Road

21. **Mr Seymour Crawford TD** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food whether any discussions have taken place regarding the upgrading and restructuring of the main Dundalk to Castleblayney road, running through south Armagh and serving that area as well as the Castleblayney hinterland in a direct link with the new Dundalk bypass linking either Dublin or Belfast with the region.

Has any consideration been given to the restructuring of Ballingarry Bridge, based on the Monaghan/Armagh border on this road, which is a notorious black spot. Does the Minister agree that the restructure of this road will be a major statement towards the peace process in this well-known border area; and will he make a statement.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: I must explain that the roads running through south Armagh are a matter for the Northern Ireland authorities and local authorities in the area. However, this issue will be borne in mind when the opportunity arises in discussions with our Northern Ireland counterparts.

The Ballingarry Bridge project on the N53 forms part of the national road network. Responsibility for the improvement work on it rests with the National Roads Authority (NRA) and the local authorities concerned. The NRA has overall responsibility for the planning and supervision of works for the construction and maintenance of national roads. While the Minister for Transport has responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme, the implementation of individual projects is a matter for the NRA in conjunction with the relevant local authorities.

It is understood that the NRA would be happy to be involved in the promotion of this project and would work with the Department for Regional Development (DRD) in Northern Ireland as required. In the course of discussion with DRD, the NRA has indicated its willingness to consider a contribution towards a feasibility study into the project, but that it would be premature to commit funding for construction works at this stage until the feasibility study is complete and the scope of the work required identified and costed.

All-Ireland Veterinary Protocol for Livestock Movement

23. **Mr John Ellis TD** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food whether there has been any progress with regards to an all-Ireland veterinary protocol for livestock movement.

Mr Joe Walsh TD: In late 2001, the North/South Ministerial Council commissioned a programme of work to develop closer co-operation and joint strategies for the improvement of animal health on both sides of the

border. The intention was to build on the long-standing co-operation which existed between the two Administrations on animal health and welfare matters through the development and implementation of an agreed overall strategy which would provide, as far as possible, for the convergence of the respective approaches to the prevention and control of animal disease.

At its meeting in September 2002, the North/South Ministerial Council endorsed a policy document outlining the scope and timetable for convergence of animal health policies and instructed officials to finalise discussions with the British authorities prior to final agreement on the strategy.

The programme of work was taken forward by a series of working groups at official level, which have met at regular intervals over the past two years. The work has focused on three main themes:

- common or equivalent controls at points of entry to the island
- convergence of internal animal health policies
- development of joint strategies for the control of animal disease.

The ultimate objective of an all-island animal health and welfare strategy is a policy which facilitates free movement of animals on the island, subject to EU rules. The main achievements to date are: the development of a co-ordinated and complementary approach towards import policies and portal controls at points of entry to the island; the convergence of policies in regard to scrapie and the strengthening of co-ordination; and co-operation between both Administrations on a variety of issues such as foot-and-mouth disease, BSE and cross-border fraud.

Over recent months a number of meetings were held at official level to inject fresh impetus into the process, and a position paper was produced reaffirming the objectives to be achieved. The position paper was endorsed at ministerial level in January 2004 and commits both Administrations to the ongoing process of implementation of an all-island animal health strategy. That strategy will be guided by the need to ensure consistently high standards of animal health and welfare, improved public health and an effective capacity to deal with emergencies. There is an intention on both sides to involve stakeholders in the process by means of consultation with the relevant social partners in both jurisdictions.

Ongoing work is now continuing on a wide range of issues. This work is expected to yield further milestones later in 2004 in terms of integration of the respective animal identification systems and alignment of disease-testing programmes.

