



**BRITISH-IRISH
INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY**

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

THIRTY-SECOND PLENARY CONFERENCE

24 and 25 April 2006

The Brehon Hotel, Killarney

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Final Revised Edition)

(Produced by the British-Irish Parliamentary Reporting Association)

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IN ATTENDANCE

CO-CHAIRMEN

Mr Pat Carey TD
Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP

MEMBERS AND ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

Mr John Austin MP	Mr Jeff Ennis MP	Senator Martin Mansergh
Mr Henry Bellingham MP	Mr Paul Flynn MP	Dr John Marek AM
Mr Joe Benton MP	Mr Mike German OBE AM	Senator Paschal Mooney
The Baroness Blood MBE	Mr Jim Glennon TD	Mr Arthur Morgan TD
Mr Johnny Brady TD	The Lord Gordon of Strathbane	Senator Francie O'Brien
Deputy Alan Breckon	Mr Dominic Grieve MP	Ms Liz O'Donnell TD
Rt Hon The Lord Brooke of Sutton Mandeville CH PC	Mr Robin Harper MSP	Mr Jim O'Keeffe TD
Mr John Carty TD	The Baroness Harris of Richmond	Senator Mary O'Rourke
Senator Paul Coghlan	Senator Brian Hayes	Mr Séamus Pattison TD
Mr Paudge Connolly TD	Ms Cecilia Keaveney TD	Mr Chris Ruane MP
Dr Jerry Cowley TD	Mr Séamus Kirk TD	Senator Brendan Ryan
Mr Seymour Crawford TD	Ms Julie Kirkbride MP	Mr Jim Sheridan MP
Mr Jeff Cuthbert AM	Dr Dai Lloyd AM	Mr Joe Sherlock TD
Mr Jim Dobbin MP	Mr Eddie McGrady MP	The Lord Smith of Clifton
The Lord Dubs	Rt Hon Andrew Mackay MP	Mr Iain Smith MSP
Ms Helen Eadie MSP	Mrs Rosemary McKenna CBE MP	Deputy Mike Torode
Mr John Ellis TD	Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP	Mr Robert Walter MP
Mr Damien English TD	Mr Michael McMahon MSP	

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE (FOR ALL OR PART OF PROCEEDINGS)

The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Dermot Ahern TD
Mr Nigel Dodds MP Mr Peter Robinson MP
Mr Jeffrey Donaldson MP Mrs Iris Robinson MP

STEERING COMMITTEE

<i>Co-Chairmen</i>	Mr Pat Carey TD Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP
<i>Members</i>	Mr Seymour Crawford TD The Lord Dubs Mr Séamus Kirk TD Mr Dai Lloyd AM Rt Hon Michael Mates MP Deputy Mike Torode Mr Murray Tosh MSP

OFFICIALS

<i>Joint Clerks</i>	Ms Alda Barry, British Clerk Mr Eoin Faherty, Irish Clerk
<i>Irish Policy Advisor</i>	Ms Dearbhla Doyle
<i>Delegation Clerks</i>	Mr Ian Perry (<i>Scotland</i>) Mr Peter Kellam (<i>Wales</i>) Ms Tara Wharton (<i>Ireland</i>)

Committee Clerks to the Body

<i>Committee A: Sovereign Matters</i>	Ms Dearbhla Doyle Ms Nerys Welfoot
<i>Committee B: European Affairs</i>	Mr Mike Clark Ms Elaine Hollowed
<i>Committee C: Economic</i>	Ms Dearbhla Doyle Mr Mike Hennessy
<i>Committee D: Environmental and Social</i>	Ms Audrey Nelson Ms Elaine Hollowed
<i>Secretariat</i>	Mrs Veronica Carr Sir Michael Davies KCB Mrs Amanda Healy
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BRITISH-IRISH INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY

COMHLACHT IDIR-PHARLAIMINTEACH NA BREATAINE AGUS NA hÉIREANN

THIRTY-SECOND PLENARY CONFERENCE

Monday 24 April 2006

The Body met at 9.35 am.

PLENARY BUSINESS

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): The Body is now in public session. You are all welcome. There is one small housekeeping matter to address before I begin: will all Members please switch off their mobile telephones? I know that we are all practical politicians and we cannot live easily without them, but the telephones interfere with the recording system. I would appreciate your help in that regard.

Since we met in Edinburgh, significant developments have taken place that have been important to the Body. In Edinburgh, the Body received an economic analysis from Stephen Kingon, and others, on Northern Ireland, and that analysis has proved to be an important kick-start to debate about Northern Ireland. Members will be aware that the Body focused on social and economic deprivation and that that issue was discussed in some detail by its Committees. Today and tomorrow, the Body will be told the outcomes of some of those examinations. Among the issues discussed by the Body were the implications of EU policy on the small farm sector.

There have also been significant developments on the political side. IRA decommissioning — and all that has flowed from it — has placed political debate on a new plane. The publication of the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) reports has proved to be of some reassurance to political parties in Northern

Ireland. It is fair to say that all political parties are contributing to positive and creative debate on the future governance of Northern Ireland. The statements on 6 April by Prime Minister Blair and Taoiseach Bertie Ahern have set a context for debate over the coming months. The recall of the Assembly on 15 May and the deadline of 24 November will, I have no doubt, concentrate minds enormously. There have been discussions about the reform of public administration, the education system, policing and parades. Those issues have been part of the debate, and they will inform the Body's discussions this morning.

It is important that the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) has accepted the BIIPB's invitation to make a presentation this afternoon. As Members know, the Body took a decision, on which the Steering Committee acted, to invite the DUP to make a presentation. I am pleased that the DUP representatives will be here later this afternoon to make their presentation and that we will hear their point of view.

The DUP's presentation will be followed by a question-and-answer session. There will be input from the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Dermot Ahern TD, and he will have an opportunity to answer questions already submitted by the Body. That is the context in which we meet.

Today is an important step forward for the Body, and I have no doubt that I speak for all Members when I say that I look forward to the day when all political parties associated with the Body will find it possible to take up their places around these tables. When that happens, parliamentarians who are best placed to discuss the issues of practical significance and importance to the people that they represent will be able to articulate them in a vigorous and robust way.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP): Thank you, Pat. On behalf of those of us who are not Irish delegates, may I say how pleased we are to be in such a magnificent hotel. The hospitality and warmth that we have received so far have been exceptional; I would not expect any less, but it has been the case. Co-Chairman, we are grateful to you and your colleagues for your efforts in that regard.

I do not have much to add to what Pat has said, because he has covered the ground extremely well. However, the presence of the DUP representatives and their presentation this afternoon is significant; it is a great opportunity for the Body to engage in dialogue with them. I am also glad that Dermot Ahern is attending later, and I hope that he gives us an insight into where we are with regard to the process.

The Bill being passed through Parliament this week to enable the restoration of the Assembly is very important. The absence of devolved government in Northern Ireland and the presence there of direct rule for some years — indeed, I was a direct rule Minister for five years — have been hugely difficult. Without power sharing, the Good Friday Agreement, or any agreement that tries to bring together people in Northern Ireland, is deeply flawed. It is not just a matter of people from Northern Ireland governing themselves — that must be the case in a post-devolution United Kingdom — but it is crazy that there is a National Assembly for Wales and a Scottish Parliament but the Assembly in Northern Ireland does not operate.

The continuance of direct rule would be disastrous for the Good Friday Agreement or for any other agreement that is put forward to try to solve the problems of Northern Ireland. All parties, irrespective of whether they support the agreement, understood the significance of power sharing and the need for devolution. Therefore the opportunity given to the Governments and the parties in Northern Ireland makes the time from now until 24 November one of the most important periods in the history of the process — although everybody hopes that a resolution can be reached before the summer.

I hope and pray that all parties grasp that reality and that the mutual trust and confidence that are required to restore the Assembly and the Executive are created. A generation of politicians in Northern Ireland has emerged in the past decade as a consequence of the agreement, and it would be tragic if they were not allowed to govern their own part of the world in the way that they determine rather than have it governed by politicians from the United Kingdom for whom nobody in Northern Ireland casts a vote.

Therefore the months ahead are extremely important, and I hope that when the BIIPB next meets, we will be well down the road to the restoration of the Assembly and to the resolution of this final, but hugely significant, hurdle that has to be overcome.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you, Paul. I should have said this at the beginning, but may I remind Members that the proceedings of the Body do not attract parliamentary privilege.

TRIBUTES TO MARGARET EWING MSP, MO MOWLAM MP AND LORD MERLYN-REES

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP):

We will move on to the next item. Members, I know, were saddened to hear of the recent death of Margaret Ewing MSP, and I propose that the Co-Chairman, Paul Murphy, and Iain Smith MSP, pay tribute to Margaret.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP):

It was terribly sad to hear of Margaret's recent death; like many of my colleagues I served in Parliament with her for several years. She was a doughty Scotswoman who stood up for social justice and for her country. My own memory of her is from the last time I saw her when the Body met in Edinburgh. We sat at the same table and discussed all manner of things. She was very vigorous and did not in any way seem unwell, although obviously she was. Her death leaves a great gap in Scottish — and, for that matter, British and Irish — politics. On behalf of the Body, I send her family, friends and constituents our condolences and most sincere sympathy.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you, Paul.

Mr Iain Smith MSP: I thank the Body and Co-Chairman Paul Murphy for those kind words about Margaret. Everyone in the Scottish Parliament would like to thank the Body for taking time to think of her. Margaret Ewing was a committed parliamentarian during her years at Westminster and the Scottish Parliament. She was committed to her constituents in Moray and fought hard for them. Irrespective of political views, she did not have an enemy in the political world and was regarded with deep fondness by everyone who met her.

She was committed to Parliament's international work, and was heavily involved, through the Scottish Parliament, in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, as well as the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, and she continued that work despite her illness. She visited Malawi last year and continued to be a full participant in this Body, despite her illness. We will, of course, ensure that Members' kind remarks are passed on to her family at this time. Margaret will be deeply missed, not only by the Scottish Parliament but by all in this Body.

9.45 am

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you very much, Iain. I too want to be associated with those remarks. I did not know Margaret well, but I know of her contribution to the work of this Body

and the huge contribution she made to Scottish politics. She was deeply committed, despite her long and difficult illness, which she bore with characteristic bravery. She worked hard on behalf her own constituents, as Iain Smith said, and on behalf of the party that she loved so well. We are saddened by her loss and extend our sympathies to her family.

Two other people associated with the Body have recently passed away. I call on Lord Dubs to pay tribute to Mo Mowlam, the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who played a huge role in developing the Northern Ireland peace process as we know it.

The Lord Dubs: I had the privilege of serving under Mo for her first two years as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I am conscious, as we all are, that her contribution shaped the pattern of politics in Northern Ireland for the better. It would be a fitting tribute if, as Paul Murphy said, the institutions were restored this year.

I am reminded of several incidents from Mo's life; I will mention only one or two. When asked what was the most embarrassing moment in her political life, she said that it was the day the opinion polls made her out to be more popular than the Prime Minister — the same day that he was arriving in Belfast to meet her. There was also that famous moment, now firmly in the political annals, when Tony Blair was making his big speech to the Labour Party conference. He mentioned Mo Mowlam, and the whole conference gave her a standing ovation. And, as Tony Blair said himself, that was the first time in history that a standing ovation had been given during a speech to a person not giving the speech. That was quite a first.

She made an enormous contribution. One thing that was not mentioned in the many tributes that were paid to her in London was her wish to open the Stormont Estate to the wider public. Elton John played a fantastic concert there, and people came from all over Ireland and elsewhere to attend it. It was her aim to make Stormont and the entire estate accessible to ordinary people and to make them feel that the whole process was something that was for them and that affected them.

Of course, there were aspects of Mo's personal style — some of the language that she used was perhaps not appropriate for this Body, but was typical of the great character that she was and how she was respected and loved by so many people in Northern Ireland. Towards the end of her time as Secretary of State, she and the Unionists fell out; we could discuss why that happened, but it made things difficult for her. She was very dis-

appointed when she was moved away from Northern Ireland to another Cabinet portfolio.

Her contribution has not yet been fully assessed. In time, people — a wider audience than this Body — will realise just what an enormous contribution she made; her bravery in going into the Maze, in the face of much advice that she should not, in order to save the peace process, and the many other ways in which she contributed to a more peaceful society in Northern Ireland.

There are people alive today in Northern Ireland who owe their lives to the enormous contribution that Mo made.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you, Lord Dubs. Another eminent personality and former Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Lord Merlyn-Rees, passed away recently. Lord Peter Brooke will pay tribute to Lord Merlyn-Rees.

The Lord Brooke: As Merlyn belonged to an earlier generation, I will say something about his background. He was born a Welshman and remained devoted to his Welsh roots. He returned to live in Wales when he was in the House of Lords and when he was suffering from Parkinson's disease. His family came to England to find work between the wars and, after the war, Merlyn taught at Harrow Weald Grammar School where, for the benefit of British Members of the Body, both Diane Abbott and Michael Portillo were pupils.

During the war he served in the RAF and rose to the rank of squadron leader. He found a parliamentary seat in the north of England in 1963 and became as devoted to Leeds as he already was to Wales, and as he was to become to Northern Ireland. He served as a junior Minister in the Wilson Administration in the late 1960s, becoming Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as soon as the Labour Government returned to power in February 1974, when he inherited the Sunningdale Agreement.

His greatest political virtue and lodestar was a constant conviction in the powers of reason and goodwill. However, by the time he took office the circumstances were too dire, given the troubles on the one hand and the Protestant industrial strikes on the other, which invalidated the powers of reason and goodwill at that stage. Like so many others during the troubles, he did his very best in what were then infertile times.

He was always close to Jim Callaghan — indeed, his political career was founded on that relationship. In early 1976 he was promoted to be a most competent Home Secretary, a position he retained until 1979, and which became his final office in the Government after Mrs Thatcher's victory. He was

half a generation older than me, but we were always good friends — not least while serving on this Body. He was a most steadfast man, deeply happy in his marriage to his wife, Colleen, and those of us who knew him and shared his friendship were lucky to have done so.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you, Lord Brooke. I wish to be associated with your comments.

Members will rise for a moment of silence.

Members observed one minute's silence.

NEW MEMBERS

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): There have been a few membership changes since the last meeting of the Body. From Jersey, Deputy Alan Breckon has replaced Deputy Maurice Dubras, and Daniel Joseph Murphy has replaced Senator Frank Walker as an Associate Member. From Wales, Glyn Davies has replaced David Melding. Jeff Cuthbert and Alan Cairns have replaced Brian Gibbons and Glyn Davies as Associate Members respectively.

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): In accordance with Rule 2a, the following Associate Members have accepted the invitation of the Steering Committee to assume the powers and responsibilities of Members for the whole of the session: Senator Paul Coghlan and Paudge Connolly TD for Ireland; Joe Benton MP, Jim Dobbin MP, Lord Gordon, Baroness Harris, Julie Kirkbride MP and Jim Sheridan MP for the United Kingdom; Helen Eadie MSP, Michael McLean MSP and Robin Harper MSP for Scotland; and Jeff Cuthbert AM for Wales.

At the conclusion of Item 3, there will be the usual group photograph at 3.30 pm.

PROGRAMME OF BUSINESS

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): The next item on the Agenda is the adoption of the proposed programme of business. I move that the proposed order of business be adopted.

Programme of Business agreed.

On a slightly happier note, I am sure that Members will join me in wishing Mr Séamus Pattison TD — I do not know whether he is here or not — a belated happy seventieth birthday.

[Applause.]

It would be extremely helpful if those who wish to speak on the political motion and have not already given their names to the Clerks could do so as soon as possible or could otherwise indicate to the Chair that they wish to speak.

RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Agenda item 2 is the motion on recent political developments, and I call on Mr Seymour Crawford TD to move the motion formally and open the debate.

Mr Seymour Crawford TD: I beg to move

That this Body acknowledges that significant progress has been made over the past year, including decommissioning of IRA weapons; notes that the two Governments are convinced that the IRA no longer poses a terrorist threat; recognises that ongoing concerns about criminality need to be addressed and urges all communities to support policing structures; calls on loyalist and dissident republican paramilitary groups to cease all paramilitary and criminal activity and decommission their arms; underlines the need to avoid a prolonged political vacuum; welcomes, in this context, the 6 April initiative by the two Governments to set out an agreed strategy for the restoration of the Assembly and devolved Government; recognises that the prospects for a peaceful and prosperous future for Northern Ireland are best served by devolved, power-sharing government as provided for in the Good Friday Agreement; looks forward to the recall of the Assembly on 15 May; urges the parties to take full advantage of this opportunity to engage in dialogue with a view to an early agreement on the election of a First Minister and Deputy First Minister, formation of an Executive and restoration of the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement; encourages and fully supports the ongoing work to develop North/South co-operation in the best interests of both parts of the island and east-west relations for the benefit of all the people on these islands.

Mr Chairman, on behalf of the Fine Gael party and myself, I welcome the initiative by Prime Minister Blair and Taoiseach Ahern. It is vital that on 15 May all parties use this opportunity in a positive and constructive way. Time is not on our side. Recent discussions that I have had with people from Northern Ireland make it clear that many housing estates are becoming more polarised, and young people now getting involved in certain structures do not have knowledge of the murders and events that brought about the deaths of over 3,000 people. Some may get involved in issues that they will later regret. It is vital that there is proper engagement, that all parties commit themselves at this point in time to an inclusive situation, even if that means some flexibility. The Good Friday Agreement is a vital document, and has brought about much change. But we must not allow technicalities to block us in putting in place positive structures, and I believe that there must be goodwill on all sides.

Progress of great significance has been made since we last met, and none more so than in the area of decommissioning of IRA arms. On many occasions at meetings such as this I have emphasised the fact that that was necessary — not because arms could not be got again, but because it was written into, and part of, the agreement. Agreements like that must be honoured. However, there is a need

for movement on the Loyalist side, and from the breakaway Republican, IRA-type groups.

10.00 am

There was a serious upsurge in Loyalist violence in the summer of 2005, leading to deaths mainly due to internal feuds. In recent days we have also had the spectacle of bombs being prepared by splinter groups on the Republican side. It is vital that the police forces North and South have the opportunity to stop this type of activity. Bombs can only cause mayhem, loss of life, and continued problems in Northern Ireland and the border region.

To this end, policing is vital. My party and I strongly believe that there is a need for total involvement in the new Policing Board, which was set up on 1 April. I beg Sinn Féin to take up their seats in that body. I believe that they can do a better job by being involved in the structures of that body than from outside. There has been much progress in the PSNI, and a great intake of people from the Catholic side. These are all positive steps, and can only be helped by Sinn Féin, as the larger political body on that side of the divide in Northern Ireland, taking up their places. I know that they still claim that they have reasons not to, but the future of the peace process is much more important than any individual problem there might be.

Criminality is one of the other issues that must be dealt with. It is in that context that I believe that the involvement of all sections of the police force is vital. I welcome the recent involvement between the Garda Síochána and the PSNI in trying to deal with oil laundering and other issues in the border region. In my own county of Monaghan, one of the bigger debts that the council has to deal with is due to the disposal of laundered by-product. This is a very dangerous product, which has been left on the side of the road, and in one case recently, right beside a community centre on a holiday weekend when a lot of children were about. It is not just about the cost of getting rid of this product, but also the danger that it may cause to individuals or to the environment.

On that issue, the gardaí and PSNI jointly revealed the oil-laundering business and others; that took place, and we were able to see that in the papers.

I say this with hesitance, but it has to be said, the one thing that annoyed me about the issue was that the Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams, spoke out on behalf of Mr Murphy, who was one of the people involved, while, at the same time, he condemned criminal activity. Quite bluntly, we cannot have it both ways. Criminal activity must stop, and the only way that can happen is through proper involvement of the gardaí and the police. Recently, property was

seized, but that had nothing to do with the IRA; it was just simple criminal activity. We need to ensure that we do not stop progress simply because criminal activity continues. However, if that activity is linked to political parties, that is a different matter.

The restoration of the Assembly is vital, not only for the peace process and for ensuring an end to violence, but for prosperity and jobs in Northern Ireland, as the motion states, and also, I suggest, for counties south of the border. There has been very little international investment in jobs in the border counties of Donegal, Leitrim, Cavan and Monaghan, but this issue is vital to the whole border region. North/South co-operation is also vital in a town such as Clones, in my constituency, where the population has decreased in spite of the overall national increase. I call on our Government to ensure that everything possible is done to recognise the difficulties that such areas are up against.

Today is a historic day for this Body, and I too welcome DUP's involvement here; it is a courageous and major step forward. I hope that Unionists will soon see the importance of this type of forum, because we can only benefit by knowing what each other thinks and by trying to deal with problems that may exist. We must move forward with no hidden agenda, and we must be open with all parties, because it was hidden agendas that caused difficulties in the past, and that cannot be allowed to happen in the future.

The need for a restored Assembly has been highlighted in one area probably more than most: the rural housing problem. Those Members who are not from the Republic may be unaware of the rural housing problem which our Government have tried, with little success, to deal with, but at least they are addressing it. One issue that annoyed people from the rural areas of Northern Ireland was the decision of a British Minister to curtail rural housing simply by one stroke of a pen. That proves, if proof were needed, the need for a working Assembly in Northern Ireland where the representatives who the people have voted for decide what happens, with the full knowledge of what is needed. It is in the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland and this island that the Assembly is restored as quickly as possible. It will benefit us south of the border as well as north, through the North/South bodies. It will benefit east/west on both these islands. As we move towards 15 May, I urge all parties that this is not simply a recall of the Assembly but an opportunity that cannot and must not be missed.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you, Seymour. We have a long list of Members who wish to speak, so we recommend that remaining Members speak for about four minutes, if that is OK.

Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP: Co-Chairman, I wish to express my appreciation of the initiative shown by you and Deputy Jim O'Keeffe TD, which will culminate this afternoon in the DUP's participating in the Body — admittedly as visitors. I know that Jim put a great deal of energy into that, and you gave it rocket motors. It is a significant day for this Body, and, I hope, for political developments in Northern Ireland. Both of you have shown a degree of political ecumenism — I can barely pronounce that — and it has paid dividends. I very much appreciate it.

Looking ahead to our next plenary, which will fall at a critical time in the political process, I hope that we can again find some innovation to enable us to get the MLAs from the political parties in the Stormont Assembly here. Indeed, that may well provide a reason and an excuse — if that is the correct term — for the DUP to return. In any event, we need colleagues from the Alliance party and the small parties in Northern Ireland there. I hope that you can use your good offices and discussions with Paul Murphy and others to see that the MLA representation is here in some way or another.

Seymour Crawford referred to policing, and that is the big iceberg that has not been identified in the peace process. A tremendous amount of work remains to be done on that, politically and in every respect. It still has the potential to be used as an excuse by some bodies to block the political process. Therefore, the initiative of the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister could be aborted if the future of policing is not addressed. We should not ignore that, particularly during the next 24 hours.

I am also concerned about local government reform in Northern Ireland. At first glance people may say — including, indeed, colleagues from my country — that this is purely and exclusively a domestic matter, but that is not so. The Northern Ireland Office — which does not always get it 100% correct — has decided that the local authorities in Northern Ireland should be reduced to seven — not approximately seven, but seven. The legislation on what these local authorities should be was passed in an hour and a half in the House of Commons last week, so there has not been the normal and traditional chewing of the cud and examination of boundaries and numbers. That will have the effect of greening the west even more than it is at present, perhaps not immediately, but 10 years down the road, bearing in mind the nature of current Westminster representation for Northern Ireland. As a consequence, feelings of isolation will be reinforced for some people, particularly Unionists in the west and probably Nationalists and Republicans in the east. The Body should take some time to consider that.

We should also take some satisfaction from the fact that, since we last met, the on-the-run legislation, which was ill thought out, had to be pulled. That shows that we as parliamentarians must keep our eye on the Northern Ireland Office; its motivation is 100% sound, but its judgement is often somewhat less so. The legislation was unnecessary and inappropriate, and it had to be aborted rather late in the day.

My final point is one that was also raised by Seymour Crawford, who painted quite a broad canvas of the issue. Almost uniquely in western Europe, Northern Ireland has no environmental protection agency. I think that every other part of the UK does. The Republic of Ireland has its Environmental Protection Agency, and that is the norm elsewhere.

I do not have to tell you how important the ecosystems are, and the environment of Northern Ireland is precious to us all. However, the policeman of the environment — often the perpetrator of harm against it — has been named as the Northern Ireland Office itself. I hope that the Body — either in the Environmental and Social Committee or some other committee — will urgently examine the need for an environmental protection agency in Northern Ireland that is independent of Government. That has particular ramifications for the common sea around us and the shared concern about the environment in the border counties of the Republic and Northern Ireland.

10.15 am

Ms Liz O'Donnell TD: Earlier, we discussed and remembered the contribution of the former Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam. She would be extremely disappointed that Northern Ireland still does not have a power-sharing Executive and that a dysfunctional situation exists at the Assembly.

Today, DUP representatives are coming down to make a presentation to the Body. That is long overdue and is a welcome development. I also welcome the recent initiative of the two Governments to make a real effort to stop the drift. It is not sufficient simply to have an absence of violence in Northern Ireland. That is certainly not what we had in mind when we negotiated such a comprehensive political settlement to bring closure to the difficulties between the two countries in relation to Northern Ireland — and in Northern Ireland itself in relation to governance. Complacency has befallen the citizens of Northern Ireland on that matter.

Direct rule and the politically dysfunctional situation of part-time and part-paid MLAs is not acceptable; it is not what we had in mind and it should not be allowed to continue. I welcome the decision of the two Governments to stop ignoring the dysfunction and

to wake up the political representatives in all parties in Northern Ireland to the reality of their responsibility to get back to work, to show leadership in their communities and to take on the responsibilities of office. The cross-community power-sharing arrangement that was voted for, and agreed on, is an important aspect of the Good Friday Agreement. It is not an option; it is a key part of the settlement that a cross-community Executive would take up the responsibilities and deal with the day-to-day problems of Northern Ireland. From that point of view, I welcome the timetable that the two Governments have put in place. I urge the parties in Northern Ireland to revisit the spirit of accommodation that existed at the time of the Good Friday Agreement — both in negotiations and in the final days of the settlement — and to find courage.

Unfortunately, the deal that was finally made with the Unionist community in Northern Ireland was with a completely different party. Looking back, I think that the greatest weakness of the agreement, both in negotiations and in the final settlement, was the self-exclusion of such a significant cohort of Unionist opinion, as represented by the DUP. At the time, there was nothing that the two Governments could have done about that. For political reasons, the DUP decided to exclude itself from the negotiations and from the final settlement. That self-exclusion has had catastrophic implications on the final outcome of the agreement. It meant that moderate Unionism, with which a deal was made via the Ulster Unionist Party, was constantly under fire and sabotaged by the DUP, which was excluded from the deal.

That meant that David Trimble and his colleagues experienced great difficulties in implementing the agreement, post-Good Friday, because of constant political sabotage by the DUP. Ultimately, that led to the virtual electoral destruction of the Ulster Unionist Party, which now has only one Member of Parliament.

Another damaging outcome of the DUP's self-exclusion is that relationships that were built up with the Ulster Unionist Party never even began with the DUP. We are now at the fledgling stage in building personal trust and political relationships with the DUP. That is evidenced by the fact that its visit to the Body is seen as a big deal. Relationships are only beginning between the DUP and the other parties in Northern Ireland, and with the two Governments. Like it or not, the biggest party in representative terms in Northern Ireland is at only the early stages of engagement with the political aspects of the peace process.

We have a significant way to go in building those elements of human trust that we spent so long in developing between the parties — the Ulster Unionist

Party, in particular — and the Irish Government. The Irish Government is only starting that relationship with the DUP. However, I believe that it can be done and that we must remain optimistic and be respectful of the cultural and political views represented by the DUP. Unless that trust is built through bodies such as the BIIPB, and through bilateral meetings between the Governments and the DUP, there is no hope of forming an Executive, because it is hard to build human trust. Unless there is sufficient trust between Sinn Féin, representing the biggest Nationalist party, and the DUP, representing the biggest Unionist party, it will be difficult to see how a functioning Government in Northern Ireland can be formed.

I hope that the fact that the DUP delegation is coming here today is an indication of its willingness to take up the responsibilities of office and provide cross-party leadership in the process.

The Baroness Blood: I welcome the motion. However, when I read it, it struck me that an element seems to have been left out. If people visit Northern Ireland today, they will see that great strides have been made since the Good Friday Agreement. Northern Ireland bears no resemblance to what it was like 10 years ago. A visitor could almost be forgiven for thinking that everything is all right. However, the one element that is left out of the motion is the huge price we pay for segregation. The Secretary of State is on record as saying that that is a very high price indeed.

While we deal with important political issues, we also must deal with issues on the ground. This is Community Relations Week in Northern Ireland, and I pay tribute to those Members who were responsible for starting that initiative. We have a more deeply segregated community today than we have ever had before. That is not only the case in hardline working-class estates; even in middle-class areas, there is segregation, and people tolerate one another, but no more than that.

I would very much like to see the Assembly up and running again; things are being done in the name of Northern Ireland that, perhaps, would not be done in the same way if local people were involved. However, as we move into the political way forward, I worry that we are not taking the community along with us. As I go around Northern Ireland, I find that there is apathy about politics. If people were told that such-and-such a statement was coming out and that we were going to move forward, they would simply say, "So what?" and ask whether anything will be different.

Liz O'Donnell made the point that the DUP is the largest Unionist party now, whereas, when the

Good Friday Agreement was established, it was the UUP. That should teach the Government a lesson. During the years of negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement, there were just two main parties and everybody else was on the sidelines. As many Members will know, I was one of the founder members of the Women's Coalition, and we were very much sidelined, as was the Alliance Party. If things are to work in Northern Ireland, everyone must be on board, and we must ensure that everybody is up to date and addressing that issue.

Tributes were paid this morning to Mo Mowlam. I remember her saying, on more than one occasion, that when she came to Northern Ireland as Secretary of State she wondered whether she should put her energies into integration — not just integrated education — or into the peace process. Shortly before her death, she told me that she felt that she had made the wrong decision by going into the peace process. We must get the people on the street on board.

Although I welcome the political initiatives that will take place over the next six months — and I hope and pray that there will be some resolution by 24 November and that the institutions will be up — there is still a major problem on the streets of Northern Ireland, where this issue has not really been tackled.

The Government in Northern Ireland published a document called 'A Shared Future'. It is a lovely glossy document, with lots of lovely words, but when civil servants are pressed on how it will be implemented, they do not have a great many answers. A tremendous amount of work needs to be done outside the political process, if things are to work in Northern Ireland.

As a final thought, we have talked about the visit by members of the DUP to the Body, and I am absolutely delighted that they are here to put their point of view and that things have moved on. Five years ago, who would have thought that this visit would have been possible? I thank those Members of the Body who were involved in making this happen. It is a whole new step up.

Mr Arthur Morgan TD: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirleach.

While enjoying my discussions with fellow parliamentarians last evening and this morning, I took the opportunity to lobby British parliamentarians, in particular, on two issues important to me: first, the proposed privatisation of Sellafeld and, secondly, the ongoing energy review in Britain.

We in Ireland are extremely concerned about Sellafeld, and have been for many years. We are worried that, with huge resources from the British Government, the institution can never be controlled or kept under any environmental discipline. Surely, if it were privatised, the inclination would be for greater profit, and many of us are concerned with the environmental and health implications for Irish people in that regard.

In relation to the review of energy, I have asked a number of British parliamentarians to lobby the British Government not to authorise a whole new generation of nuclear power plants, because the waste legacy from such plants is not just incidental; it will be here for, quite literally, hundreds of years. When the sustainability principle is applied to that concept, there is no case whatsoever for another generation of nuclear power plants.

I agree almost entirely with everything that Liz O'Donnell said. I say that with some reluctance, because I do not want to destroy her political career and, given our political perspectives, I hope that that will not be the effect. I agree with almost everything that she said, with perhaps one subtle difference: trust.

Republicans have been negotiating with the British Government and, indeed, the Irish Government for some considerable time, and we have been negotiating with political parties, North and South. Frankly, I do not trust too many of them, but we can still do our job and trust can be built along the way. I am concerned that we would waste time trying to establish trust. I agree that trust is an essential element, but it will come later. We can get on with agreeing programmes of work and implementing Government policy at Executive level in the North without necessarily Ian Snr or Ian Jnr coming to dine with me in my village of Omearth.

I welcome the visit by the DUP and hope that the delegation comes with a positive message — I certainly welcome the fact that they are coming.

I am concerned that if it does not have a positive message, its long trek down this island that we all share will not be as productive as it could have been. Political leadership is needed at this time, perhaps more than ever before or at any other stage. It has not been forthcoming from the DUP, and that has been particularly disappointing for me. I hope it will not be a grandstanding session. I am, however, looking forward to it.

Seymour Crawford and Andrew Mackinlay raised the matter of an environmental protection agency for the North. That is needed urgently, but not just in the North. There should be an all-island agency, precisely because of the border. It is always going

to be difficult if there are two agencies standing back to back, one in the South and one in the North. A much more streamlined, comprehensive and productive job could be done through a single agency, so I hope that will work.

I will leave it at that as I do not want to waste time and others wish to speak. I am looking forward to the session at 2.30 pm, the one that is concentrating all our minds.

10.30 am

Mr Henry Bellingham MP: I welcome many of the remarks that have been made so far. Co-Chairman, you said that the decommissioning progress and the IMC reports have all been very positive. Nobody can take away from the very positive progress that has been made. Indeed, I would say there has been more than just significant progress. I also agree that this afternoon's delegation from the DUP is one of the most significant initiatives this Body has taken in its existence. I certainly look forward to hearing what the delegation has to say.

As far as the Assembly is concerned, I feel very strongly that we must move as quickly as possible towards its restoration. My party, the official Opposition, has been a very strong supporter of the Good Friday Agreement, and I do not think that there is anyone in my party who does not want to see the Assembly started up again. As other Members have pointed out, there is a democratic deficit in Northern Ireland and a crying need for the Assembly. We should not, however, be under any illusions about the very real obstacles in the path of its restoration.

Why was the Assembly suspended in the first place? It was suspended because of illegal activities on the part of Sinn Féin within the Assembly itself, and one should not get away from the fact that there are a number of current criminal activities being carried out by former terrorists, by former paramilitaries. I agree with Seymour Crawford, who in his very good introductory speech talked about the need for goodwill, but we need to bear in mind that as far as the breakaway Republican groups are concerned, as far as the extreme hardline paramilitary groups are concerned, there are no ambitions to go into the Assembly.

On the other hand Sinn Féin does have ambitions to go back into both the Assembly and Government, and that is why we are entitled to ask if the party is still being funded by criminal activities, if it is receiving funds from smuggling, from drugs, from protection rackets and from money laundering. It must be much more transparent and open about its finances, and I suggest that we should task the IMC to look specifically at the funding arrangements of all the parties in Northern Ireland. After all, there

is a huge debate in Westminster at the moment over the funding of political parties. It is vital that a similar discussion take place in Northern Ireland, and only third-party monitoring, oversight and proper exposure of Sinn Féin's finances will provide the comfort to the DUP that is so badly needed. Liz O'Donnell was absolutely spot on when she pointed out that the whole political situation in Northern Ireland has been transformed.

Anyone who goes into, or observes, the Westminster Parliament will see that the official Ulster Unionists no longer exist. There is one MP left. The Unionist Benches are filled by DUP Members, and that was the will of the electorate. I have no doubt at all that if Sinn Féin took their seats in the Westminster Parliament — and I wish they would — their presence would be visible straight away, because there would be more of them than there are of the SDLP on that particular part of the green Benches.

I am a born optimist, but I am very concerned, and I agree with what Baroness Blood said about the polarisation and segregation that takes place on both sides. It is a paradox. On one hand, we have had remarkable progress in Ireland, particularly in Northern Ireland — the prosperity, the goodwill, the determination among young people to get on with their lives, free of any of the nonsense we have had in the past. On the other hand, we see greater segregation and polarisation. That is why rebuilding and reinstating that trust is absolutely vital. Without that, we will not make the progress that is referred to and urged in the Motion. It must start right away — this afternoon — and that is why I look forward to what will happen during these next two days.

Mr Jim O'Keeffe TD: Co-Chairman, I am usually optimistic about developments in Northern Ireland. There has been enormous progress, and we should not forget that. The situation in Northern Ireland that we became used to, with murders and bombings and violence of all kinds, is a thing of the past. Having said that, we have to accept fully that real peace is not just the absence of violence and killings. We must ensure that the institutions are in place, and that politics are operating, to make absolutely certain that that kind of situation will never arise again and that Northern Ireland and its people can benefit from that peace.

I see a major window of opportunity at this stage. Very clearly, between May and November, that window is there for the people of Northern Ireland and, in particular, for the parties in Northern Ireland. In that context, it is great that the DUP are breaking the ice and coming along to speak to us today.

I suppose I should offer a word of caution, and I think of Arthur Morgan's comments about the DUP.

When we spoke to the DUP we put it to them very clearly that we accepted that they had a point of view. It was not a point of view that we necessarily agreed with; and the invitation to come was so that they could present that point of view, and give us the opportunity of having an understanding of it — even of questioning it — but, very importantly, as Liz O'Donnell mentioned, of respecting that position, that point of view, without any onus on our part to agree with it. I hope that that will be the tenor of our discussions later in the day.

In relation to the near future, Baroness Blood touched on one of the issues that we have to remember: the polarisation in Northern Ireland and — worse than that — the absolute apathy. We are all politicians, keen to see political institutions and committed to the idea that they are absolutely necessary. My worry is that perhaps a huge majority of the people in Northern Ireland do not necessarily share that view and, in many instances, probably could not care less whether those political institutions are put into place.

What is the consequence of that? The consequence is that it puts a real challenge to the parties. In particular, it poses a challenge to the parties in Northern Ireland. While of course we in the Republic and in Britain will all provide active encouragement and patient support, at the end of the day the deal has to be cut by the parties in Northern Ireland.

The commitment to work together has to be given by the parties in Northern Ireland. They are the people at the coalface. We are in the background to a large degree. It is necessarily going to involve a building of trust. There has to be some trust because inevitably at the end of the day there will have to be a leap of faith by all the parties in Northern Ireland to achieve the outcome that we all believe is so necessary.

That brings me to the main point I want to make. Now is going to be the real test for the parties in Northern Ireland from the point of view of political leadership. If I might mildly chide Arthur Morgan — perhaps even less so than I have done in the past — political leadership, as I see it, is not what one can stridently or otherwise expect and demand from others. At the end of the day, political leadership, I think, will be assessed on what you yourself can offer. That is where the real test will come.

Having set out their stall in initial discussions, which is the normal way, each party will then have to be prepared to see and understand the viewpoints of others and be prepared to take that leap of faith and to bring something to the table themselves. If that happens, then we are going to have a solution.

I will finish as I began. I am very optimistic because, at the end of the day, those people on that part of this island of Ireland are the people who are going to provide the answer, and I have faith and trust and confidence that they will provide the answer, and when they do we will have institutions in place that will ensure peace, stability and prosperity in Northern Ireland for the years ahead.

The Baroness Harris: First, I want to say how much I agree with my good friend, May Blood, that all the parties and society in general have got to be part of the process of coming together by 15 May. It is completely unacceptable that that has not happened in the past, and it absolutely must be done this time. Everyone must come together, and the people of Northern Ireland must say very clearly to their politicians that they want that to happen.

I would very much like to echo Seymour Crawford's comments, especially about policing, which is my main interest when I speak in the House of Lords on Northern Ireland issues. I have had 25 years' involvement with policing in England and Wales — not that the late and much lamented Gerry Fitt gave me any credit for that. In fact, he memorably told me that I knew nothing about policing in Northern Ireland — and how right he was.

I have had many conversations with the leaders of Sinn Féin about membership of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. To date, there has been absolutely no movement whatsoever on their commitment to join — in fact, quite the reverse. The arguments that they put for not being members of the Policing Board are just incredible. Their membership would make such a difference in Northern Ireland. I do urge them, finally, to say now that they will become members in their own right.

There is, as we have already heard, massive criminality in Northern Ireland. Sir Hugh Orde and the PSNI have made some excellent inroads, actually, but they need proper and substantial resources. Having seen police forces in England and Wales using up lots and lots of money, nevertheless I have been shocked at the amount that is needed for policing in Northern Ireland.

The resources that the police need could be supplemented by money that has been recovered by those policing agencies that can seize the assets of those who have been convicted in Northern Ireland. Dialogue should be entered into to move some of the money that comes from those assets into policing in Northern Ireland. I complain bitterly about that all the time, but our UK Government Ministers say that there is always sufficient money for policing. However, having seen some of the

work that the police need to do, more resources should be made available.

10.45 am

It is vital that policing remains high on the agenda and that all parties work together for a peaceful future for Northern Ireland.

Mr Joe Sherlock TD: Go raibh maith agat, a Chomh-Chathaoirligh.

Although the Labour Party hopes that, when the Assembly is recalled on 15 May, it will form an Executive immediately, the current climate suggests that that will not be the case. We therefore welcome the two Governments' signal that, in the event of the Executive not being formed, the parties have only another few months to reach agreement.

Setting such a time limit is an important step in ensuring that we will not enter a period of endless drift. Any shadow Assembly, such as that which the DUP has proposed, could potentially exist ad infinitum, with the parties merely overseeing the work of the NIO Ministers. The Labour Party wants the parties in the North to share power, not scrutiny. However, the recent suggestion that the Governments may be considering a further series of hot-house talks in the summer concerned us. Recent history has taught us that that approach has failed in the past and is likely to fail in the future.

I say to whoever is speaking on behalf of the Northern parties: remember that we in the South can quite plainly see that, despite the guns in the North being silent, society there remains bitterly divided and is becoming even more so. There is more evidence of a hardening of the divisions caused by tribal identifications between the two communities. Therefore, in parallel with the efforts to restore political institutions, all sides must make a real effort to tackle the sectarian divisions that have increased — not diminished — since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Eddie McGrady MP: Thank you for giving me the privilege of addressing this important assembly. I have no doubt that it could have an enormous influence on the outcome of the Northern Ireland talks because it is a channel that is open to all of us, and through which we can influence the Irish and British Governments.

A few random thoughts will be difficult to put together in four minutes. However, to echo what has been said, I welcome the initiative that has taken place, and I welcome last week's introduction in Westminster of the Government's new Northern Ireland Bill. That will enable the institutions to be put into a format that will enable progress.

Much has been said about trust. If both Governments are not open and clear about their dealings with the parties in Northern Ireland, trust cannot be created. Dealings behind closed doors with individual parties — as has been the case in the past, and which currently happens — will lead to further distrust.

One of the inexplicable consequences of the peace process, which I have never been able to explain, is the huge polarisation: people have voted for extremes. One would have thought, logically, that in a peaceful era the moderate parties would have held sway. The only explanation that I can come up with is that, by dealing differently with the two extremes, the British and Irish Governments gave them a prominence that, in itself, created a never-ending cycle of them and us — we gain one thing; you must get another. Such dealing creates and sustains the distrust that exists in Northern Ireland.

Notwithstanding that, this is a wonderful opportunity. I hope that all of us, from all parties, will do our best. The new dialogue into which the British and Irish Governments appear to be entering is premised on the comprehensive agreement of 8 December 2004, and I have a problem with that. It is a difficult agreement to analyse and I do not propose to do that in the two and a half minutes that are left. However, much is encapsulated in the preface to the comprehensive agreement:

“The documents presented here constitute the proposed agreement which the British and Irish Governments sent to Sinn Féin and the DUP.”

They were sent to nobody else. My party did not see the comprehensive agreement until the morning that it was published, nor did we hear anything about it; neither did the Alliance Party, the UUP or anybody else. If that is the format in which the Governments are attempting to go forward, it is doomed to failure. If the contents of the so-called comprehensive agreement — which was neither comprehensive nor an agreement — are the base upon which the Governments build, they have damaged dramatically the minority — Unionist and Nationalist — protections that are enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement.

The senior parties, if I can use that polite description, can veto ministerial appointments to which parties are entitled under the d'Hondt process. They can undermine an Executive Minister and can unilaterally expel a party for failure to vote in support of a First Minister or a Deputy First Minister. That was all agreed in December 2004 by the two Governments. That is a total contradiction of the guarantees, the ethos and requirements of the Good Friday Agreement.

I sincerely hope that the Governments will step back from that position and return to the framework from which we are all coming: the Good Friday Agreement. There is a difficulty in that. The DUP excluded themselves — they were not excluded — from the Good Friday negotiations. Members will also remember that when the signatures were being put on paper on that Good Friday morning, one party did not subscribe: Sinn Féin. Every other party of the eight parties around the table signed up to the agreement that they had negotiated that week, except Sinn Féin; it took Sinn Féin two or three months to take counsel from the Army Council before it could do so.

The DUP says that it will do everything to dismantle the Good Friday Agreement, while Sinn Féin is, at best, ambivalent about its enthusiasm for it. Those are the two protagonists. We have to make sure that the above scenario does not come into play.

There are other aspects that I would like to mention briefly. The Bill at Westminster, and the protocols to it that the Secretary of State will create, must not lead to the creation of a talking shop or a diversion. The Assembly must be recalled primarily to achieve the objective of appointing a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister. Such an appointment would be a signal to all the parties that they should have confidence in what is happening. Watering down that primary objective by taking consultation about water rates, education or health will diminish focus.

If we do not concentrate on the primary duties of appointing the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and the Executive Ministers under the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 2000, the focus will be lost by November.

It is ironic that the Government are saying that they will consult with the parties on health, education, rates and the reform of local government when all the Northern Ireland parties — except one, on one issue — are totally opposed to what the Government are doing and have been ignored consistently. All the Northern Ireland parties on the Northern Ireland Grand Committee voted unanimously against the Government's education proposals and were ignored. Why should we believe that our views will be considered now?

I recently retired from the Northern Ireland Policing Board. It has been four and a half of the most fruitful years that I have spent in public life. We have been creating a new police service for Northern Ireland and it has been a wonderful and worthwhile experience. The question is, can Sinn Féin support the police? Can they say to their

erstwhile comrades in arms, “We will pursue you for criminal activity”, when such activity is sustaining Sinn Féin in the political field?

Under the guise of community restorative justice, which is a very good concept that keeps young people out of the penal system, Sinn Féin have set up 14 community restorative justice committees in my constituency and in Newry. These committees report to their own headquarters in Mullaghbawn, south Armagh. They have engaged in vehicle checkpoints in Newry and in the surrounding area; they have engaged in interfering with, and in some cases assaulting, citizens going about their lawful, and sometimes unlawful, duty.

The publicly stated purpose of these groups is to act as an alternative to the Police Service of Northern Ireland — thereby creating a separate police service. If that were to happen there would be chaos in our society. Our society is going to change dramatically over the next two years in every aspect — social, economic, educational, health. We will not recognise it if we meet again in four years’ time, and it is all being done without the consent of anyone in Northern Ireland, except one.

On the revision of local authorities — which will now not be local — Sinn Féin is the only party that agrees with the Government’s proposal for seven councils, which Andrew Mackinlay referred to. Séamus Mallon said that it represented the Balkanisation of Northern Ireland. There will be green to the west and blue or orange to the east. In a few years’ time there will be de facto repartition with all of the evils and consequences that that will have.

It is vital that between May and November all of us brings any pressure we can on the parties and the Governments to ensure that there is clarity of thought, openness in negotiation, and honesty in approach. Only then can we achieve the new Northern Ireland that we are striving for.

Senator Brendan Ryan: There is something historic about this meeting — and I am not talking about the DUP, whose presence will result in more members of the British Parliament being recorded in an Irish census than there have been since 1922. Perhaps there is some symbolism there.

Eddie McGrady summed up the disquiet that many of us have about many things that are happening. We can only hope that what evolves will be different from what many of us fear will happen.

11.00 am

The Northern Ireland Police Service has been so reformed that it is inexplicable to any of us. I would often be critical of our own police force and I am not one of those who believe in supporting the

police at all costs. However, I have a few questions. Uniquely in the United Kingdom, the Police Service of Northern Ireland is still armed, even though the homicide rate in Northern Ireland is probably spectacularly lower than in many other UK regions. Maybe somebody can explain that to me. In addition, the shooting dead of the driver of a stolen car is not characteristic of a normalised society. I do not justify the stealing of cars but a police response of that order in a society that is in many ways normalised is not the sort of thing that reassures people.

As regards segregation, civic society has an enormous role to play. Maybe it is outside the remit of this Body, but Northern Ireland should be the place in the western world where inter-church ecumenism is most advanced. Instead, we are regularly treated to church leaders telling us that they cannot do more for fear that they would be misunderstood or that it would lead to confusion. It is essentially that they do not want to do things that are being done in many parts of the world. For instance, in areas such as inter-church marriages, Northern Ireland is not as advanced as some other parts of the world. It is up to civic institutions in society to lead and to allow those who wish to make progress in more and deeper integration and inter-church relationships, which are part of the fabric of society, to do so.

As regards involvement in Parliament, there have been several staunch Unionist members in the Senate over the years who have carried British passports. The reason they could do that was that they did not have to take an oath of allegiance. I do not want to speak for Eddie McGrady, but I have discussed this with other members of the SDLP, and the taking of an oath of allegiance or fealty has not been the most comfortable moment of their political careers. I invite my British colleagues to reflect on whether it is necessary to have something as crude as an oath in order to take up a position in a parliament in well-developed civilised democracies. We have survived perfectly well in what, from the point of view of the Irish Labour party, has been a boringly stable democracy for the best part of 80 years. It is an obstacle that could be reflected on.

Finally, as regards the rhetoric of political accountability here and the need for it in Northern Ireland, it would be a great step forward if the British-Irish Council were to make itself accountable to some parliamentary body — particularly this one — instead of operating independently and mostly in secret, and only condescending to deal with issues that the Council thinks are important as distinct from issues that this Body, representative as it is of all the Parliaments in these islands, thinks are important.

That would be a good model for future institutional accountability. Until the British-Irish Council is prepared to make itself accountable, a lot of the rhetoric about accountability in Northern Ireland will be just that — rhetoric.

Rt Hon Andrew Mackay MP: We are excited by the Governments' new initiative: we wish it well, and we all want an Assembly up and running. We are delighted that several very important players from the DUP will be with us this afternoon. It is an historic occasion.

However, there is also a lot going wrong, so I will be a little bleak for a moment. It will be a terrific task to get the Assembly up and running. Society in Northern Ireland is severely fractured, and, as always, May Blood's contribution was significant because she lives at the sharp end. When she tells us that Northern Ireland society is less integrated than ever, I believe her, and that confirms everything else that we hear. Joe Sherlock underlined that as well.

We are also slightly to blame. The two Governments are very much to blame, and those of us in the Opposition who have rightly supported the Governments since the Good Friday Agreement are also somewhat to blame because we have made mistakes. Provided that we learn from those mistakes, we may get through this next difficult stage.

Seymour Crawford got it smack bang right in every respect in his opening remarks. However, one point struck me: he said that we must have transparency. Eddie McGrady said that too much has been happening behind closed doors. I resented the fact that often only two parties were involved in the consultations, which was totally unacceptable. That has caused huge resentment and damage. Every party, however big or small, must be involved.

I am not convinced that the British and Irish Governments have learned the lessons and that there will be transparency. Eddie McGrady underlined that there is no transparency at the moment, and that must change.

We have a much more peaceful Northern Ireland now, and May Blood is right to say that it is completely different from what it was 10 years ago. Those who visit Northern Ireland see complete changes, and that is the good news. The bad news is that the more moderate parties that we assumed would benefit from the Good Friday Agreement have not done so. Eddie McGrady posed the question, "Why?" I have always felt that the moderate parties have been taken for granted because of their moderation. The more extremist parties have been courted by the two Governments in such a way that it was hardly surprising that the electorate thought that

those parties were really powerful and that it should vote for them. That happened in the general election last May, and we will all have to live with the consequences of that.

This Body, particularly under the co-chairmanship of Pat Carey and Paul Murphy, has also changed beyond belief. We are now far past the Body being the talking shop that it had to be when it was set up. We are doing really important work now. Our next meeting will be in Belfast, which is something that your predecessors, co-chairman, were unable to achieve. I agree with Andrew Mackinlay that that is marvellous.

Eddie McGrady mentioned the Balkanisation of local government and, therefore, the Province. I would like to take up Andrew Mackinlay's point: if this Body is serious, it needs to debate the proposals for local government in Northern Ireland at length in Committee and in plenary. Those proposals were rushed through the House of Commons. As Andrew said, the debate took a mere hour and a half — upstairs, we call it "in Committee" — and the Order had gone through. It still has to go to the House of Lords — I see that the Liberal Democrat spokesman The Lord Smith of Clifton is nodding. I hope that the Lords will take it more seriously than we were allowed to.

If this Body has a role, it should be to scrutinise the Order, first by cross-examination in Committee and then by debate during our plenary session in Belfast. I am extremely worried about what I have heard. Those of us who sit in the House of Commons have all been alerted by the wonderful work that Andrew Mackinlay has done. He has been badgering his Government for more debate, and Eddie McGrady underlined those points today. I end by making the plea that our Steering Committee considers taking up this matter up because time is not on our side.

Senator Paschal Mooney: I could not help but reflect on the Chinese saying about living "in interesting times". After all the years of the Body attempting to be inclusive, my colleagues who have been attending these plenary conferences from the very beginning must be greatly encouraged that the day has finally arrived. As Arthur Morgan has said, the main business happens this afternoon.

I support the views of my friend and colleague Senator Ryan. I repeat what has often been said in the Body about the closed and secretive nature of the British-Irish Council. Such secrecy should not happen, and it does not happen in other democracies — for example, the Benelux countries — where there is an overarching ministerial tier that is accountable to a parliamentary tier or in those that have groupings

such as the Nordic Council. The Body should take that on as a new crusade to the two Governments.

Like earlier contributors, I welcome the improved environment. I echo the encouragement that has been voiced to get the DUP and Sinn Féin to engage in meaningful discussions. I am concerned by the recent statements by the UVF leadership, which refuses to decommission its arsenal totally. I say that to provide a sense of balance to what has been said, inevitably, about the remnants of dissident Republicanism and the most recent manifestation of its opposition to the peace process. I applaud the police for the manner in which they were able to prevent another catastrophe. David Trimble once said, "Who will jump first?", and John Hume — I hope that I have got this right — said, "We will jump together." The IRA jumped first where arms were concerned; it is time for the Loyalist paramilitaries to get rid of their guns once and for all.

In Dublin last week we commemorated the ninetieth anniversary of the Easter Rising. Focusing on North/South co-operation, it is salutary to remember on that anniversary that, in the modern era of the troubled relationship between Britain and Ireland, the gun was first introduced into Irish politics by extreme Loyalists who were opposed to the democratic will of the British Parliament. That Parliament included 106 Members from the island of Ireland when the Home Rule Bill was introduced in 1912. Sadly, the opposition outside Parliament was actively encouraged by people inside Parliament who facilitated the landing of guns from Germany at Larne and the formation of the UVF. That led to the formation of the Irish Volunteers and the subsequent rebellion in Dublin in 1916. The reason for my short discourse on Irish history is that the inheritors of that anti-democratic opposition — the present-day UVF — are once again indulging in sabre-rattling.

The two Governments have given a renewed impetus to the concept of North/South co-operation. The key priorities are: the development and delivery of practical co-operation — the key word being "practical" — on an all-island economy; infrastructure and spatial planning; the north-west; and improved co-operation on cross-border public services such as health and education. I have said this before, as have many of my colleagues from the north-west and the border counties: partition devastated my part of the island, North and South. The economic devastation of the north-west and the border counties is there for all to see. Renewal of economic development is vital for the future prosperity of people on both sides of the political line.

We should all send a strong message to those elements in the Unionist community who, seemingly,

are prepared to condemn everyone in Northern Ireland to another cycle of violence if there is even minimal movement towards measures that will ensure prosperity in both parts of the island. In 1912, home rule was seen to be against the interests of Unionists. I will not attempt to rewrite history but, to paraphrase another quote in another context, it is a salutary reminder that when there is minimal political development on this island, Loyalist violence "hasn't gone away, you know".

I strongly support the view that trust is the "open sesame" to practical co-operation among the major parties in Northern Ireland. I also endorse what has been said about the exclusion of political parties. For those of us in the South, it is particularly poignant that political activity at Government level has been about inclusivity. "Inclusivity" is the key word in the Republic of Ireland. I am on the outside looking in, and I fail to understand why those who represent all elements in Northern Ireland's political pantheon are not included in consultations. Northern Ireland is a fractured society, and it is vital that everyone is involved. The British and Irish Governments have the perception that, because both of them are involved in a fully democratic engagement in their respective environments, democracy is also at work in Northern Ireland. At present there is no democracy there, and we hope, by the formation of an Executive and a Government, that democracy will be at work in Northern Ireland. It is incumbent on the two Governments to ensure inclusivity when establishing a dialogue that will move towards an eventual political solution.

11.15 am

I wholeheartedly welcome the DUP delegation to the Body, and I applaud its decision to attend. Relations between the different traditions on this island have been bedevilled by mistrust, suspicion and downright hostility. Going as far back as 1912, I think that that has acted as a barrier to meaningful dialogue. After the bloodbath of the first world war, at the Paris Peace Conference, Churchill said that while Europe was binding its own wounds, the "dreary steeples" of Fermanagh and Tyrone rose and were an ever-present reminder of an ancient quarrel yet to be resolved. I hope that we are moving rapidly towards a resolution of that quarrel.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Before we suspend the sitting for 20 minutes, I would like to acknowledge the presence of Senator Maurice Hayes and the British ambassador, Mr Stewart Eldon.

The sitting was suspended at 11.16 am and resumed at 11.56 am.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): We will now resume the debate. The next to speak will be Jim Glennon TD, followed by Lord Smith.

Mr Jim Glennon TD: I am aware of the time constraints, and I will be brief. First, I want to join with my colleagues in giving a wholehearted welcome to the delegation from the Democratic Unionist Party. The Body, and politics in these islands, will be much the better for it. I hope that it will be the first of many such attendances on the part of the DUP and the indicator of the start of total dialogue on the part of all politicians in the islands.

I also agree with earlier comments about the British-Irish Council. I will not go any further than that, other than to say that it is in need of a review. This Body has a role to play in a relationship with the Council, and that is a matter that can be addressed in the coming weeks and months.

I agree particularly with Arthur Morgan's comments about the necessity for an all-island environmental protection agency. It makes eminent good sense; the alternative, if one thinks about it, would be nonsense. It must be looked at in the context of what is best for the environment. If a separate agency is deemed to be appropriate for the Northern part of this island, then we in the South might as well divide the existing agency and have one for each of the three provinces. Just as an aside, Leinster already gave Munster enough yesterday without letting it away with that again.

My main point concerns the urgency surrounding the renewal of the institutions. I recently had the pleasure of a visit to urban Belfast, hosted by Baroness Blood. It was a very striking day, not only for me but for all my colleagues. I also shared a day in south Armagh recently with yourself, Co-Chairman.

12.00 noon

Several things came across very clearly from those visits to parts of Northern Ireland that could not be more different from each other, and it was not good news that came across. There was a striking sense of polarisation, which was mentioned earlier, and I endorse the comments about it. I do not believe, however, that there is apathy, as a Member said. What we saw was not apathy. In fact, it was quite the opposite: there was a resentment of the renewed polarisation. That is far more dangerous than apathy.

Jim O'Keeffe gently chided Arthur Morgan about the absence of political leadership, suggesting that political leadership is not a question of what other people can offer but rather of what we can offer. I endorse that absolutely. The Body, in particular, must examine those issues and give leadership,

as there is no room for complacency. From the evidence that my colleagues and I saw on visits to the North, there is no real progress being made.

There is a political vacuum — and we all know nature's attitude to a vacuum. Resentment is building up in the Protestant community, and particularly in the young Protestant community, about the way Northern society is heading. In south Armagh we saw marvellous sporting facilities for the youth of the area, but all for one denomination. There was not a soccer pitch to be seen. We discovered that the youth of the area are collected by a minibus and driven to Kilkeel, 40 miles away, to avail of leisure facilities. That cannot be right or healthy. We heard of the alienation of the young Protestant population; when they are unsuccessful in their application to join the PSNI they are told that there is positive discrimination in favour of Catholics. I question that also.

We are in danger, Co-Chairman, of going full circle. Forty years ago, we saw the genesis of what we have all endured and what the people of Northern Ireland particularly have endured: an aggrieved young Catholic population. We are now in danger of turning full circle and seeing an aggrieved young Protestant population. It arises from the lack of on-the-ground, local, political activity. It behoves all the parties in the North to act. I particularly empathise with Eddie McGrady's comments about the comprehensive agreement that was reached between the two extremes and the middle parties being omitted. That is absolutely unjustifiable and is utterly dangerous also. If we let the situation develop and an aggrieved young Protestant population mobilises — and there is imminent danger that it could — we will all have failed. The Body will have failed; all our politicians and all our colleagues on all parts of these islands will have failed. We ignore that possibility, not only at our own peril but at the peril of democracy in these islands. Go raibh maith agat.

The Lord Smith: Thank you, Co-Chairman. As many Members have observed, people in Northern Ireland live in two parallel universes that are in stark contrast with each other. First, there is the economic universe, in which there has been unparalleled prosperity in the past 10 years; as Baroness Blood said, it is quite unrecognisable now. However, the political universe is in an impasse, a stand-off; it is a cross between Italian politics at the moment and those of Baghdad. Below that political universe, there is a subterranean system of paramilitary activity, which is now less concerned with military adventures than with criminal activities.

Deputy Crawford spoke of the need for effective policing on both sides of the border, and, most

important of all, for political parties to participate in policing, and that is something that I am sure we continually urge on Sinn Féin. A democratic society must have a policing authority; it cannot have alternatives of questionable legitimacy. There can be only one form of state authority with regard to policing.

The future of devolution is exercising us all at the moment. Two years ago, I urged the two Governments to do what they are doing now: recall the Assembly and threaten to cut MLAs' salaries off. The situation has been allowed to unravel for too long. However, we are where we are.

Deputy O'Donnell rightly drew the Body's attention to the stance of the DUP. Although I am second to no one in wanting the devolved institutions restored, I must say that I am rather pessimistic and will remain so until the DUP lightens its intransigence. That, in my view, is the main stumbling block at this particular time.

The problem with fundamentalist politics is that it always pursues a policy of perfection, so whatever Sinn Féin and the IRA do, the DUP will ratchet up yet another condition before it can enter devolution and power-sharing again. The DUP must be somehow encouraged and weaned from that very fundamentalist attitude; otherwise it will mean that, by the end of November, there will be no devolutionary settlement.

As I have said before, the DUP must understand that a return to direct rule will not be the status quo ante — it will be a return to direct rule effectively mediated through a de facto condominium of Dublin and Westminster, and that will not be to the DUP's liking. There will then be a growth, which we would all encourage, of cross-border collaboration, but the DUP will have no say in how that operates. The party's intransigence will exclude it from having any real influence on future developments. The consequence of that intransigence should be emphasised to the DUP, because the ball is now in its court to reciprocate, to some degree, the IMC's endorsement that the IRA has given up arms.

Turning to the modernisation and reform of local government, we all agree that it is necessary, not least to give some real power. At the moment, it is just about waste disposal and parks. Successive Governments in GB also reduced the powers of local government. Localism is now the fad of the moment, and, as an academic observer of local government over forty years, I welcome that.

The reduction of 26 local councils to seven is unacceptable, and on Wednesday I will move a motion of regret to that effect to the Order in the House of Lords. On the other hand, however,

giving some powers back to local government is an essential pre-requisite for refurbishing democratic politics. That must be the optimistic hope of the reform of local government, although it clearly must be looked at again. I agree with Andrew Mackay that the Body should revisit this issue, because it has received pretty short shrift as regards scrutiny in Westminster.

I hope that my pessimism will be unfounded, but much now depends on whether the DUP is prepared to shift.

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

It is important that the DUP is here, and it is good that the Body got such coverage on 'Morning Ireland' and in other media because of the visit. However, I cannot help but reflect on a meeting I had quite a few years ago, as part of a cross-border delegation, with Peter Robinson, the then Minister for Regional Development. We outlined everything that was needed, and had a very productive meeting. Attending the meeting not only as a female politician but as a person from Donegal, I thought that I might have caused more trouble than I would solve.

In the past, with no harm to previous Secretaries of State, we had meetings where we were tapped on the shoulder and told that we were doing a great job because we were doing cross-border work and told, "Keep at it, girls and boys", whereas Peter Robinson said, "Well, if you need money for that, we will toll that, and we can take money from that", and so on. It was a working meeting.

At that meeting, we had begun to talk about local decision-making and local decision-taking, and we discussed taking hard decisions. Tolling is an issue that must be discussed with local communities so that they realise that, when they have to put their hands in their pockets, there will be implications. However, I was disgusted that, having secured money for the Toome bypass at that meeting, Peter Robinson had abdicated within a week, and Gregory Campbell took over for a while.

I welcome the fact that the DUP representatives are here. When the DUP held ministries in the Assembly, they knew what power was, what they could do and they knew the advantage of local decision-making to local people. I want them to return to a situation where local decision-making can take place, for the benefit of Ulster and for the island of Ireland. As I often tell this Body, I am a TD for Ulster, and, from sheer practicality, local decision-making matters as much, if not more, to me than many other people in this room.

That was a few years ago, and there was an east-west divide that the DUP Minister had a specific responsibility to try to address. By all accounts, the new legislation affecting local government can only further increase the east-west divide on the island of Ireland from an economic perspective. That must be addressed before it happens, which is why I completely agree that local government change must be addressed, and the Body should take it on.

Andrew Mackinlay mentioned that the Body took on other issues at the last plenary session, such as the on-the-runs legislation. Whether the withdrawal of that legislation was partly due to our discussions or not, let us be happy that we contributed to righting a wrong before it progressed beyond the point of no return.

I also commend the SDLP and May Blood and others who are here, because inasmuch as there are people here who are aware of Northern Ireland issues, sometimes we do not see what is right under our noses. The likes of Eddie McGrady have been at this game for a long time, and he is living, as much as anybody, in the middle of the reality and has flagged up other potential pitfalls. In common with what others have said, I hope that all parties will be included in an agreement, because once people are excluded and solutions imposed, that leads to automatic exclusion, and that is not the way to go.

Politics and criminality have been tied together, rightly or wrongly, and they must be separated. The Criminal Assets Bureau and its equivalent in the North have been successful in this seriously important work, as can be seen from cross-border working between the PSNI and the gardaí. One thing that could and should be done is a redoubling of resources for that work, as Baroness Harris suggested. There should be a fast-track means of getting to the root of criminality, and it should be dealt with as criminality as opposed to anything else. Does it challenge the political stability to even call for that? However, it is effective, it is working and it deals with criminals as criminals, and that is how it should continue.

12.15 pm

It is interesting that there is a new green agenda. We usually wrap the flags round each other at times, but we are now interested in the concept of an all-Ireland environment protection agency — something with which I completely agree. I thought it uncanny, given that we were talking about the environment on the island, that an environmental agency would be one of the first all-island bodies that would feature in the debate on the all-island part of the motion.

I wondered if it is because the DUP is coming that we are talking so much about nuclear threats and such like,

but maybe I am overstating the importance of that visit.

As Liz O'Donnell said, we must drive to a positive conclusion matters that should have been concluded a lot of years ago. Mo Mowlam took things forward as best she could, and further than many people may have liked at the time. However, I hope that we can move forward with new energy and impetus.

I have been in politics for 10 years on 2 April. I first walked into the Dáil on 16 April, and the one lesson I learned was that you go in as a mad young thing thinking you are going to change the world in about half an hour, but you discover very fast — and to the amusement of those watching — that things do not change overnight.

I now accept that things do not change overnight, but I would come back to one point: we need local decisions taken locally that will be to the advantage of the people of the island of Ireland. If people do not accept that it is better for that to happen, I will be saying on 24 November that the two Governments should, and must, and will have to take that step and go on and make their threat a reality. It is not the preferred option, and it is not what should happen; but politicians will have had six months to decide whether they want to keep, bring back and control the wonderful work that was done. They did not get enough time to learn how to beat the Civil Service, but that can only come with practice.

I hope that the DUP, or any other political party, will be back in an Executive making decisions for all the people and that places like the north west — as Paschal referred to — will gain from that.

The Lord Brooke: It is always a pleasure to follow Cecilia Keaveney, especially as one of my great-grandfathers was born in a Church of Ireland vicarage outside Letterkenny.

I apologise if I have said it in these halls before, but my late father used to say that when he was a student there was a club where the members lived one day a term backwards. They would get up, play some bridge, have a glass of whiskey and late at night they would eat porridge. My party believes that we live in an imperfect world, and I am not complaining about that. I congratulate the Steering Committee and Jim O'Keeffe on the development later today. In some ways the latter would have been even more fruitful if the presentation by the DUP had occurred in the morning and this debate had

occurred in the afternoon. However, I am not complaining.

I salute the framework of the next seven months — seven months to the very day. However, I do not have anything useful to say to the main protagonists, and we all know who they are, especially as it seems a little patronising to lecture them. They have to make decisions themselves, and none of us can make those decisions for them. Trust is a valuable but voluntary process, and all any of us can do is to seek not to inspire distrust ourselves and to demonstrate that we trust other people, based on the quite well-founded principle that if you treat someone as being trustworthy, the more likely he or she is to be so.

However, I have one thing to say to our own Government. When we met in Edinburgh, Paul Bew told us that the present Secretary of State gave the impression that he did not appreciate the consequences of his decisions and actions upon opinion in the Province, and he sometimes seemed surprised by the response he received. That afternoon at our regular question session I asked the Secretary of State if he was ever surprised by the responses he got. He said that he never was. That is important to events this year because Paul Bew also reminded us that almost everything that Her Majesty's Government was doing at the present time was likely to be regarded with disfavour in the Unionist community at precisely the moment it was being asked to go into Government with Sinn Féin. I was therefore a little dismayed when the Secretary of State, in the recent statement that has been generally welcomed this morning, said that in the meantime he would be carrying on regardless of public opinion with decisions he believed to be in the national interest and to help make Northern Ireland world class.

In the light of the other political challenge that he was throwing down, that seemed a somewhat narrow consideration of the national interest. That is all I have to say on that.

Arthur Morgan and I usually speak in this debate as its close approaches. This time he spoke early, and, as he animadverted on the British Government in another, more peripheral, aspect of policy, I shall pay him the compliment of responding to him. First, I must declare an interest. On New Year's Day 1982, or it may have been 1 January 1983, my brother, who had just taken silk, was rung up by the Treasury Solicitor, who said that the Secretary of State for Energy, who was then Nigel Lawson, had decided not to fund the protestors at the Sizewell B nuclear power station inquiry, but that he was prepared to brief counsel to the inquiry, who could ask inconvenient questions

of all witnesses. My brother responded that before a serious offer was made, he had to tell the Treasury Solicitor that there was a generation alive in this land that had never had a science lesson in its life and that he was a member of it. The Treasury Solicitor said that that would not be a problem, as the Central Electricity Generating Board would take three months to deliver its evidence-in-chief; that there would be no cross-examination during that period; and that therefore my brother had three months to mug it up. My brother said that in that case he would of course take the brief.

Sizewell B was the last station to be built in the old sequence, and the inquiry lasted two and a half years. Two and a half years later in Tokyo, I met Sir Walter Marshall, the Chairman of the Central Electricity Generating Board and confessed that my brother had been counsel to the inquiry, which I think he knew. I also told him the story. Sir Walter, a great authority on nuclear energy, said he was still trying to feel that he had learnt a scintilla of what there was to be learned over 25 years; yet my brother, who had never had a lesson in science in his life, believed that he could mug it up in three months. However, he went on to say that it was the quality and number of my brother's questions that had been responsible for the inquiry taking two and a half years and that that, in the end, would be acceptable if we did not have to go through the entire process again and it saved time later. I wish that some of the categorical things said about Sellafield had been subject to the same degree of technical scrutiny as Sizewell B was.

On the further point that Arthur made about nuclear energy, he skilfully omitted climate change. At the time of the New Orleans flood, I had the privilege of hearing the Chief Scientific Advisor to the British Government, Sir David King, talking to three American senators who were over here for a regular meeting with parliamentarians. He said that when the Thames barrage was built with bi-partisan support in 1982, it was calculated that it would need to be used only once every three years. Now, he said, it is being used seven times a year. That means that the pace of advance of climate change has been 21-fold in the course of the last 23 years.

Climate change is an even more significant issue than spent nuclear fuel. I, too, welcome environment agencies, but how are we going to turn back the ravages of climate change for our grandchildren, our great grandchildren and our great-great-grandchildren without nuclear energy? This is especially difficult as the footprint of wind farms and their like is to leave what will be aesthetically

an environmental mess and is already occasioning effective protest. I am grateful, as ever, to Arthur Morgan for having broadened our mutual agenda.

Mr Séamus Kirk TD: I am conscious of time constraints. I congratulate those involved in inviting and persuading the DUP to come to this plenary session. The delegation has arrived early, which is perhaps a good omen for what will transpire later in the session.

There are raised expectations about the DUP's contribution. I simply hope that in two or three hours' time those expectations will be fulfilled.

In the meantime, we will continue to discuss what has become the staple diet — the mundane dialogue about the restoration of the Assembly and the Executive. The advantage of speaking at this stage in the proceedings is that one gets a better feel for what the respective representatives see on the political landscape. Sinn Féin and the DUP, currently the two largest parties in the Assembly, have a great weight of responsibility on their shoulders. The hope of the two Governments and of this plenary conference is that they can find sufficient common ground to get the Assembly back and to re-establish the Executive. Baroness Blood spoke about building cross-community trust, and how essential it is to achieve the necessary climate change to restore the Assembly.

I suggest that we examine the issue of economic development. With regard to the establishment of a climate of conventional politics in the North, one or two contributors have referred to the significant economic growth that has manifested itself as a result of the ceasefires and the peace process having taken hold north of the border. There is some distance to go to alleviate the dependency of the Northern economy on the public spend. It is sustainable in the short term, but the British Government will examine that issue and ask whether it is sustainable in the longer term. Do we need to have a more conventional economic environment, whether that is industrial growth or growth in the services sector that is paralleled elsewhere in Europe, to take hold and power the economy forward?

It is important that the public support the re-established institutions. If people are caught in a straitjacket of polarisation to the extent that we have heard about today — and I am not disputing that assertion — how do they get out of it? Is it a matter of political leadership on both sides getting people out of that straitjacket, or is it that political leaders find themselves in the comfort zone of being prisoners of their own political problems?

12.30 pm

The phrases "risk taking" and "jumping together" are used from time to time. Risk taking and jumping together are important for our desired objective. It may be that a process of gradualism is also needed. The DUP has a considerable distance to travel in the political process. The party did not support the original Good Friday Agreement, so if that agreement is to be the template and framework in which the DUP must work — and clearly it will be — there is some considerable distance to travel. I share the view of many people who believe that there is sufficient pragmatism in the DUP to see the merits of coming in from the cold and participating.

There is a huge obligation on Sinn Féin. If we turn back the pages of the various reports of these plenaries, we can see that Sinn Féin has come a significant distance since it entered democratic and constitutional politics some years ago. However, it still has a considerable distance to go in order to meet the template that is necessary for cross-community bridge building.

Two political parties are coming from the extremes to meet in the middle. Eddie McGrady graphically illustrated the difficulties faced by the moderate middle-of-the-road parties in the North; they can easily become isolated and be excluded from the process, but they are the cement in the middle. We have to be conscious of that and respect their roles.

Mr John Ellis TD: Everyone must recognise that this is probably the most significant day in the Body's life in recent times, in that the DUP has come to make a presentation. However, the UUP has now started to move to the ground that the DUP once held, as it does not want to become involved with the Body. That is yet another worrying example of polarisation in Northern Ireland, where people do not seem to maintain a common position and make changes to suit their own political agenda in their communities.

Eddie McGrady said that the SDLP is not being kept abreast of everything that is happening. That is extremely worrying. If progress is to be made, everyone must be kept informed and nobody should be kept in the dark. If people are not kept informed, they become isolated and alienated. Isolation and alienation caused much of the troubles. It is also worrying to hear people say that some Nationalist and Unionist communities feel isolated.

We can all talk about politicians and about becoming actively involved in the new situation in Northern Ireland, and the Governments have given until November for action to be taken and for an Executive to be put in place. Would electorates elsewhere

tolerate a situation in which politicians who had been elected two years ago had not accepted their active responsibilities? I do not think so. The Northern Ireland electorate wants its politicians to get to the table now and make decisions, put an Executive in place and move on.

On Friday, I was in Northern Ireland, at a seminar on the development of the Upper Bann waterway that was organised by the SDLP. During the seminar, it became clear that in the absence of political leadership in Northern Ireland, progress could not be made. At previous plenary conferences, Seymour Crawford has spoken about the Ulster Canal and other waterways issues. Such issues cannot be dealt with, as there is no Executive at Stormont. We must tell the politicians that, as elected representatives, they have a responsibility to do the job that they are elected to do — namely, to get involved, to govern and to take decisions.

The stand-off has gone on too long. When a vacuum is created, communities can find themselves having two police forces. That is unacceptable, in the same way that Óglaigh na hÉireann is unacceptable in the South. There is only one Óglaigh na hÉireann, and that is the Irish Army, a fact that has been emphasised in recent weeks by the Irish Government. We must explain to our fellow politicians on all sides in Northern Ireland that they now have a duty to their communities to get in there, do the business and move on.

Mr Chris Ruane MP: Like Jim Glennon, I also visited Belfast with the Committee D study group; the visit was ably convened by Baroness Blood. I share Jim's view that there is polarisation in Northern Ireland.

We visited both communities, and we looked at issues such as transport, childcare, education, employment and leisure facilities for young people. What I saw there was stark. I represent the west ward of Rhyl, which is the poorest of the 865 wards in Wales, but the poverty that I witnessed in West Belfast and North Belfast far outweighed the poverty in my community. I was inspired to table 60 parliamentary questions as a result of that visit. I am parliamentary private secretary (PPS) to Peter Hain — for Wales, not for Northern Ireland — and Peter had to pull me to one side to ask me what was going on.

Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP: Not enough.

Mr Chris Ruane MP: Not enough.

Let me share some statistics to show just how stark the position is in parts of Belfast. I asked for higher education university participation rates for

each ward in the North. The figures show that 77% of young people in North Down go to university, but only 4% in the Crumlin and Shankill areas. Further education colleges are quite often located in working-class communities to help to give those communities a skills base. Some 35% of young people participated in Lagan Valley and only 2% per cent in Stranmillis. That disparity far outweighs anything that I have seen in my own constituency, which contains one of the richest wards in Wales and one of the poorest.

Economic inactivity levels show the number of people between the ages of 16 and retirement age who are not working but who are not on the unemployment register. Admittedly the figures have come down in North Belfast and West Belfast from 44 % to 40%, and from 44% to 38%, but that is still not good enough when compared to the economic inactivity levels of 17% and 18% in East Antrim and Lagan Valley.

In some areas the statistics are just not collated or collected. Statistics on basic literacy at ward level are not collated. Social economy statistics, which can release the potential in working-class communities, are not collected.

The work that needs to be done in working-class Catholic and Protestant communities is not being done — not at that level, at least. It is being carried out at a high level with the high-profile visits of Sinn Féin and the DUP to Tony Blair, and it works wonders for individuals' egos. It probably works even greater wonders for those individuals' parties. It is not just the members of the Alliance party, the SDLP and the UUP who lose out; those who lose out the most are working-class people in those communities.

The issue of trust has been mentioned. It is not just an issue of the trust within or between political parties — the trust between the elected and the electors is being broken because they see that those problems are not being addressed. The bread-and-butter issues are not being addressed. I have heard the solution from the politicians there: "More money for Northern Ireland. The British Government have let us down." The finger-pointing goes on. It is easy to grandstand and finger-point and watch your electoral success go up and up, but it is the people on the ground who suffer. Sinn Féin has made progress on this issue and the party has made concessions. I would urge the members of the DUP to look at their communities, especially their working-class communities, take up the challenge and work on those issues. That could unite their communities, themselves and, indeed, the whole political process in Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach have bent over backwards to move the peace process forward. They tried to accommodate the DUP and Sinn Féin, perhaps at the expense of the smaller parties. However, at the greatest expense are the working-class communities. We have tried our best with the carrots, and we have conceded on issues. If progress is not made now, we will have to move towards greater all-Ireland co-operation between the North and the South on those issues in order to move the policies forward and to help people in those working-class communities.

Senator Paul Coghlan: Co-chairman, as a native of these parts, it would be remiss of me if I did not join with you in your warm welcoming of everybody to Killarney and to this lovely hotel. Killarney is not known as “beauty’s home” for no reason. One has only to look out the windows to see that this area abounds in great natural beauty, which has been conducive not only to peace and tranquillity but to excellent contributions from the Members this morning. Before moving on to recent political developments, enjoy beauty’s home; we are in heaven’s reflex.

Seymour Crawford set things out well when he opened the debate this morning. We all welcome the initiative of the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister.

All must be positive and constructive. We urgently need proper engagement and, as Mr Crawford said, there is need for movement on the Loyalist side and for the removal of all dissidents.

I do not know what little bit of the jigsaw is missing, but I believe Arthur Morgan that Sinn Féin will take part in policing in due course. That is necessary: everybody must be involved. There can be only one army and only one police force. I have no doubt that those involved in criminality and the dissident paramilitaries on both sides do not believe in any cause, other than *mé féin*. They are merely flying a flag as a flag of convenience for their own selfish, greedy motives.

Without overstressing it, today is something of an historic day, and I am glad that it is happening in Killarney. I join with everybody in welcoming the DUP. Like Jim O’Keeffe, I travel optimistically: I hope that the DUP’s presence will, please God, lead to other Unionists urgently reassessing the situation and deciding that they should come forward as well. I know that people are not taking their seats, but we urge everyone to work the Assembly and form the Executive.

I have no doubt that the DUP is engaged in a little risk-taking. It is, as others might say in a different context, breaking the mould. DUP representatives have travelled South with a positive outlook — what-

ever few hard nuggets may be contained in their presentation. It is a healthy development, it is good progress, and, like other Members, I look forward to hearing them outline their thinking and to engaging in a constructive exchange of views with them.

Finally, touching on something that Eddie McGrady, Andrew Mackay and a few others said, I endorse the view that the Body could usefully debate the local government proposals for the North. All politics is local, and it would perhaps be a shame if it were made somewhat less so. That debate will not happen today, probably not tomorrow, but perhaps soon.

12.45 pm

Mr Paudge Connolly TD: It is nice to feel that I have something in common with the DUP, in that this is the first meeting of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body for me and for the DUP. I, however, hope to return and to partake in several meetings to come.

I am delighted that the DUP is here today. It gives us an opportunity to know what it is thinking, for we are not mind-readers. We will show that we are good listeners and that we fully appreciate the party’s participation. The DUP has somewhat stolen the show, and one would not begrudge it that at this point.

The continuing suspension of the Northern Ireland political institutions is tantamount to leaving Northern Ireland in an insidious political time warp. It is having a corrosive effect on normal community life in Northern Ireland. It is incumbent on all political leaders to demonstrate leadership and genuine statesmanship in the quest to restore the institutions. One cannot go forward looking over one’s shoulder. We have had far too much of that for a long time. People have been elected to lead. Sometimes that requires courage, and I do not know that we see that in Northern Ireland politics.

We have to deal with many real-life issues in Northern Ireland, and a lot of those are being put to the side. Business must be allowed to develop, and there is a great sense of concern from the business community in Northern Ireland about the political stalemate. That cannot be ignored. There are other real-life issues, such as the provision of health services in rural areas. We need to examine that on a cross-border basis. Those issues must be tackled, and they cannot be tackled in a political vacuum. We have to look at educational opportunities, at the infrastructure such as roads and, as Mr Ellis mentioned, the Ulster Canal.

We had a regrettable situation in which a Minister of our own Government said that no progress could be made on cross-border issues, such as the Ulster

Canal and the joining-up of the Erne and Shannon waterways, until the institutions were restored in Northern Ireland. That effectively meant that we could not go forward until the Government was up and running. The Minister cited the political stalemate as the reason. That cannot be allowed to continue.

If the great waterways between Lough Erne and the Shannon were opened, it would be excellent for tourism, and many benefits would flow from that. That would help the economy of many rural towns. We have seen what it has done for towns such as Carrick-on-Shannon and Ballyconnell. Many benefits would flow to such towns as Killeshandra, Clones, Monaghan town and Glaslough.

We cannot sit by; we must get all the players onto the pitch. We cannot have a match if all players are not present. I ask that they come, join in, and get our institutions up and running. Go raibh maith agat.

The Lord Dubs: The slot that I am filling is normally the Michael Mates slot, and it is one that he has filled with his particular style and individual stamp. Nobody, least of all myself, could possibly emulate the way he does it. Therefore, I am even more regretful that he is not here today, but I will have to do it in my own way and I hope that Members of the Body will bear with that.

It has been an incredibly interesting debate, one of the most interesting in which I have taken part. There have been some outstanding contributions, and some interesting new ideas and thoughts. Let me comment briefly on some of the contributions, and then try to wind up the debate with regard to the broader issues.

Seymour Crawford started us off on an excellent footing. He set the agenda for the rest of the debate, covered all the key issues, and made one comment that I thought was very important. He said, "Time is not on our side." That, in fact, has characterised many of the approaches to the issues about which we have been talking today. He also referred to policing, criminality, young people's coming into the grip of paramilitaries, the need for trust, and the fact that Sinn Féin should join the policing bodies. He also made a point about rural housing, and he was critical of direct rule Ministers with regard to recent statements.

Andrew Mackinlay covered the issue of the DUP's visit. He said that it was important that this Body should involve MLAs when we meet in Belfast in the autumn — an issue that the Steering Committee discussed yesterday. There was much sympathy for what Andrew said. He talked about local government reform in Northern Ireland and his unhappiness

at the thrust of Government policy on that. He also spoke of the need for an economic protection agency — a view that was characterised by some of the other speeches that followed.

Liz O'Donnell made a very broad-ranging speech about the situation, the position of the DUP, and the unacceptability of direct rule. She supported the two Governments in their statement on what was going to happen over the next few months and how they were going to move forward. She particularly welcomed the fact that there will be a timetable for that.

May Blood, speaking from direct experience of the segregation and division in her community — one of the most difficult areas in Belfast — said that segregation was now more widespread than ever, and that that was a particular problem that had to be faced in Northern Ireland. She also talked about the apathy regarding politics in Northern Ireland, which was a difficulty for all politicians there, and which would have to be overcome.

Arthur Morgan made a speech that was very critical of nuclear power and Sellafield, and argued that there should be an environmental protection agency for the whole island.

Henry Bellingham paid particular attention to criminality, and he also suggested that the IMC be tasked with a need to examine the funding of political parties in Northern Ireland and where they get their money from.

That was a novel suggestion, which was not echoed by anybody else.

Jim O'Keeffe was characteristically optimistic when he talked about the range of issues and the need for political leadership. He was right when he said that political leadership is not something we can urge other people to do; it is something we must demonstrate ourselves. That could well be the watchword for how Northern Ireland moves forward.

Baroness Harris talked from her experience of policing and said that she thought that there was no move by Sinn Féin in that direction — something which one or two Members have challenged, and which I will mention later. Joe Sherlock talked about Northern Ireland being a very divided society.

Eddie McGrady, like others, spoke from many years' experience representing his community. He made the point that the two Governments had not played fair by the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party and had put much more emphasis on their relationship and dealings with the DUP and Sinn Féin — again, a point that was echoed later. Mr McGrady also made the alarming comment that, although he supported the principle of restorative

justice, he was unhappy that the way it was being applied in certain areas almost made it an alternative to a police force, rather than something that supported policing. He was also against the seven local authorities.

Senator Brendan Ryan suggested that the PSNI should consider becoming unarmed. He also mentioned the oath of allegiance as something that the British Government should move on from. He, among others, made the point that the British-Irish Council was not sufficiently transparent as a body and should be made so.

Andrew Mackay talked about society being fractured and how the moderate parties were taken for granted. Senator Paschal Mooney mentioned the DUP and the British-Irish Council, but he also spoke interestingly about some aspects of the history of Ireland, which I shall read with interest when we receive the transcript of proceedings. Jim Glennon was with me when Committee D visited Belfast, and he mentioned young people and the difficulties that they face. Lord Smith mentioned criminality.

Cecilia Keaveney echoed many thoughts when she said that we all went into politics believing that we could change the world quickly and that we have realised that it is a rather more difficult task, but that we should stick at it. She also talked interestingly about some dealings that she had had with DUP Ministers in representing her constituency.

Lord Brooke took on Arthur Morgan about Sellafeld and talked about climate change, which had not hitherto been mentioned, being an important aspect of considering energy policy. Séamus Kirk mentioned the DUP's visit to the Body and made the point that that had raised expectations, but hopefully not beyond their ability to deliver.

John Ellis talked about the need for political leadership in Northern Ireland. Chris Ruane did much work following Committee D's visit to Belfast and produced some very alarming statistics on indicators of deprivation and related matters in some parts of west and north Belfast compared to other parts of Northern Ireland.

Senator Paul Coghlan welcomed us to this wonderful part of the world, which we all echo, and talked about policing and local government reform. Finally, Paudge Connolly made his maiden speech to the Body, for which many thanks are due, and we will hear more from him.

To conclude, a key issue was the enormous welcome to be given to the DUP, although I hope that we do not have expectations that that event cannot meet, but I am delighted that they have

come. There was enormous support for the two Governments in how they have decided to move forward over the next few months; and there was a feeling that the British-Irish Council should become more open and transparent. We spoke of our concern about the polarisation and segregation of Northern Ireland, criminality, and the hope that policing will become a much broader set-up when Sinn Féin eventually decides to join the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

Finally, environmental protection was mentioned by many Members, so I suppose that the Body will have to engage with that matter as well. It has been a very good debate, and I would like to congratulate all those who took part.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you, Lord Dubs. In fact, there were 23 speakers to the motion, which is quite impressive.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Body acknowledges that significant progress has been made over the past year, including decommissioning of IRA weapons; notes that the two Governments are convinced that the IRA no longer poses a terrorist threat; recognises that ongoing concerns about criminality need to be addressed and urges all communities to support policing structures; calls on loyalist and dissident republican paramilitary groups to cease all paramilitary and criminal activity and decommission their arms; underlines the need to avoid a prolonged political vacuum; welcomes, in this context, the 6 April initiative by the two Governments to set out an agreed strategy for the restoration of the Assembly and devolved Government; recognises that the prospects for a peaceful and prosperous future for Northern Ireland are best served by devolved, power-sharing government as provided for in the Good Friday Agreement; looks forward to the recall of the Assembly on 15 May; urges the parties to take full advantage of this opportunity to engage in dialogue with a view to an early agreement on the election of a First and Deputy First Minister, formation of an executive and restoration of the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement; encourages and fully supports the ongoing work to develop North/South cooperation in the best interests of both parts of the island and East/West relations for the benefit of all the people on these islands.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): We reconvene at 2.30 pm, when I presume it will be standing room only.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.

The sitting was resumed at 2.33 pm.

ADDRESS BY THE DEMOCRATIC UNIONIST PARTY

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): I call the afternoon session of the Body to order. I remind Members to switch off their mobile phones entirely, because they make the sound system less effective.

I am pleased to welcome Mr Peter Robinson MP and his colleagues Mrs Iris Robinson MP, Mr Nigel Dodds MP and Mr Jeffrey Donaldson MP from the Democratic Unionist Party. They have accepted Paul Murphy's and my invitation — and indeed that of Members — to address us this afternoon. This is a very important occasion for the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body; it is important that we hear the views of all parties on this island and elsewhere, and, to that end, I am very pleased to welcome the delegation from the DUP. In a moment, I will invite Peter Robinson to address us, and that will be followed by a question-and-answer session.

It is my great pleasure and, I presume, yours, to invite Peter Robinson MP MLA to address the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body.

[Applause.]

Mr Peter Robinson MP: Thank you very much indeed, Mr Co-Chairman. My colleagues and I are grateful for your welcome. Reading some of the media coverage surrounding our visit here today, one could be forgiven for thinking that, rather than coming to make a presentation to an inter-parliamentary forum, we were coming to settle all of the British-Irish issues of the last 1,000 years, from the plantation, through the famine, right through to the performance of the Welsh referee at Twickenham a few weeks ago. I hope, Paul, that we find today's Welsh referee just as accommodating as on that occasion.

I think that our role today is probably much more modest. Nonetheless, we are grateful for the opportunity to come and make a presentation, and to take questions. This is our first visit to this Body, so we had no clear view of its composition. However, I read an article by Barry White in the 'Belfast Telegraph' that referred to the Body as:

"a get-together for pensionable politicians."

[Laughter.]

I formed a picture of rows of elderly people, sitting with blankets covering their legs and nodding off

to sleep. I am glad that, at least, there are no blankets in sight.

[Laughter.]

Allow me to introduce my colleagues. Nigel Dodds is the MP for North Belfast. He is a former Minister for Social Development in Northern Ireland. Jeffrey Donaldson is the MP for Lagan Valley. We make him confess every day that he was once an Ulster Unionist. Iris has no sins to confess; she is the MP for Strangford. They are all also Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr Co-Chairman, we are Unionists by birth, by desire and by conviction; unapologetically, unflinchingly and unalterably. We are not Nationalists who have lost our way. We are not a temporary aberration. We are not the past. We are the present and, like it or not, we are the future.

In case anyone here in Killarney can be likened to those who came to see the talking horse — they came for the novelty of seeing the horse talk, rather than to listen to what it had to say — I ask only that you take away this one message from the Democratic Unionist Party about the future of Northern Ireland: Unionists want a stable, peaceful and democratic future. We want to coexist in Northern Ireland with those who share our homeland, even with those who hold a different and conflicting political outlook. We want to have a co-operative and harmonious interaction with our Southern neighbours, and we want to develop better relationships, North/South and east-west. However, let me be clear: none of the arrangements or structures to facilitate those ideals can be imposed or forced on us. There can be no settlement that does not have our consent.

We accept the legitimacy of those who, using solely democratic and peaceful means, seek to advance their aspiration of a united Ireland. With no less legitimacy we, using solely democratic and peaceful means, will oppose them. Where conflicting constitutional positions exist, the principle of consent must determine a territory's constitutional direction and destination. However, in addition, agreement must be reached on how the conflicting parties order the governance of their territory within the constitutional parameters that have been democratically decided.

The Democratic Unionist Party is openly and eagerly a devolutionist party. We want to see an Assembly that exercises the fullest range of powers, and we want to see it happening at the earliest possible suitable moment. We have advocated setting the Assembly up with the highest level of responsibility that circumstances allow — short of

Executive devolution — until Republicans complete the process of democratisation.

We hope that when the Assembly meets on and after 15 May, its Members will seek to tackle the many vital issues that have an impact on our constituents, whether they live in east or west Belfast or in any other part of the Province. A failure by the Northern Ireland parties to reach agreements on those social and economic issues would not bode well for the future when powers are devolved. Equally, a failure by the Government to give effect to agreements that have been reached would call its credibility into question.

There has been much speculation and commentary in the press that the Democratic Unionist Party intends to delay Executive devolution, seemingly for its own sake, and is content simply to be the largest Northern Ireland party at Westminster. No party has more to benefit from a working Assembly. With over 30 MLAs, we are the largest political party in Northern Ireland, and would have more influence than any other party over decisions that are taken in the Province.

It is in our interests, and, more importantly, in the interests of the people that we represent, that when the conditions are right, devolution is returned to Northern Ireland at the earliest opportunity. We have nothing to gain by unnecessarily delaying devolution. Equally, we, and those for whom we speak, have most to lose if powers are devolved while paramilitary and criminal organisations still continue, if they are attached to parties which are in government. Collapse would be the inevitable outcome. That is why caution is compulsory and certainty is crucial.

There is much that we want to achieve for all the people of Northern Ireland to create a prosperous, thriving and successful society. Of course, delaying that opportunity denies people the benefits of local decision-making. However, one cannot build a prosperous, thriving and successful society on shaky or unstable foundations. Let me make it clear: there can be an Executive in Northern Ireland only if it is formed among those who engage in exclusively peaceful and democratic politics. In policy documents and manifestos, we have consistently emphasised that an Executive involving Sinn Féin is not possible unless the IRA has ended all its paramilitary and criminal activity and people are satisfied that that is permanent and not tactical.

Threats to bypass the principle of consent and attempts to bully parties into submission will not advance the process or aid reaching a settlement. Deadlines, threats, Government spin and media pressure will not change our position, which has

received the overwhelming mandate of the Unionist electorate and will not be abandoned.

There can be no sidestepping or circumventing the issue of paramilitary and criminal activity. It cannot be talked away; it must be faced honestly and settled comprehensively. Bringing forward the date of full devolution is in the hands of Republicans; they know what they have to do. Their record for moving quickly has not been good. It took seven years after the Belfast Agreement to bring about substantial decommissioning; it took 11 years after the first IRA ceasefire to make a statement that came close to saying that the war was over. Just as pressure has forced Republicans to move in the past, it is necessary again in order to ensure that the process is completed and cemented.

Considering that it has taken Republicans years to take the steps that they have, it is not unreasonable for Unionists to exercise caution when assessing whether the process has been completed and is permanent. We will take as long as is necessary — but no longer — to be sure that the Republican campaign is over. After more than 30 years of terror, we want to be sure that we have a real and enduring peace.

This week, we will see the Independent Monitoring Commission's (IMC) latest report on paramilitary activity. I am sure that we all hope that the IMC will be able to report more progress. The usual leaks and attempts by the two Governments to spin the report before its publication have already begun. That is usually a sign that the Government want to deflect from some elements and accentuate other selected parts of the report rather than letting it speak for itself.

This approach serves only to diminish the credibility of the Government's judgement on those matters. If the report says that it cannot give the IRA a clean bill of health but that steady progress is being made, let it say so. People in Northern Ireland will consider that to be welcome progress and will be patient in waiting for completion. If, however, the IMC indicates that there is still more road to travel while the Government are spinning the line that we have reached Utopia, people will not believe them if and when we eventually reach the finish line.

Not unnaturally, I claim that the progress that has been made vindicates DUP strategy. The Ulster Unionist Party policy of accepting Sinn Féin into Government — guns, paramilitary operations, criminal activity and all — produced no incentive to end illegality. Instead, it produced a "We'll have our cake and eat it" approach, which has been evidenced in the events of recent years, including

the Florida gunrunning, the raid on Castlereagh Special Branch headquarters, and a number of murders and shootings. Who really believes that the IRA would have taken the steps that it has, had the DUP not been unequivocal in its demands that IRA activities be ended once and for all?

The DUP approach of holding out for completion and permanence is working, albeit there have been setbacks from time to time. So far, the IRA's actions have been too slow and, too often, not done in a way that would have commanded greater community confidence. However, its movements since November 2003 have been far in advance of what went before.

Does anyone believe that the Ulster Unionist Party would have demanded the same level of completion that we have? Does anyone believe that the Governments in London and Dublin would have held out even as far as they did for Republican acts of completion? History suggests that, but for the DUP victory, Republicans would have moved less, and more slowly. Now is not the time to dilute the strategy or abandon it. There can be no acceptable level of paramilitary or criminal activity. Every week of holding out for completion and securing progress helps to build a better society and produce an environment in which an Assembly can last without suspensions and crises.

2.45 pm

It would be foolish to suggest that considerable progress has not been made; however, it would be dangerous to suggest or imply that the process has been completed. I cannot say if or when a judgement can be made that completion has been reached. However, if and when a *prima facie* case can be made, the DUP has committed itself in its election manifesto to a consultation process in our community to ensure that Unionism is satisfied that completion has been achieved and that it is stable and enduring, not tactical and strategic.

The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom pledged that people had to be satisfied that the IRA had completed its transition before an Executive that includes Sinn Féin could be formed. We valued that pledge, and we intend to use the Prime Minister's yardstick to inform our decision-making process.

The requirement for an end to the activities of paramilitary organisations cannot be a one-sided approach. The concentration is naturally on the IRA because of its connection with Sinn Féin and the issue of places in Government. Equally, however, it is vital that the illegal activities of Loyalist paramilitary organisations are brought to an end once and for all. The Unionist community is intolerant

of all such paramilitary and criminal activity. We say that it must stop, and we accept no moral distinction between IRA criminality and Loyalist criminality.

Some people have suggested that we are setting too high a benchmark. They say that it will be impossible to stop individuals engaging in criminal activity. I am sure that that is right. However, that is not our litmus test: we cannot accept that any party that is in government should be inextricably linked to those who sanction, organise, tolerate or benefit from such criminality. That should not be exclusively a Unionist position, but a position that everyone who wants to see a stable, decent society in Northern Ireland can support.

Understandably, over the years, constitutional issues have overshadowed the role that bodies such as this Body have played. It has been difficult to separate the role of the BIIPB from the background of its formation. The 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement left a bitter legacy among Unionists, and that continues to this day with the refusal of any Unionist from Northern Ireland to take up seats on the Body. The Anglo-Irish Agreement left a political wasteland in the Province for many years. To proceed over the heads of the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland was a mistake that I hope that no Government will repeat.

Some Members will have heard or read of other Unionists' attacks on us for our visit today. I have no time for those Unionists who were quite happy to set up and participate in unaccountable all-Ireland bodies that have executive power, yet seem to have insurmountable difficulty in my colleagues and I simply addressing a body that has no executive decision-making power at all. No intelligent Unionist is opposed to a body of this nature, provided that it is perched on a branch of an acceptable tree. It must be set in the correct context — a context that is free of threat to Northern Ireland's constitutional position.

In 2004, we published a policy document that dealt with Northern Ireland's relationships with other regions of the British Isles. It was entitled 'North South East West', and in that document we proposed a British Isles parliamentary body. There is no doubt that the historical, cultural and other interests of people living in the British Isles mean that, on many issues, all of us have much in common. There are also issues that are particular to two or more regions, and it is also important that appropriate arrangements exist in such cases.

As recently as December 2004, we made it clear that, in the appropriate circumstances, we were prepared to participate in a parliamentary forum that involved representatives from the United

Kingdom and Irish Parliaments, as well as the other legislatures in the British Isles. That position is reflected in paragraph 10 of annex B of 'Proposals by the British and Irish Governments for a Comprehensive Agreement', which states:

"Following appropriate consultation with the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body, the two Governments would encourage the Oireachtas,"

— I hope that that is the right pronunciation —

"the British Parliament and the relevant elected institutions to approve an East-West Interparliamentary Framework which would embrace all their interests. The framework would operate on an inclusive basis."

Mr Co-Chairman, that continues to be our position, and we support the involvement in such a body of representatives from the devolved and other legislatures. Where the DUP has agreed to the framework within which an inter-parliamentary forum is placed, we will play a full and constructive role in such a body.

We have also made it clear that we are prepared to co-operate with the Republic of Ireland where it is in our mutual interest. As our party said in that 'North South East West' publication in 2004:

"We are committed to participating fully in any arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland which we agree as a result of the talks process".

It went on:

"In some instances, co-operation with the Republic of Ireland will be to the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. In other instances, competition will be in our best interest."

In seeking to attract investment, there is likely to be competition between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on some occasions. That is why it is so important that Her Majesty's Government create a level playing field for Northern Ireland to compete, as it is the only part of the UK that has a land border with another EU member state. We have pressed the Government regularly on that matter. Our significantly higher level of corporation tax proves a significant disadvantage.

Unionist participation in cross-border initiatives is much more likely to be forthcoming if those initiatives are based demonstrably on what is in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland, rather than advancing an apparent narrow Nationalist political agenda. Nationalist politicians in Northern Ireland would quickly find that if they adopted that approach, they would be much more likely to receive a positive reaction from Unionists.

Mr Co-Chairman, we came here not to seek approval for our position nor in expectation of winning converts but to increase understanding of our position and of our motivation. While no party will more stubbornly resist settling for a talked-up

illusion of peace, no party will more eagerly grasp the real thing when it appears. The DUP is serious and determined to make progress. The DUP is capable of, and willing to give, leadership. No one, Protestant or Roman Catholic, who respects the law and embraces democracy, has anything to fear from the Democratic Unionist Party. What we gain for those who vote for us, we will share with those who do not.

Nobody has more to gain from attaining peace and robust political structures than a community that has suffered so much from terror and instability. Nobody deserves it more; nobody desires it more; and nobody will contribute more to making it work. Thank you.

[Applause.]

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you very much, Peter. We will now take questions. As we have only slightly over half an hour, I suggest that Members keep questions brief, rather than make statements. Mr Robinson and his colleagues will distribute questions among themselves.

Mr Jim Glennon TD: Co-Chairman, on a house-keeping matter, may I suggest that at future meetings of the Body, when there is a contribution such as that which we have just heard, Members be supplied with a script in the same way as the press and people in the public gallery are.

I thank Mr Robinson for his powerful contribution, and I welcome him and his colleagues to the Body, and, before Senator Coghlan gets in, to Killarney as well.

If the members of the delegation had been present this morning, they would have heard our concerns regarding the urgency of the situation in Northern Ireland as well as the delays in restoring the institutions.

In his contribution, Mr Robinson stated that the party would engage in:

"a consultation process in our community to ensure that Unionism is satisfied completion has been achieved."

Is that foreseeable within the times and deadlines set out?

Mr Peter Robinson MP: Some of my colleagues may wish to join me on that issue. I said that when a prima facie case can be made that we had reached completion, we would consult our community. I hope that that is within the time that the Government have set out. However, it is not we who will make the assessment; it will be made by the IMC, the PSNI, the Army, and by those who feed us information on the ground. If that leads us to believe that

we have achieved completion, then we would involve the community in the widespread consultation that we promised in our election manifesto.

Therefore the answer is yes, I hope that it will be within the time, but we are not the ones who will determine whether it has been wound up; that is a matter for the Republican movement. The faster it moves, the more quickly we can move to the future stages.

3.00 pm

Mr Nigel Dodds MP: Mr Co-Chairman, thank you for your welcome this afternoon. As Peter Robinson said, there is a desire for devolution among those whom we represent. The DUP was a devolutionist party when the Ulster Unionists were an integrationist party and wanted nothing to do with devolution. We held the torch aloft for devolution.

People in our community ask why so much time has been given to the IRA and Sinn Féin in the process. Even after the Northern Bank robbery last year, in which the IRA was clearly involved — even the Taoiseach admitted that — an enormous amount of time was given to the Republican movement to bring it to where it is today, which is not even at the point of completion.

We want stability and endurance for the long term. If we rush devolved government without acts of completion, we will set the process back. We have seen the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive restored and collapsed on four occasions. We want a permanent settlement, and we think that our strategy will deliver that.

Mr Jim O’Keeffe TD: May I say that everyone acknowledges the courage of the DUP representatives in coming here and the breakthrough that they have made. We really thank you for having had the courage to come to talk to us.

May I press you a little on the time frame? In his opening remarks, Peter referred to the fact that, so far, the Independent Monitoring Commission has not given the IRA a clean bill of health. Everybody here wants to be convinced that there is an end to paramilitary and criminal activity on the part of the IRA and all others involved in such activity.

Can I bring you along the road a bit? If the IMC, either in this report or its next one, gives the IRA a clean bill of health, what time frame do you envisage might be involved in the consultation process to which you refer before you could come to the judgement that you believe you need to make to allow the Executive to proceed? Can you give any indication, on that hypothesis, about the time frame?

Mr Peter Robinson MP: Jim, if those circumstances were to present themselves, that would fit in with the view that I expressed earlier, where a case had been sensibly made that completion had been achieved.

At such a stage the consultation would begin. I imagine that it would not just be within our own party but would embrace churches, community organisations, other political interests, the business community and others. I presume that we are talking about some weeks; I do not consider that it will take months upon months to complete.

People need to be satisfied that there has been completion, but they also need to be satisfied that an end to violence is not temporary, because there have been instances in the past when violence and activity were halted for tactical reasons, whether for Bill Clinton’s visit or for imminent elections. People will want to be satisfied that they have a full stop, end of the chapter, and closure of the book — and not a tactical end of the armed struggle for it to begin again at some later stage.

As the Prime Minister said, the community has to be satisfied, and it will have its opportunity to speak through the consultation process. After all, the Government will not allow the community to be consulted through elections — they are putting elections off. We will still keep our commitment to consult, but I do not see it taking much more than a matter of weeks.

Senator Mary O’Rourke: May I join other Members in welcoming Peter Robinson and his delegation. We were waiting all morning, and very little got done until we got hold of you all.

I note that you consider words such as “caution”, “certainty”, “completion” and “permanence” to be the lodestar by which your party would engage in power sharing. Those words are necessary, but I fear, as might others here, that although you say that the IMC and other bodies will judge when that time of certainty, completion and caution has come about, excessive caution on your part might be a ploy — I hesitate to use that word because I do not mean it in a pejorative sense — or a strategy that would continue until the worth had gone out of it. Can you do anything to assuage that fear?

Mr Peter Robinson MP: I do not view caution as a bad word but as a sensible thing. Perhaps I can give Members some background about why my party will be cautious and why it will look for certainty. In December 2004, the leader of my party came out of Downing Street indicating that progress in the negotiations that were then taking place had reached the stage where he felt that he should inform the Unionist community that, although

he might have to bite his lip and swallow hard, he was prepared to go into Government if Republicans ended their campaign and activities. At that very time, the leadership of the Republican movement was organising the largest bank heist in the history of these islands. Had we not been cautious before, that would have been a salutary lesson to anybody that we need to be certain about these matters. It is no small thing for the Unionist community, because there is a great deal of history. The organisation that we are talking about has caused much suffering, so people are naturally suspicious and they want that level of certainty.

Although everyone is impatient and concerned about delays, we must have a stable political structure in Northern Ireland. We need to be sure that it is there; that it will be stable and lasting and will endure and not collapse every couple of months like the previous one. If devolution is set up and falls once again, I suspect there will be no further attempts to get it off the ground in Northern Ireland. It is vital that we get it right; so do not use the word "caution" as though it were some dreadful label that should never be attached to any process.

People are happy to be cautious when they talk about the economy; it is also right to be cautious when dealing with the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Jeffrey Donaldson MP: Mr Co-Chairman, it is a privilege to be here this afternoon and to share in this presentation. The history of the past 35 years in Northern Ireland is littered with the wreckage of political initiatives that have foundered because one side of the community or the other lacked the confidence to move forward. That has happened as much for Nationalists as it has for Unionists. There have been Assemblies where only Unionists were present and there have been scenarios, such as the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which were only supported by the Nationalist community.

We accept absolutely, and without qualification, that the only political dispensation that will deliver stability in Northern Ireland is one that has the consent, support and confidence of both sides of the community. Therefore, our caution is not tactical or for party-political advantage. It is to ensure that the community that we represent is behind and supports the political initiative that we want to provide long-term stability.

Coming from an Ulster Unionist background, and having been involved in that party's negotiations right up to the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998 and beyond, I have seen what happens to political leadership when people are left behind. It is in the interests of no one who desires to see long-

term stability in Northern Ireland to leave their people behind. A leadership that is devoid of support will not endure and, therefore, cannot deliver. David Trimble fell because he could not deliver on his side.

Much time and patience has been given to the leadership of Sinn Féin to ensure that it could deliver on its side. The leadership was given a lot of scope, and we all know that, on occasions, a blind eye was turned to many things because it was understood that there was a struggle going on within the Republican movement. All we ask is that when the moment comes — and we hope that it does come — and when the time is right to move forward, that we, as the leadership of Unionism, will be given that little extra time and space to ensure that we bring our people with us. If we do not bring our people with us the process will fail, as all other processes have failed in the past. Therefore, I repeat that it is in everyone's interest that this initiative succeeds and that the Unionist community is confident to move forward. That will be the best guarantee of success.

Mr Nigel Dodds MP: When there is talk of caution and the Unionist concerns for certainty, clarity and stability for the future, people in Northern Ireland reflect on the utterances of Southern political parties vis-à-vis Sinn Féin and its suitability for Government here in the Republic. Last night, the Tánaiste made a comment about Sinn Féin being untouchable because of its baggage of violence and criminality. Parties in this jurisdiction are vying with each other as to why Sinn Féin is unacceptable for Government. Other economic arguments are now also being used, but we know the underlying reason.

It is very understandable that caution is being used here, so how can Unionists — who have been on the receiving end of 35 years of genocide, murder and mayhem, along with their Catholic co-religionists — be expected not to feel the need for caution and certainty that this is over once and for all?

Mrs Iris Robinson MP: Mr Co-Chairman, as a mother and a grandmother, I feel that it is in all our interests to achieve democracy in Northern Ireland and a shared future with our Roman Catholic neighbours.

I want an end to having to live with bulletproof windows, panic buttons, TV monitors and police escorts. My children range from the ages of 33 to 23, and I have grandchildren of 14 and six years of age; they have all lived abnormal lives in Northern Ireland.

I assure all of you today about our sincerity, and I want to put to rest any doubts that the Body may

have. I want to see a devolved institution in Northern Ireland, particularly for taking decisions on bread-and-butter issues that affect everyone regardless of religious background. There have been many problems over the last 35 years of instability, which caused much neglect within the structures and Departments in Northern Ireland and led to many issues such as roads, education and health needing to be addressed.

We come here with only goodwill, to encourage the Body to accept our bona fides that we want to see a democratic institution where both communities have the same aims and objectives: to make the lives of our people bearable and, indeed, peaceful and enjoyable.

3.15 pm

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): There is quite a long list of Members who wish to speak, and I am anxious to accommodate everyone. I am also aware that at least two members of the delegation are very tight for time. We will move on as speedily as we can.

Mr Robert Walter MP: I echo the thoughts that have been expressed. I am delighted that these four colleagues from the House of Commons are here, particularly as the Body's discussions are open and frank, as always. They know most about what is normally discussed at the Body, and I regret that the DUP is not usually present.

In his presentation, Peter Robinson mentioned the provenance of this organisation. He mentioned 1985, and it is right to point out that the origins of this organisation go back before that, to the 'Anglo-Irish joint studies: joint report and studies' of 1981, which mentioned a parliamentary tier in inter-parliamentary discussions. I welcome Peter Robinson's comments about the DUP participating in inter-parliamentary discussions involving the Parliaments and Assemblies of these islands.

This Body brings together the Oireachtas, the Westminster Parliament, the Parliament of Scotland, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly — when it is up and running — as well as Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man. We are that Body. My question is blunt: our next meeting will take place on DUP home territory in Belfast. Can we look forward to members of the Democratic Unionist Party joining us as full Members of the Body?

Mr Peter Robinson MP: I have stated clearly that the DUP has no difficulties with an inter-parliamentary forum and believes that it can do useful work. However, it needs to be perched on a branch of a suitable tree, and the structure there-

fore needs to be agreed. That would be part of the process that the Government are setting up where, in parallel to the Assembly that will commence in May, they are hoping to have further constitutional discussions among the political parties. I imagine that much of the work that will be done there will be of the same variety as that in the 'Proposals by the British and Irish Governments for a Comprehensive Agreement'. That document gave an indication of how progress might be made in this respect.

The Democratic Unionist Party did not have any difficulty with the terms in which it was placed in the comprehensive agreement. Whether it happens in the time frame indicated depends upon whether other things happen in that same period. To some extent, we are both being held back by the one requirement: that there is a complete and total end to paramilitary and criminal activity, so that we can get on with all of those matters.

Senator Paschal Mooney: Like all of my colleagues, I am privileged to be a member of this Body, but equally privileged to be here today and to applaud our parliamentary colleagues in the DUP for taking their courage in their hands and coming among us after many years of this Body's deliberations on having a Unionist chair here. I also endorse the words of my colleague Robert Walter MP.

I support much of what Peter Robinson said in his presentation in relation to the document on North/South and east-west arrangements. As someone who lives in Leitrim, a border county, which along with the other border counties on both sides has suffered economically and socially since partition, I would like to ask Peter if there is a subtext in his presentation: that efforts towards establishing all-Ireland institutions to advance matters of mutual interest is unity by stealth.

If so, would the DUP not accept the bona fides of the Government of the Republic, speaking for the majority of Southern Irish people, that such institutions are a practical measure and that the evolving relationship between the two parts of the island is based on mutual respect, co-operation — not coercion — and reconciliation — and not rejection of his traditions and beliefs? If not, what steps does he believe we in the South should take to reassure the Unionist population of our good intentions that have not already been taken?

Mr Peter Robinson MP: I am grateful for the question. I will let Nigel deal with much of it, because my responsibility was the 'Devolution Now' document; his was North/South and east-west, so he will touch on those issues. On the generality,

most people in Northern Ireland would have no difficulty with there being sensible co-operation and a good relationship with the Irish Republic. You would not find people in the Unionist community having a difficulty in swallowing that.

The difficulty comes in where institutions and structures are set up, not with the purpose of having practical co-operation and improving the lives of citizens here and in Northern Ireland, but with nothing more than a political purpose and there to advance a political goal. That is a distinction that Unionists are attempting to make. We want to have the practical co-operation without the political undertones.

Mr Nigel Dodds MP: In our discussions with the Government leading up to the putative agreement in 2004, we wanted to see key outcomes, which were stability, accountability in the institutions both within Northern Ireland to the people of Northern Ireland and in the North/South bodies, so that decisions that were made in those North/South bodies by Northern Ireland Ministers would be properly accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive and, through them, to the people.

We are relatively content that if the sort of changes that were outlined in the comprehensive agreement which we negotiated and which would take account of ensuring that there was proper accountability — mechanisms put in place for both internal decision-making in Northern Ireland and also in terms of North/South bodies — that would take care of many of the difficulties and issues that we had with those bodies prior to those negotiations.

Prior to the sorts of changes that would be necessary, and which we have suggested and put forward and, I think, the Government have accepted, it was unacceptable in their present form, as outlined under the Belfast Agreement and operated previously, that Ministers from Northern Ireland could go to North/South bodies and make decisions. I remember standing along with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Assembly attempting not just to interrogate or ask questions, but to suggest amendments or changes, and that was ruled out. In fact, nothing to do with the budget of those bodies could be properly inspected, scrutinised or changed.

So what we are looking for is proper accountability. We believe that those changes are in the comprehensive agreement that was suggested in December 2004, and if those changes are made, I think that will go a long way towards dealing with many of

the concerns that we had about the operation of North/South bodies.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): I encourage Members to tighten up their questions rather than make mini-statements.

Mr Joe Sherlock TD: I have been a member of Committee D for the past three years, and there has always been criticism of the fact that there has been no DUP representation on the Committee. First, does your presence here today mean that you have seen a change in the scene that has enabled you to come? Secondly, do you have any comment on the fact that the North remains a society bitterly divided by tribal identifications — and is becoming more so — in spite of the fact that the guns are silent?

Mr Jeffrey Donaldson MP: In response to your first question, the political climate has changed significantly over recent years, and our presence here today reflects that.

In relation to your second question, it is true that even since the Belfast Agreement was signed in 1998, Northern Ireland has become more polarised. The evidence is there that more Protestants are living in predominantly Protestant areas and more Catholics are living in predominantly Catholic areas than five, 10 or 15 years ago, and that is a problem. A major contributory factor to that problem is the influence of the paramilitaries on both sides. We can have all the agreements we want at political level and at institutional level; we can get political parties sitting across the table and making decisions, but unless we deal with the problem that is creating greater polarisation through fear, hatred and crime, we will not get to grips with that division. We will only be applying a sticking plaster over a very deep wound. That is the reason that we believe it is right that we deal with paramilitarism as well as with creating political institutions that can deliver a top layer of political stability. This is as much a problem in Loyalist communities as it is in Republican communities, and it is the reason for Peter Robinson saying that he wanted the Loyalist paramilitaries out of business every bit as much as the Republicans paramilitaries.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): We have a number of Members who still wish to speak, so I propose to group them. The first group I will take will be Senator Brian Hayes, Arthur Morgan TD, Dominic Grieve MP and Liz O'Donnell TD — in that order, please.

Senator Brian Hayes: There has been a series of bilateral meetings between some Southern parties, my own included, and the DUP, and we very much

welcome that. At the beginning of December, Fine Gael and the DUP had their first official meeting; Jim was there and our party leader, along with Rev Dr Ian Paisley and many of the senior colleagues who are here today. We want to see more of that because there are many issues that we need to address, not just Government to Government or parties to Government but within parties.

My question is a straightforward one. At the last plenary session of the Body there was virtual unanimity on the opposition of the Body to the then proposals by the British and Irish Governments to introduce legislation to deal with the so-called on-the-run issue. If that matter resurfaced, how would it affect your negotiations and your position in respect of the outcome that we hope to arrive at in November?

Mr Arthur Morgan TD: A Chathaoirligh, go raibh maith agat. First, I deeply regret that I am sitting with my back to our guests. It is not intentional I assure you; it is simply by dint of the seating arrangements here.

I too welcome the DUP delegation to Killarney. A Cathaoirligh, I think we all agree that progress in the peace process has been much slower than anybody in this room would have liked. However, as the cliché goes, we are where we are. The principle of consent mentioned by Peter has been well and truly settled through the Good Friday Agreement, so that is established and has been dealt with. When does the DUP envisage commencing the consultation process with its community?

Surely the agencies that should deal with allegations of involvement in what is now commonly called “criminality” are the Criminal Assets Bureau and the Assets Recovery Agency. Those types of institutions should rightly come under the control of the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

A comment was made on policing, and I am happy to work through the policing arrangement. However, that issue can be settled only in the context of a rounded settlement in the Executive, with all parties elected with a mandate. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Liz O’Donnell TD: I welcome the delegation to the meeting.

Peter’s presentation concentrated almost entirely on his concerns about security issues and the permanency, or otherwise, of the Republican movement’s commitment to democratic means only. Many parties on the island — and, indeed, most people here — would understand and share those concerns, because there have been so many false dawns and disappointments over the

years. Some of those concerns are ongoing, north and south of the border, as the Tánaiste said only yesterday.

3.30 pm

Even though the DUP was not part of that final political settlement known as the Good Friday Agreement, if the party were confident that there had been an end to criminality, would the DUP and its constituency, its voters and the broad Unionist community, accept the other constitutional and institutional arrangements that are part of the agreement? In other words, is it only a lack of confidence about the security issues that is holding everything up?

Mr Dominic Grieve MP: Given that an end to paramilitarism and criminality is critical if one is to be satisfied that the Republican movement is acting in good faith, and that by its very nature criminality is endemic in Northern Ireland, what type of reassurance does Mr Robinson seek from Republicans that continuing criminality is not linked to them? In particular, how important is the current failure by Republicans to support the PSNI?

Mr Peter Robinson MP: I shall deal with some of those issues, and my colleagues can pick up on any others.

Dominic mentioned criminality. Nobody can expect to live in a criminal-free society. It would be nice to believe in it, but it is not going to happen. The issue is, therefore, whether the organisations that are in government are associated with those who are involved in organising, sanctioning, benefiting or tolerating criminality. We are looking for a clear signal that the actions of those involved in criminality are not the responsibility of any party that is linked to a party in government. That becomes particularly difficult when, even to this moment in time, although the cows in the fields and the dogs in the streets know that the IRA was responsible for the Northern Bank robbery, it still denies any involvement. What credibility does the IRA have when it says that it is not involved in criminality, when everybody knows that it has been? There are real difficulties, and we will therefore examine the assessments from the police, the IMC and others on that subject.

The PSNI must deal with individuals who are responsible for illegal activity within the boundaries of Northern Ireland, or the Garda Síochána if the activity is on this side of the border; it is also a matter for the Assets Recovery Agency and the Criminal Assets Bureau. However, that goes only as far as making individuals responsible and making them face due process. It is vital that no organisational, criminal element is associated with

Government. That goes beyond the individual responsibilities that those organisations may have.

The question asked was to whether, as soon as the issue of paramilitary and criminal activity is settled, anything else would hold matters up. The parallel negotiations that the Government are contemplating will deal with the issues that were discussed leading up to December 2004 and that are set out in the comprehensive agreement. By and large those issues were in a form that was acceptable to the DUP. Some matters could have been dealt with better; for instance, the SDLP has raised the issue of the manner in which the First Minister and Deputy First Minister are elected. We do not prefer the option contained in the comprehensive agreement. Our option is probably more to the SDLP's liking.

There are issues to be resolved, but there is little difference between the comprehensive agreement's stance on those issues and what is acceptable to us. We want improvement on some issues, but I honestly do not believe that that will be a problem. The big problem that I see is with our being satisfied about paramilitary and criminal activity. I hope that by the time we come to take a decision, the rest will have been resolved in those parallel discussions.

Mr Nigel Dodds MP: Brian Hayes asked a question about the on-the-run legislation. That legislation united virtually everybody in Northern Ireland — and further afield. I have never seen the House of Commons so united in opposition. All parties opposed that legislation tooth and nail. Even the Secretary of State, in introducing it, described it as obnoxious but necessary, and there was great relief when it was withdrawn. Any suggestion that that legislation might be brought back would undoubtedly be an absolute deal breaker. There is no appetite for that legislation or any kind of amnesty for terrorists on the run. It has been dealt with. It has gone away. We do not want to see it come back.

Dominic Grieve raised the PSNI issue. Surely it is ludicrous to suggest that those mandated to look after a whole range of responsibilities as part of a Government should not be prepared to say to people to go to the police and tell them that a crime has been committed. People should be told to support the police and give evidence to them. To not do so is simply unacceptable and ludicrous in any kind of democracy. If Sinn Féin and the Republican movement are serious about wanting to get into Government, that issue must be addressed. I suggest that they should not be cautious about that but should exercise some urgency in

supporting the institutions of law and order in Northern Ireland.

Mr Jeffrey Donaldson MP: A question was asked about when the consultation will commence. When we believe that the potential exists to move forward to an Executive, we will commence the consultation. As Peter Robinson said, that should not last any longer than a few weeks.

Mr Peter Robinson MP: One further question concerned the principle of consent. It was suggested that that had been settled. I wish that it had been settled, because if it had been, we would not have had the recent joint statement and the terms that appeared in paragraph 10, which overtly indicated joint management, joint authority and joint sovereignty if people did not meet the Governments' deadlines. One cannot say, on the one hand, that one will move the constitutional position on to that new arrangement without the consent of the people of Northern Ireland and, on the other hand, say that one believes in the principle of consent.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): I want to try to be fair to all those who have offered to speak. I will take brief questions in the following order: Cecilia Keaveney TD, Senator Paul Coghlan, Jerry Cowley TD, Michael McMahon MSP and Seymour Crawford TD. I ask you all to be brief because we have other business to conduct.

Ms Cecilia Keaveney TD: Go raibh maith agat, a Chomh-Chathaoirligh. As a fellow Ulster public representative, I am glad to be here and glad that Peter Robinson is here too.

The last time I met Mr Robinson, he was Minister for Regional Development, and we argued the toss over where tolls had to go — here, there or anywhere — for the bypass at Strabane and the Toome bypass. Those were very basic, but very interesting local activities. Coming from that perspective, my interpretation of what Mr Robinson said was that if we stopped the Body as it is, and we started it up again that would be OK; we could have DUP representation. We would probably have much the same representation from the different countries; we cannot really have anyone else because those are the people who are interested.

We had the permanent ceasefire and decommissioning. We now have: "when the conditions are right"; "we cannot say when or if"; and "we hope it does come". To reiterate the same question that others are asking, I wonder whether there is going to be another hurdle.

Is it fair that we were looking for regional development so many years ago, and, in reality,

we have local government reform that is only going to make it worse? That is a topic that we started to discuss this morning. Can we offer a wee bit of hope that things will get sorted out and that normality will break out, and that we deal with criminality in a criminal manner, and deal with politics in a political manner?

Senator Paul Coghlan: As Jim Glennon rightly forecast, I very warmly welcome Peter and Iris Robinson, Nigel Dodds and Jeffrey Donaldson to Killarney. While I know that they will not, of necessity, have time today to savour it all, they will very much appreciate the natural beauty of the great outdoors and the surroundings here in Killarney. Rather like Robert Walter, I shall be very brief.

While their caution regarding the Executive is understandable, surely, with regard to the advancement of mutual interests, this Body is an ideal and totally non-threatening forum that they can more quickly adopt as Members.

Dr Jerry Cowley TD: Like everyone else, I greatly welcome the presence of the DUP. It is a very important event, given what has happened in the past, and given the DUP's position that things have to move in particular ways. However, the DUP is here today and there was talk of confidence from its delegation. I would like to test that level of confidence. I ask how much confidence is in the delegation. What is the confidence level that there will be a devolved institution within the window of opportunity that exists at the moment? More specifically, on a scale of one to 10, could the delegation give me its confidence level?

Mr Michael McMahon MSP: As a Member of a devolved institution, and having seen the benefits of working closely with our colleagues in the Welsh Assembly, I ask the delegation to outline its view on close working with the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive in terms of economic, social and cultural links between the North of Ireland and Scotland.

Mr Seymour Crawford TD: Like Cecilia Keaveney TD, I would like, as a fellow Ulster person, to welcome the four personnel from the DUP. This is a major step forward, and I hope that they will have gained something from it, as we have.

This morning I spoke of the urgent need to settle this issue as quickly as possible. I raised that matter for a number of reasons: first, the continued polarisation of communities up there; and secondly, the lack of agreement on policing. I did not mention the third reason this morning, but it is a very practical one as far as we in the border regions are concerned, and it must be a problem in Northern Ireland as well. Because of a lack of

high-tech jobs, we are losing our graduates. I understand from my friends in Northern Ireland that many people from there are going to college in GB and other places, and not coming back. We are losing highly skilled people from all sides. For all those reasons, can the DUP give us a commitment that it intends to ensure that this thing works sooner rather than later?

Mr Peter Robinson MP: As Minister, I was glad to give the go-ahead to both the Toome bypass and the Strabane bypass, along with the Limavady bypass, the Comber bypass and many others — in fact, I was bypassing an awful lot of places.

Local government reform is a major issue for Northern Ireland. Regrettably, there are clear indications that even if the Assembly sitting on 15 May were to reach some consensual arrangement on the future of local government, there is no commitment on the part of the Government to accept what the people in Northern Ireland want for their own local government arrangements. That is regrettable and is something, I hope, on which the Assembly will test the Government. I expect that we would get considerable support in the House, should agreement be reached on those issues.

3.45 pm

It is not as simple as saying that criminality should be left to those who deal with criminals and that politicians should deal with politics. If there is an Executive, and Members are being expected to sit down with people who are engaged in either paramilitary or criminal activity, it indicates that there is an acceptance by society that that is all right and OK. I cannot do that; it is not right that it should be done.

The leaders of any society should be role models for that society; they should not be engaged in paramilitary and criminal activity. That is not to say that those bodies should not be responsible for anybody who breaks the law, but if an organisation is supporting those who are engaged in law-breaking, or benefiting from the law-breaking itself, that is clearly not an acceptable way forward. That position was enunciated by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in the pledges that he made about the necessity to remove all paramilitary and criminal activity.

We were asked about confidence levels. Our confidence is in our own position; the confidence that we are being asked to rate on a scale of one to 10 is our confidence that other people will do things by a certain time. I have indicated in other places that I do not believe that, at its present pace, the Republican movement will meet the deadlines that have been set. Only if that pace

increases, only if Republicans stretch themselves and ensure that criminality is cut out completely in a much shorter time, will those deadlines be met.

It is not a matter of confidence in our position; we are confident that, when we see it, we will recognise it and be able to move on that basis, but we cannot be confident that people who have delayed thus far will do it within that time frame. It is not really our call — it is up to the Republican movement to demonstrate that it has ended all paramilitary and criminal activity.

I regret very much that I will not see the delights of the locality, other than through a car window as I leave. However, I am sure that I shall receive an invitation to come back at some other time and go for a jaunt around the streets in one of the horse-drawn carriages that I saw.

In relation to the Scottish Parliament, as a Minister, I found it very valuable to meet my counterpart Scottish Minister on matters of mutual interest, which I did on two occasions. On one occasion, I met Scottish and Welsh counterparts on mutual issues, and we learnt from their experiences and they from ours. Equally, when I was in office, I phoned, on several occasions, the responsible Ministers in the Irish Republic on matters of mutual interest. That is what co-operation is about; that is when it really can be of benefit, and there is no reluctance on our part to developing those relationships.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Does anybody else from the delegation wish to comment?

Mrs Iris Robinson MP: Everyone looks at the Scottish Parliament model with envy, especially in relation to health issues such as the introduction of free nursing care. The Scottish Parliament, of course, has tax-raising abilities that the devolved institutions in Wales and Northern Ireland do not, but we certainly look with envy at just how well the Scottish Parliament manages its own affairs. It is a role model for the rest of us.

Mr Jeffrey Donaldson MP: Just to respond to Seymour Crawford's question about the economic conditions and the loss of graduates, there is no doubt that for years Northern Ireland has suffered, and not just from the loss of graduates. A very high percentage of our young people leave Northern Ireland for further and higher education and never return, and that is a major problem for us. We want to address that.

Seymour, all of us here can give you an absolute commitment that we want to see devolution and an Assembly operating and functioning properly as quickly as possible. Every day, every week that

passes, my inability to take decisions for the people that I represent means that there is a limit to what I can do for them.

Now, I want to fulfil the mandate that I have been given, as do all of us at this table, and we want to do so as early as possible. In fact, recognising that we have a difficulty at the moment with an Executive, we have proposed that the Assembly be restored on 15 May and that it be given responsibility for some of these issues and start taking decisions, or try to arrive at a consensus on some of the key issues, even in advance of an Executive being formed.

From day one we are up for sitting around the table in the Assembly and in Committees, addressing the issues like the one you have identified, the economy. It is a big issue for us in Northern Ireland. We want to bring forward proposals to the Government — and when the Executive is ready to be established we want to be ready to address and tackle these issues.

We absolutely do not want to delay any longer than we have to. In fact, we would have devolution tomorrow if we could get it at a level consistent with where we are at the moment, and I hope that we will move quickly towards full devolution.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you very much. I want to thank the DUP for its input and you for your questions, and I now call on my Co-Chairman, Paul Murphy, to thank the delegation on behalf of us all.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP): Thank you, Pat. Peter, Iris, Jeffrey and Nigel, thank you very much indeed for the seriousness and the substantial nature of your contribution and the frankness and fullness of the discussion and exchange of views that we have had. It did not surprise me, because I have worked with you for many years, and I suspect that it did not surprise many people sitting here either. But this is the first time that this opportunity has arisen, and I do not think that anybody can underestimate its significance.

Secondly, you talked about the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and whatever the pros and cons of that agreement, the name is completely wrong. As a Welshman I rejected it. And what is rather interesting is that since that agreement was signed, the Body in front of you today has represented people from way beyond England and Ireland. There are people from Wales and from Scotland and from the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, and all of us here wish you well in the months ahead in the negotiations that you are going to have — first, hopefully, to become part of this Body, in any fresh negotiation. Both Liz O'Donnell and I

chaired strand three of the agreement, and that agreement certainly meant that we should have a body like this which would embrace people of all persuasions in Northern Ireland.

Finally, I hope that when we next meet, and as a result of those negotiations, you come to us not simply as leaders of your party but as Ministers of a Northern Ireland Assembly. Thank you very much indeed.

[Applause.]

The sitting was suspended at 3.53 pm.

The sitting was resumed at 4.32 pm.

ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, MR DERMOT AHERN TD

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Order. I apologise for the delay, which was somewhat outside our control. I am delighted, as I am sure are Members, to welcome Mr Dermot Ahern TD, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, to the meeting. I am told that this is the first time that a former Co-Chairman has formally addressed the Body. Dermot, you are particularly welcome. I know that you were listening earlier to what was going on, so we all look forward to your address. I now invite you to address the Body.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr Dermot Ahern TD): Go raibh maith agat, a Chomh-Chathaoirligh agus a dhaoine uaisle. First, I apologise for being a bit late; I took the opportunity to have a follow-on meeting upstairs with the DUP delegation. I listened intently to the earlier discussion, and I complimented the Body to the DUP. I also complimented the DUP for what I felt was an important session.

After I turned off my mobile phone earlier, I saw a photographer admonish Senator Mary O'Rourke, so not to be outdone, I made sure that I turned mine off again. I echo the words of several Members about how delighted we all are to be in such scenic surroundings in Killarney. I know that Senator Paul Coghlan, who took a photograph of me, is getting photographs with everyone outside. I think that they will be on his literature for the next election. I am not sure that my colleague John O'Donoghue will be too happy about my being photographed with Paul.

I am a former Co-Chairman of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, and before I came here, I tried to recall when I held that position — it was that long ago. However, over lunch, Paul Murphy reminded me that it was from 1993 to 1995. I must say that I had — and have — fond memories of the time that I spent as a Member and as a Co-Chairman of the Body. I was born and bred — and still live — five miles from the border, so I found it an extremely valuable Body to be on. I am still friendly with my Co-Chairman, Peter Temple-Morris; we correspond every now and again about the issues of the day.

A great deal was happening, and the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body was to the fore of

the discussions that took place at the time. I am delighted that, in 2006, it continues that tradition — the DUP's presence at this session is a small but very significant step. I wish to say, and not in any sycophantic way, that of all the organisations with which I have been involved during my political career, the Body has been one of the best for cutting through the myths and barriers on both sides. I have seen at first hand how the Body's open and frank discussions, both formal and informal, have helped to develop mutual understanding and good relations.

At the start of the Body, and during my time as Co-Chairman of it, we were subjected to some pretty harsh criticism, particularly from the Unionist community. That disappointed us, and we always referred to the two chairs that were left vacant for Unionists to participate. That is why I am delighted that the DUP joined the Body today for its discussion. As I said to the delegation, dialogue is an absolutely vital part of building trust and understanding. The Body has long sought dialogue with the Unionist community and tradition; therefore it is very significant that the DUP has joined you.

I would encourage you, Co-Chairmen, and all Members, in whatever way you can, to build on this engagement with the DUP and to engage with the Ulster Unionist Party and with all other strands of Unionism across the border.

I wish to pay a particular compliment to your distinguished Co-Chairman Pat Carey, who has been extremely busy and who has kept the officials in my Department very busy in the preparations and lead-up to today. I also warmly congratulate my colleague Paul Murphy, with whom I had the honour of working when he was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I miss him and his wit and personality, and I am delighted to be here as part of this organisation with him.

Both Co-Chairmen bring considerable experience to the job. I know that they and several Members worked very hard to make today's engagement possible, and I hope that that can be built on and that the Body becomes a forum for all political strands and parties on the island.

Ireland and Britain have a strong and multi-layered relationship that reflects our complex, intertwined histories. Today, we have a close relationship that expresses itself in many ways: we have shared economic interests; we remain major trading partners and have become major investors in each other's communities and economies. As neighbours and partners in the European Union, we work closely together on a range of international issues through our development aid programmes. The mobility of

our peoples has been enriched by a vibrant cultural and sporting engagement. We also share the imperative of working together to find a solution to the Northern Ireland issue.

Devolution in Britain has opened up a new and vibrant dimension to that relationship. The Good Friday Agreement recognises the importance of the wider east-west dimension and gives expression to that unique relationship via the British-Irish Council. The Irish Government actively participate in the work of the Council and value it as an insutientit for consultation and co-operation on a wider range of east-west matters. It provides the Irish Government with a unique forum in which to engage not just with London and Belfast, but with the devolved Administrations of Scotland, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. Indeed, I do not think that the Taoiseach has missed one of the British-Irish Council's meetings, and I have attended many of them, as appropriate.

As Governments and Administrations, large and small, we face many of the same social and economic challenges, and we can learn from one another on issues such as the environment, drugs and social inclusion and can develop opportunities to work together to our mutual advantage. That is what we are doing in the British-Irish Council, and there is potential to do much more. Indeed, in recent discussions with the British Government, we said that the east-west link needs to be built on, and we intend to do that.

The British-Irish Council (BIC) is an essential part of the architecture of the Good Friday Agreement. The Irish Government are committed to advancing the work of the Council. We hope that in the very near future, we will see the Northern Ireland Executive taking their places again at the BIC table. We see a dynamic and fully functioning east-west strand as a very important component in the development of a comprehensive and balancing relationship among the peoples of this island.

I know that, as fellow parliamentarians, Members share my belief in the power of politics. For too long now the people of Northern Ireland have been denied active political representation in the institutions established in the Good Friday Agreement. For too long Northern Ireland's politicians have had no role in important decisions affecting the daily lives of their constituents, as Jeffrey Donaldson said. Eight years on from the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, and more than three years since the suspension of the institutions, it is time for political power and responsibility to return to a fully functioning Assembly and Executive. It is time for politicians to begin the work they were elected to do.

The Governments are united in our conviction that devolved partnership government, as enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, provides the best opportunity to create a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland.

On 6 April 2006 in Armagh, the Taoiseach and Prime Minister set out the Governments' joint strategy to bring this opportunity to reality and achieve a fully functioning Assembly and Executive in 2006. Three weeks from today, on 15 May, the Assembly will meet for the first time since suspension in October 2002. It will be asked to elect a First Minister and Deputy First Minister and form an Executive within six weeks. Should that not prove possible, we are prepared to give some additional, but limited, time — until 24 November — for the express purpose of implementing the agreement and establishing the Executive.

We have now reached a point in the process where the parties must take difficult decisions. The deadline of 24 November is very real. In putting forward our plan, we are exercising our responsibilities as Governments to give direction and leadership. Now it is up to the parties. Partnership government means just that: the political parties in Northern Ireland working together in partnership and fulfilling their democratic contract with the electorate.

Our clear and primary focus is on taking the necessary steps to achieve full restoration of the Assembly and the Executive this year. The Governments are agreed that, should we reach 25 November without the formation of an Executive, we will exercise our responsibilities to ensure that the agreement is implemented to the maximum possible extent for the benefit of all communities. We will do so because we have a continuing responsibility to advance the process to which both Governments are firmly committed and which has been endorsed by the people of this island, North and South.

Our task today is not to conjure with failure; rather it behoves all of us to re-commit to doing everything possible to ensure successful restoration of the institutions. Our primary focus is on making the Assembly and the Executive work. Any alternatives would be a poor second best for the people of Northern Ireland. Our intentions and aspirations for 2006 could not be plainer. The fundamental priority is the full implementation of the agreement across its three strands. That means a fully functioning Assembly with a First Minister, a Deputy First Minister and local Ministers in charge of Departments. It means a North/South Ministerial Council functioning as envisaged in the agreement. It means optimal operation of the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovern-

mental Conference. These are not dry institutional structures; they are the political framework within which politicians, North, South, east and west, can take forward real work on behalf of their people.

4.45 pm

When we were in Armagh on 6 April the Taoiseach, Prime Minister Blair, Peter Hain and I met a delegation of business leaders from Northern Ireland. They gave us a clear message that there needs to be a radical approach towards the problems — mainly economic — of the Northern Ireland situation. They want to replicate the South's economic success in the North. To do this, they see real value in North/South co-operation to meet our shared economic challenges and opportunities.

The two Governments are convinced that North/South co-operation is delivering real benefits for the people of this island. Working together, we have been looking at ways to develop a more prosperous and competitive all-island economy. We are determined to get maximum benefit for the massive €100 billion of infrastructure development planned on the island over the next 10 years.

We have initiated a comprehensive study on the development of an all-island economy. It will examine opportunities for further co-operation in areas such as innovation, R&D, trade and investment promotion.

We are identifying ways to work together for the economic development of, for example, the north-west of this island. In telecoms, energy, education and health we are developing co-operation that will deliver for ordinary people.

We cannot afford to miss these opportunities. The economic well-being of all our people depends on it. We want to see the North/South Ministerial Council meeting again and doing its work for the benefit of all of the communities on the island. That is absolutely our preferred option.

However, the two Governments have been very clear that, if we do not have an Executive by 24 November, we will bring forward the work of North/South co-operation. It is our responsibility so to do: our responsibility under the Good Friday Agreement and our responsibility to the people of Ireland.

We have made huge strides forward since this time last year. We have consistently argued the case for devolved government and for the implementation of the agreement. But while we can make the case and create the conditions for partnership government, the onus now is on the politicians in Northern Ireland to show leadership and courage, and to make it happen once and for all.

The weeks ahead will be challenging for all the parties. When they meet in the Assembly Chamber in Stormont three weeks from today, I hope that all 108 Assembly Members will grasp this opportunity to reclaim their political relevance and to make politics work for the people of Northern Ireland in 2006.

[Applause.]

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you, Minister, for that very comprehensive address. I want to thank you on behalf of us all for the work that you continue to do for the whole peace process, and indeed the work that you do across the wider community in your capacity as Minister for Foreign Affairs.

My Co-Chairman has reminded me that we started at 4.30 pm. We have an hour and a half, which takes us to 6.00 pm. Time would be very tight for departure to the hotel, so it has been suggested — if it does not cause mayhem with the organisers — that we could perhaps delay departure by 15 minutes or so, if that is technically possible. If not, perhaps someone could tell us during the next hour or so.

We will proceed with questions.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Renewable Energy Resources

1. **Mr Jeff Ennis MP** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs what measures the Irish Government are taking to encourage the greater use of renewable energy resources.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr Dermot Ahern TD): As a former Minister for Energy, I am fully aware of the need to develop renewable energy technologies. It is a key priority of the Government. Since the mid-1990s a support scheme has operated in Ireland to encourage the construction of new electricity generating plants powered by renewable energy. As you may know, we have a short-term target to have 13% of all energy coming from renewable sources by 2010. We are confident that we can meet that target.

Last year we brought forward a pilot mineral oil tax relief scheme for biofuels. That was very successful. During my time as Minister for Energy I was part of the process in bringing that forward. The 2006 Budget, announced recently by the Minister for Finance, Brian Cowen, included €205 million over four years for a targeted extension of that package.

That is subject to state-aid approval, but we do not anticipate problems in that respect. However, one never knows with the European Commission.

We recently launched a €65 million programme of grants, which is a significant investment, to support the use of renewable technologies in the heat market.

With regard to cross-border co-operation, I have discussed renewable energy many times with Peter Hain. It is no coincidence that my home town of Dundalk is the place to which the Government agreed to decentralise Sustainable Energy Ireland. That decentralisation will create a vision of renewable energy in the greater Dundalk and Newry and Mourne area. That cross-border project is called 2020 Vision, and that area will be the pilot for the development of renewable technologies across the spectrum.

About a year ago one of the DUP delegates contacted me to find out what we were doing in Dundalk with regard to renewable energy. A significant part of the Dundalk Institute of Technology is advancing the use of renewable energy. It is the first — and only — urban campus in the world that has a wind turbine. That turbine has been running for the past few months and provides all its energy needs.

Mr Jeff Ennis MP: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive and detailed response. I am sure that he agrees that that question has taken on greater resonance since crude oil hit a record price of \$75 a barrel last week. Is he aware that the British Government have established a £59 million environment and renewable energy fund for Northern Ireland so that electricity that is generated from sustainable sources will increase from its current level of 5.6% to 12% by the year 2012? Over the next two years £8 million will be made available to over 4,000 private households for the micro-generation of electricity via solar and wind power. Does the Minister agree that it is important to use such grants to empower ordinary citizens so that they can play their full part in alleviating the current energy crisis?

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: Yes. The Government recently announced the €65 million grants-for-dwellings programme so that renewable energy will be generated for heating using, for example, wind power, solar panels and heat pumps.

With regard to North/South co-operation, we have decided to increase interconnection so that there will be an all-island energy market by 2007. Indeed, legislation is going through the House of Commons to facilitate that. A large element of that project focuses on how we can develop renewable energy on an all-island basis.

One issue that I know interests some of our Welsh friends in particular is that the Republic of Ireland Government have agreed to interconnect with Britain, and Wales will most likely be the interconnection point. That substantial project will be fast-tracked by the Irish Government in the coming years. Apart from the Greek islands, Ireland is the last island to have its electricity interconnected with the rest of Europe. We are extremely conscious of the need for that interconnection. We hope that, ultimately, if we can build up our renewable sources, we will not only be able to take Russian and European electricity, we will also be able to trade back renewable and indigenous energy sources.

There is a lot of planning to be done. We are extremely conscious of that, and we see huge advantages in working with the British Government to match what they are doing. However, our work must be done in such a way that complements what happens across the border.

Ms Cecilia Keaveney TD: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Is the Minister familiar with the wind farm that has been proposed for the Tunnes Plateau in Lough Foyle? There is local opposition to big investment in that type of industry in the North. The gas interconnector that goes from Belfast to Derry

was wonderful when it was built, but will it go as far as Donegal in the near future?

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: I am well aware of that wind farm. When I was Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources I used to have my ear bent about it.

A wind turbine was built slap bang in the middle of my home town, in the campus of the Dundalk Institute of Technology. The campus, which has four and a half thousand students, is in an urban area. No objections were raised against the wind turbine, which supplies all of the college's electricity. Indeed, when I talked to Bill Clinton about development aid in Africa he knew about the turbine, even though it had been up and running for only two weeks. He thought that it was amazing and something that could be used in Africa as a template for energy supply. He also thought that Ireland should use its development aid budget as part of a move to supply energy in Africa.

However, I have digressed. We cannot have our cake and eat it. People are in favour of renewable energy or other energy sources as long as they are not in their back yard, but that is not what Cecilia Keaveney wants to hear. There is a proposal to build a massive wind farm where I live, and, no doubt people will object to it.

Do not get me wrong: I have said this before, and some people tried to make out that I am in favour of nuclear energy — I am not. However, speaking as a former Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, if our choices or geography restrict us to a mix of certain energy resources, we must try to harness our indigenous resources.

If one flies over mainland Europe on a good day one can see that Denmark, the Netherlands and other countries are dotted with wind farms and individual wind turbines. It does not look particularly nice, but the turbines supply a huge percentage of the energy requirements for those countries.

Decisions must be made in such a way that takes into account people's valid objections while acknowledging that a greater good is necessary to ensure that we do not become over-reliant on fuel sources that may run out in the middle-to-distant future.

Mr Robin Harper MSP: The Minister will agree that the principal rationale behind renewables is to reduce our impact on the environment. He also spoke optimistically about economic development, and I think that that optimism is shared by all the other Governments represented here. Economic development inevitably means an increase in energy demands, but if we do not control the rise in the demand for energy we will be running to stand still

where the environment is concerned. Is the Irish Government sufficiently concerned to address this problem through whatever means — legislation, taxation, financial research and efficiency gains — that are necessary to eventually reduce the demand for energy? That concern must always parallel the introduction of renewable energy.

5.00 pm

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: A group composed of the main energy users is currently in operation. It was founded some years ago, and I participated in it when I was Minister for Energy. As in every country, there is a handful of large energy users in Ireland who use a very sizeable proportion of the country's energy requirement. That group has done excellent work, and has reduced the demands of their respective industries. Over time, additional companies have joined voluntarily to reduce their demand.

My successor, Noel Dempsey, is bringing forward a ten-year plan on energy. A large element in that will be an effort to reduce demand right across the spectrum in various ways, including assistances. I do not wish to go into too much detail, as I am not in that Department any more, but it is a long-term plan to reduce reliance and demand on finite sources so as to preserve those sources. Sustainable Energy Ireland, who are being decentralised to my home town, run, and will be given additional resources to run, significant energy-saving campaigns. As a parent, particularly, I have always been of the view that the current generation of young people are not as conscious as they should be of the need to conserve energy. That message needs to be conveyed by groups like Sustainable Energy Ireland.

Ms Julie Kirkbride MP: What is the Minister's attitude to nuclear power? He said in passing that he was against it. I presume he speaks for his Government on that. Will he tell us whether he sees the bigger industrial economies, such as the UK, as needing to maintain nuclear capacity if they hope to reduce their carbon-footprint in the world? Given that he is excited about the interconnector coming soon, would he be happy to accept nuclear-produced energy from France and elsewhere, when wind-power does not work?

[Laughter.]

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: The interconnector is an issue that will have to be faced. Some say that it will be possible to purchase electricity that is not specifically down to nuclear power. I do not believe that. Ultimately difficult choices will have to be made in that respect. No doubt that will be one of the issues that will come up during the consultation process leading to construction of an interconnector, if that is what Ireland wishes to do.

Opposition to nuclear energy is long-standing in Ireland. Yesterday I flew over Carnsore Point, where I opened 14 wind turbines some years ago. Those not from Ireland will not know the significance of Carnsore Point: it was the proposed location for a nuclear plant in the 1970s. Today there are 14 wind turbines there.

Ireland's committed opposition to nuclear energy reduces our ability to have a cake, a pie of energy sources. On average, most European countries are 30% reliant upon nuclear energy. Ireland does not have that; and so we have to rely all the more on gas, coal, or renewable energy. That difficulty will continue if we remain opposed, and we do, to nuclear energy.

I have had discussions with Peter Hain in relation to the British Government's proposals to increase nuclear energy in the context of what may be constructed on the island of Ireland, in the North, and he has assured us that it is not the British Government's intention to build a nuclear energy plant on the island of Ireland.

Christy McGrath

2. **Mr Jim Glennon TD** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs about the need for Her Majesty's Government to prioritise and expedite the case of Christy McGrath, a 27 year-old Irishman currently serving in Gartree Prison the fifth year of a 14-year sentence, particularly in view of the serious doubts which now exist concerning the safety of the prosecution process in this case, the overwhelming cross-party support among Irish parliamentarians for his case, and his poor health, which has necessitated several removals to hospital.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: I have been lobbied very intensely on the plight of Christy McGrath, and my Department has actively followed the case. Christy McGrath, for those of you who do not know, was charged with murder in England in July 2000. During the trial he claimed he was pressurised by his legal team on the day to change his plea of innocent to one of guilty, and that he was informed that if he did not do so he would receive 30 years without parole. He further claims that forensic evidence exists which, if examined, would exonerate him, and he remains adamant that if he got a retrial he would be found innocent.

He has engaged a firm of well-known lawyers who are advising him on the issue. One of the options open to him is to avail of the appeal procedure in the British judicial system, which is an independent body — the Criminal Cases Review Commission. My Department understands that unless there are exceptional circumstances, the Commission is not

empowered to consider cases unless the normal court appeal system has been exhausted, and that is not the case, I believe, at this moment in time.

My officials have been in contact with Mr McGrath — he is currently in Gartree Prison — on a number of occasions. The last visit was on 16 March. We will continue to remain in contact with him.

Mr Jim Glennon TD: Thank you, Minister, for your response, and thanks to you and your Department for the co-operation and interest that you have shown in this case, and particularly the help and support that has been given by the Embassy in London. The purpose of the question is really to highlight the plight of Christy McGrath, who is a young Irish jockey. I have been to see him in Gartree Prison and I am quite satisfied, insofar as anybody can be, that this is a genuine failure of the system.

It is an unusual case; it is not like previous miscarriage of justice cases, in that there is no wrongful conviction per se. However, there is a failure, in my view, of the legal system. We are aware that Gareth Pierce has taken on the case and is confident that it will be brought to a favourable conclusion, but the principal purpose of raising it today is that there is a health deterioration scenario here; it has been necessary to remove Christy to hospital on several occasions.

There is a significant political campaign building behind the case. Almost 200 parliamentarians have now signed up in support of the case across all parties in the Oireachtas and also across parties in the Commons and the Lords. I am told that an Early Day Motion has been put down in the House of Commons, and I would urge our British colleagues to take an interest in the case and to help as far as possible in arranging a speedy conclusion. I know it is a cliché but it is, I think, worthy of repetition in this instance: justice delayed is justice denied.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: Well, that was not really a question, it was a statement, but I do understand. Colleagues in the Oireachtas from all sides and shades have lobbied me very strongly, and I have agreed to meet with a number of people in relation to it. I am not sure when that has been arranged for. I understand that the case is of some urgency, but ultimately, given that he has employed a legal team, he must make decisions in consultation with them as to how he should proceed in this respect.

European Funding

3. **John Marek AM** asked what discussions have taken place between the British and Irish Govern-

ments on the joint use of European funding from 1 January 2007.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: We participate in several EU cross-border programmes with Britain: INTERREG III A — the Northern Ireland-Ireland programme; the Ireland-Wales programme, and the Peace II programme. They are worth a total of €180 million, €48 million and €868 million respectively. Sixty-three million euros of EU funding is available to Ireland for cross-border programmes between Ireland and Britain, and preparations for the new programmes are well under way. A new feature of the territorial co-operation initiative is that border areas separated by up to 150 kilometres of sea can apply for funding. That will provide an opportunity to fund initiatives between Ireland and Scotland.

The EU also funds the Peace II programme, which has an overall funding envelope of €868 million and is coming to a close. It has been very successful in Northern Ireland and in the six southern border counties. During the much-vaunted financial perspective dialogue last year there was an unsuccessful attempt followed by a successful attempt at the EU council meeting to agree a budget from 2007 to 2013. Both Governments were successful in getting €200 million for the Peace III programme. It is greatly reduced than heretofore, but €200 million will be made available for the Peace III programme, which will again be for the six southern border counties and the six northern counties. The Government will work closely with the British Government, the European Council and the Parliaments to finalise the necessary regulations to allow new funding applications under the Peace III programme to commence in 2007.

Mr John Marek AM: I wish to ask two questions. First, where do you think the appropriate policy decisions are made on the UK side as far as the North/South use of money is concerned? Secondly, you mentioned programmes with Wales and Scotland. Will you ensure that any such programmes with Wales are publicly known and that there is wide public consultation so that the National Assembly can make its views known before any programmes are irretrievably committed to?

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: I agree with the second point because the programmes generally bypass our Parliaments and Assemblies. Although policies and regulations are hammered out at EU level, the implementation boils down to independent organisations that are not responsible to our respective Parliaments. Over the years, the complaint has been that applications have been extremely complex, and the way in which they have been publicised has

led to a situation in which people have been passed by. There will be a much greater onus, particularly in relation to the Peace III programme, on how to deal with society in Northern Ireland and the border regions as it moves from the conflict to the non-conflict situation.

5.15 pm

Resources have been significantly reduced. For instance, the Republic of Ireland will receive €58 million out of the €200 million during the period 2007 to 2013. That is only an average of €8.29 million per year, so it is pretty insignificant. The vast majority of the money will be going to Northern Ireland.

Mr Jeff Cuthbert AM: I would like to know about the Lisbon Agenda. We have lost many enterprises in Wales, and the jobs have relocated to the Far East and to the former eastern European countries because labour costs are cheaper. Clearly, we cannot compete on labour costs but we can try to compete on skills and flexibility.

The purpose of the Lisbon Agenda is to make western Europe a centre of excellence for economic development and for the development of skills and technology. Is partnership working a good way for countries such as Wales — and, indeed, the rest of Britain and Ireland — to get the best out of the Lisbon Agenda?

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: We are somewhat underwhelmed by progress on the Lisbon Agenda. Although in the recent review the Republic of Ireland came out pretty well in relation to job creation and developing new technologies, new ways of working and upskilling people, more co-operation is needed across frontiers.

Significant numbers of people have come to the Republic of Ireland from the 10 new accession countries. The following statistics are significant: within the last two years, 175,000 people, mainly from Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, have come to the Republic of Ireland, which has a population of four million, while an estimated 250,000 people from those countries have come to the UK, which has a population of 55 million.

These are the types of issues that have been thrown at us so far. We have coped with them to an extent, but we need to plan for the future.

To answer you, yes, it is quite clear from all our meetings at EU level that there is an even greater need for us to work with like communities — such as yours — to ensure that the type of problems that we face are being dealt with in a more co-ordinated way.

Again, as regards the influx of large numbers of people from the accession states, only three of the 15 EU countries — the UK, Ireland and Sweden — allowed free movement into their countries. We have taken the brunt of that influx whereas others have not done so for reasons of national interest. In future we will have to make decisions on further accession of countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, so it is important that we examine these issues in a co-ordinated manner.

Cross-border Co-operation

4. **The Lord Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs that the two governments pledge that cross-border co-operation, together with the creation of any necessary agencies, will continue to be developed and not constrained or inhibited if the Executive and Assembly in Northern Ireland are not reconvened in the near future.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: My earlier speech has answered much of this question. Our priority is to make the Assembly and the Executive work. We have made it quite clear that alternatives are second best. The Taoiseach has made that quite clear, publicly and privately, to all the parties. As elected politicians we want the elected politicians of Northern Ireland to be masters of their own destiny. It makes no sense for us to wish otherwise, so we have set out what we believe is an achievable sequence and timescale — it is now up to the parties.

I listened intently to what the DUP had to say earlier in relation to the party's judgement, and to a consultation with their community. I would have thought that that would have started already because a wide spectrum of Northern Ireland life — business people, community leaders and other interested parties — have beaten a path to our door to discuss issues of mutual benefit on cross-border co-operation issues. They also want us to get on with the political issues.

In taking the decisions that have to be made in the coming months, people must take into account those that they represent. I am glad to hear people talk about leadership and say that they will lead, because leadership from all political parties is needed over the next couple of months. We accept that it will be a difficult period and that people will have to make difficult decisions, but, ultimately, the interests of the people that they represent depend on those decisions.

The Lord Smith: I am gratified that the statement by the two Governments mentioned greater cross-border collaboration, whatever happens. That is very good. My question went down before the

statement of the two Governments was released, but it rather anticipated that.

I want to see an extension to the fields of collaboration, particularly greater collaboration between the seven universities in higher education. Twelve years ago, I raised the possibility of the seven universities creating an all-Ireland business school. That would give it a critical mass and make it one of the major business schools in Europe. I wonder whether the list of possible collaborations has excluded education — in particular higher education — and whether the Governments might also consider greater collaboration in higher education?

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: That issue was not included in any of the six cross-border bodies, but a great deal of work outside those bodies has taken and will continue to take place. In the educational sphere a great deal of discussion has taken place on the type of proposal that Lord Smith made.

In the South, we have been reasonably successful in linking universities to business. One of our economic successes is that we have been able to show potential inward investors that that linkage is strong. Peter Hain and I and the two Governments agreed to a comprehensive study over a short space of time to look at areas of innovation, research and development, trade and foreign direct investment.

One of its first manifestations was that when the Taoiseach recently brought a delegation of business people from the Republic to India, he included substantial business interest from Northern Ireland. Although we have been successful in attracting foreign direct investment into the Republic, we are clear that doing the same in Northern Ireland will have an added spin-off for our people — particularly in the area that Cecilia Keaveney represents where it is difficult to attract foreign direct investment.

I say that with due respect to Cecilia and anyone else in Donegal. It is difficult to attract foreign direct investment into an area such as Donegal that is, to a certain extent, cut off because of its geographical position. However, attracting foreign investment would improve the spatial planning of Northern Ireland and the Derry/Donegal access and would be of added benefit to both sides of the community.

Ms Cecilia Keaveney TD: Having not yet done so in this plenary, I must acknowledge the great work that is going on at a cross-border level. For example, a million people have used the Lough Foyle car ferry since its launch a couple of years ago. Work is going on at local and national level, with the investment in Derry airport having important repercussions.

My question was much the same in thrust as Lord Smith's. One of the first things that I ask is how we keep up the work on education, employment, environment, health and the physical infrastructure in the absence of the Executive. I put that question in March 2005. Every year, we assume that in so many months' time the Executive will be up and running and that there will be real North/South co-operation.

There are another seven months before November during which things cannot happen unless the two Governments decide that they will. I thank the Minister for specifically mentioning what is going on in the north-west.

It is much better for local people to make local decisions. However, if matters have not moved on of their own accord by 24 November, I ask that the Governments move them on. In the meantime, anything that can be activated to keep North/South co-operation open and moving would be much appreciated by the people of the north-west.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: The two Governments have made it clear that if a power-sharing Executive is not formed by 24 November, we will take on the responsibility that has been given to us by the people through the Good Friday Agreement: to work to the largest possible extent those parts of the Good Friday Agreement with which we can move forward. A strong element of that is cross-border co-operation.

Consent is dealt with in the Good Friday Agreement, so no one should be under any illusions on the constitutional issue. We will deal with bread-and-butter issues — real cross-border co-operation — such as all-island free travel for pensioners, which I advocated as Minister for Community, Social and Family Affairs. I hope that that matter is now coming to the fore.

When I had ministerial responsibility for energy, I dealt with the issue of an all-island energy market, which was called for mainly by people from Northern Ireland. From a regulatory point of view, it makes absolutely no sense to have two separate electricity infrastructures — which are virtually interconnected physically — on a small island like Ireland.

Living five miles inside the border, I know all about mobile phone charges, as do other Members. The extra cost of mobile phone roaming charges is a huge disincentive to business. All those matters can be dealt with on a cross-border basis. At the recent European Council meeting, the Taoiseach and I discussed how we make Europe relevant and how we communicate it. What better way to communicate Europe, particularly to our young people, than by doing away with exorbitant

mobile phone charges that are such a restraint on trade? People who live near a frontier or those who cross frontiers are hammered with an extra cost of which most other people are not conscious.

5.30 pm

Mr Eddie McGrady MP: I am sure that the Minister will agree that the real vitality of cross-border co-operation and cross-border bodies lies primarily in a successful conclusion to efforts to establish the Northern Ireland Executive. Is the Minister concerned that the Northern Ireland Bill, which has been published and which will be debated in Parliament on Wednesday and Thursday, does not contain any specific and meaningful references to strand two of the Good Friday Agreement and that much of the Bill provides for the delegation of powers to the Secretary of State?

The reason that I ask about the Secretary of State is that plan B — on the failure of plan A — means greater participation by the Irish Government in managing the affairs of Northern Ireland. That is not a cause of concern. However, the Secretary of State was very robust when he first made that statement and almost hinted at something close to joint sovereignty, although he did not use those words. However, he rapidly backtracked from that position to an almost meaningless consultation exercise.

Would the Minister be satisfied with that scenario or would he insist that the Good Friday Agreement ethos of joint management, where required, should have a meaningful impact?

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: In relation to the Bill, several political interests — including Mr McGrady's — exhorted us to effectively put back some issues in relation to the strands, especially strand one, until there was a strong possibility of a comprehensive agreement and that everything would be done as a package. That included strand two issues, which shall be on the agenda.

We are happy that the Bill is cognisant of all the issues and principles of the Good Friday Agreement. I did not hear what Peter Hain said; Mr McGrady infers that he meant joint sovereignty. Let me be clear: the joint management of the process that the two Governments are discussing is to lead on issues of cross-border co-operation — North and South and east and west — in a way that has not been done before, and also in other areas; not just those that we have been dealing with for the last number of years.

That is plan B; it is not our preferred option. Our preferred option, to which we will direct all our vitality over the next couple of months, is getting

the politicians of Northern Ireland to a stage where they will make the decisions. At that stage, in the context of North/South Ministerial Council meetings and North/South bodies, development — which as Peter Robinson said, nobody can dispute we must encourage — can be dealt with.

Extension of free travel scheme

5. **Dr Jerry Cowley TD** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will extend free travel to older Irish emigrants, at the very least to Irish pensioners living in the UK, when they return here on their holiday, considering that they are already in receipt of an Irish pension and given that there is a common travel area which has always existed between Ireland and the UK, which pre-dates the formation of the EU thus meaning discrimination against other EU citizens, and whether he will make a statement on the matter.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: The free travel scheme is administered by the Department of Social and Family Affairs and is available to all people aged 66 and over living in the Republic. We have been considering for several years how to extend the scheme across the border. As I said earlier, there are significant moves in that respect, in the context of the current discussions between both Governments.

As Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs, I introduced what was called the pre-1953 pension, which dramatically increased the number of Irish people — particularly pensioners living in Britain — who could avail of an Irish pension based on stamps acquired before 1953. Before that, they had not been entitled to a pension based on those stamps. That increased the numbers dramatically and therefore increased the demand for free schemes, including free travel.

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan, is considering the possibility of extending free travel in Ireland to Irish-born pensioners living outside the state who are in receipt of pensions. I hope that there might be some reasonably good news in due course.

Dr Jerry Cowley TD: I asked Minister Brennan about that issue last month, and he said that he was very close to an agreement to allow citizens to have common travel arrangements so that when somebody is in the North they can have free travel, and vice versa in the Republic. However, he said that the east-west dimension was more problematic; the reason being that there would be discrimination against other EU citizens who would not be availing of that concession.

However, a spokesman for the European Parliament said recently that EU law would not prevent the Irish Government granting free travel to holders of Irish pensions living outside the state.

This is very important, Minister, as you know, because it is the main argument that has been relied on by the Government for refusing to extend the scheme to cover Irish pensioners in the UK. Even the taskforce itself attached great symbolic significance to this free travel for emigrants, thinking it to be important for them, and also considered the possibility that a legal challenge brought by an Irish pensioner in Britain would be successful based on the belief that denial of travel concessions discriminated and would be a breach of that Irish citizen's constitutional rights. In fact, in the EU statement it appears that, failing the Irish courts, there would be a case for the European Court of Human Rights or, failing that, the UN Human Rights Tribunal or the EU Court of Justice. The same person could not take all three; there would have to be three different persons. I feel it might be getting to that stage.

You made the point about pensions, and I do recognise what you are doing with pre-1953 pensions. In fact, there are 40,000 people, I believe, in receipt of an Irish pension — 30,000 in GB and Northern Ireland — so these people are already in the system. So for the people who have done so much for us and have contributed, it is said, £2 billion between 1975 and 1995, economic migrants who did so much for us and could easily have forgotten about us but never did —

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Could you possibly ask your question?

Dr Jerry Cowley TD: Minister, I thought you might give us more, firmed-up information on what is happening. Last month Minister Brennan said it was imminent. He said that we were quite near a resolution.

The second point is to ask you to comment on the common travel area. It enabled our emigrants to travel to Britain and help that country, but predates the EU arrangement.

I would also like you to comment on that statement by the spokesman for the European Parliament, which said that there was no reason for the Irish Government not to give free travel and that it would not be discrimination against other EU citizens.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: Deputy, I do not have the luxury of being not in Government, as it were, that I can call for everything.

Mr Jim O'Keeffe TD: It is coming shortly.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: I doubt that, Jim — wishful thinking.

Against much advice and much opposition I brought in the pre-1953 pension. At the time it was estimated that it would cost about €3 million; it turned out to cost over €100 million. The Comptroller and Auditor General is constantly criticising the Department for underestimating, but as most Deputies know, I make no apology for the fact that I brought that in. However, I hope that we will be given some credit for the fact that we did bring it in when it goes before the Comptroller and Auditor General who finds fault with the underestimation, because the very fact that these people were pre-1953 meant that the files were not on computers, so when the Department came to do the estimation it was virtually unsure as to what the ultimate cost would be. This had ramifications in that it rapidly and dramatically increased the number of old-age pensioners, particularly in Britain, who could avail of this pension. That in turn, as I said earlier, increased the demand not just for the free travel pass, but for free schemes which pensioners can avail of.

It is simplistic for the EU Commission to say that there is nothing to prevent Ireland from paying for travel passes. It has ramifications further on down the line: if you give a concession here, it will lead to demands elsewhere, and they have to be examined. As you may have seen recently, the proposal to give a childcare supplement for children here in the Republic has ramifications for the accession country people who now come here and are part of the EU and have children back home. All of these ramifications are currently being looked at by Séamus Brennan and his Department, but he is very sympathetic, as have previous Ministers been, to the issue of the elderly Irish in Britain. That is one of the reasons why, over the past number of years, we have dramatically increased — I think by 800% — the amount of money going to organisations in the UK who are looking after the interests of the elderly Irish.

Mr Robert Walter MP: That question opens up the whole status of the common travel area. A number of colleagues, both British and Irish, and I have become increasingly frustrated and annoyed recently that it appears that the common travel area no longer exists at Irish airports, in that one is required to show one's passport when arriving. In Great Britain, passengers arriving from the Irish Republic are segregated and treated as domestic passengers and are not subject to immigration controls.

From questions that I asked immigration officials in both Dublin and Cork on Saturday, it appears that regulations have changed. I was told that, despite the common travel area, the immigration official was required to establish my nationality. I suggested that that was a contradiction of the common travel area.

Does the Minister intend to introduce passport checks on trains and buses coming from the North or will there be an improvement of the common travel area so that British and Irish citizens can flow freely between the two states?

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: As someone who lives on the border, I very much welcome the common travel area. It is one of the saving graces of partition, which has unfortunately divided the territory where I live. I travelled to an EU country over the weekend and had to show my passport going in and, indeed, coming out of that country, which I found quite unusual — so much for common travel in Europe.

Many of the restrictions and the requirements to show identification are no doubt because of increased security, and unfortunately that is something that we must live with. We very much welcome and cherish the common travel concept between these two islands, but it does cause problems, for all sorts of reasons. It has caused problems here due to its use during times of difficulty; by people trying to evade immigration controls; and obviously its use in relation to smuggling et cetera. However, we cherish that, even in difficult times, Irish and British people have been able to pass freely.

Irish citizens going to the UK will not necessarily be subject to restrictions. Indeed, my Department has had some fairly significant cases of people taken aside, because of the very fact that they were Irish, and interrogated, and they have difficulty with that. As I said, much of it is to do with increased security.

Mr Johnny Brady TD: I compliment the Minister for introducing the pre-1953 pension scheme, which meant so much to so many people, and for another scheme that he implemented as Minister for Community, Social and Family Affairs, which was the half pension for people who did not have a full 10 years of pay-related social insurance (PRSI) contributions. That meant so much for the self-employed.

I want to ask the Minister one question, though I am sure that I know what his answer will be. A lady from Great Britain, who was at the funeral of a neighbour of mine last week, asked me should free travel be introduced, whether it would include air travel.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Without a fuel subsidy or surcharge!

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: I will have to pass on that one.

Senator Paschal Mooney: I do not want to hold things up, because I know that other Members have questions, but I am glad that the Minister has attempted to clarify the point that Robert Walter raised. The increasing number of restrictions seems to me, with respect, to be going against the spirit of the common travel area that successive Irish Governments have protected. In fact, we did not sign up to the Schengen Agreement because the UK Government would not, in order to protect the common travel area.

Perhaps for the benefit of our UK Members the Minister might clarify whether I am correct that the increasing number of illegals attempting to come into Ireland through the UK, not least taking taxis from Belfast Airport down to the Minister's constituency, has resulted in the restrictions becoming a little bit tighter? I am anxious to establish whether the Minister has any concerns about the experience that our colleague, a Member of the British House of Commons, has had.

I also want to briefly acknowledge the Minister's statement earlier, and it should be shouted from the rooftops, that this year the Irish Government will provide €12 million to the Irish abroad, 10 million of which will be going to the Irish in Britain. That goes a long way to dismiss any suggestion — *[Interruption.]*

I know that I am scoring a political point, and I make no apologies for it. They have acknowledged the contribution that the Irish have made in Britain. However, I wanted the Minister to respond to the earlier question.

5.45 pm

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: I said earlier that there is no doubt that, because of intensified security checks, people are now required to have identification. I know for a fact that people who came into the Republic for economic reasons used the border to do so; economic immigrants came through the North from Britain and crossed the border into the Republic to seek asylum. It is no coincidence that during the weeks either side of the Twelfth of July, when there were demonstrations and difficulties in Northern Ireland, the number of immigration applications in Dublin dropped dramatically on at least two, if not three, occasions in recent years.

European Funding Programme

6. **Mr Mike German AM** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs what progress has been achieved by the British and Irish Governments in co-operating

on the use of European funding programmes that from 1 January 2007 have a transnational or interregional component.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: In the 2000-06 round of EU-funded programmes, Ireland participates in two transnational programmes and one interregional programme. Britain also participates in those three programmes. The programmes are the INTERREG III B transnational Atlantic Area and North West Europe programmes and the INTERREG III C interregional West programme. Several other EU member states participate in those programmes, and contact between Ireland and other programme member states is ongoing. However, it has been the practice for Ireland and Britain to maintain contact and co-operate in areas of those programmes where matters of mutual interest and concern have been identified. Those contacts are maintained between the respective national and regional authorities.

Mr Mike German AM: I will ask my question in the context of the Minister's answer to question 3. He said that the North/South and east-west programmes between Britain and Ireland are worth about €1.1 billion. When the match funding is added, those programmes are well in excess of €2.2 billion. Therefore, state and European funding provides those significant policy interventions. The Minister also said that those matters generally bypass our Parliaments. That is because they are usually associated with fairly small projects or larger projects that are determined by others.

Committee B went to Belfast recently and met the Special EU Programmes Body. It was apparent from that discussion that the SEUPB, which manages Northern Ireland's funding, is not a policy-making body; it is a policy-implementation body. It seemed to us that there may be a vacuum in policy development and also in determining when policy interventions should take place.

There did not seem to be a focus on integration as a key driver for that funding. Does the Minister agree that his Government has a specific role to play in taking the lead, given that that policy vacuum seems to exist and that Parliaments generally bypass those significant moneys for intervention? Does the Minister also agree that his Government has a specific role to play in driving forward two policy aims: first, integration; and, secondly, ensuring that policy interventions meet the needs of all the communities that are involved?

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: The special EU body was set up under EU legislation and under legislation in both the UK and Ireland. As the Member says, its remit is fairly explicit: implementation not policy making. Policy comes from EU Directives. As one

who lives in an area that is the recipient of such funds, I know that there has been some unease over the years that they are used without reference to political representatives. We may complain about it, but that is how the schemes were set up.

It is important that the Governments of the UK and the various Assemblies as well as the Irish Government work together. Perhaps how the funds are directed could be on the agenda of the British-Irish Council to see whether some co-ordination might be possible. I am not sure that we would be successful, given the way in which the funds were originally set up and have worked from 2000 to 2006. Moreover, much of the funding has been substantially reduced and will be more than likely honed in on specific issues, particularly North/South issues.

Ms Cecilia Keaveney TD: A Committee report of the last session talked about trying to develop the Scottish/Northern Irish potential, which the Minister mentioned in his speech. However, there is a problem with administration. The three legislatures may be trying to drive the drawing down of money, even though the sum may be small, but find that two of them have different financial years. The Northern Ireland Executive is not up and running; the Scottish Parliament is devolved, while a different situation exists in the Republic. It is not enough to say that the sum of money involved is small and that therefore it does not matter too much. Mechanisms should be put in place. Dennis Canavan is looking at the potential for Scottish/Northern Irish links, and soon he will be aware of the impediments to such links. We met Dan Mulhall in the Department of Foreign Affairs, and I know that he is very interested in progressing such links.

There are outstanding issues in Scotland and Wales, and by not addressing those issues at home we are minimising our opportunities rather than maximising our potential.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: I do not disagree. What better areas of co-operation between the island of Ireland and Scotland could we deal with than tourism, culture and heritage? A great deal of co-operation goes on between Scotland and Ireland with fishing.

Pardons for soldiers of the Great War

7. **The Lord Dubs** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs what discussions he has had with the British Government about the granting of pardons for soldiers in the British Army who were shot for cowardice between 1914 and 1918.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: The Government announced their support for the shot at dawn campaign on 14 November 2003. At a meeting with the British Ministry of Defence on 6 February 2004 it was agreed that we would get the files of the 25 courts martial of Irish soldiers that took place and that were in their possession. We correlated a report in October 2004, which we submitted to the Foreign Office through our embassy in London. There has been regular contact at official level with the Foreign Office and with the Ministry of Defence. All along, the British Government have indicated that they cannot substantially reply until the case of Pte Harry Farr has been dealt with. His case is due for resolution by order of the judge involved in the case by the end of July of this year.

The Seanad debated the subject on 28 March 2006, and I decided to publish the report so that there could be a fully informed discussion. When I first saw the report in draft form, I was somewhat sceptical about the notion of superimposing the standards of today on an earlier time. I changed my mind, however, when I read about the individual circumstances of the 25 people involved, and I have become a very strong supporter of the campaign. I do not want in any way to discommode our British colleagues, but the issue must be addressed. It has already been examined and dealt with in New Zealand, so that is perhaps one way in which it might be handled.

I assure the Body that my Department and I will continue to lobby on this, and it is to be hoped that after 31 July we may have some indication from the British Government as to how they wish to proceed.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Lord Dubs, I am afraid that three other Members have indicated a wish to speak and I do not have any latitude for going beyond the allocated time.

The Lord Dubs: I thank the Minister for his full and very helpful answer. I take the point that the British Government cannot be expected to do anything until the Farr case has been dealt with in July. Will the Minister agree that there is overwhelming support in Ireland, in Britain, among politicians and among ordinary people for pardons for these men and that there is simply no case for the British Government to delay beyond the date of the Farr case? I hope very much that he will continue to press the British Government. The rest of us will do likewise, so that we can get a fair outcome for these terrible cases and for the distressed families hoping for justice for their ancestors.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: I hear from the acclaim that this is the broad view of the Body. I fully

empathise and agree with that view, and I assure Members that we will continue to seek a satisfactory resolution of the matter.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Senator Paschal Mooney, Andrew Mackinlay and Senator Brian Hayes did indicate that they had supplementary questions, but unfortunately we are out of time.

The Body, by acclaim, supported —

Senator Paschal Mooney: Will the Co-Chairman accept the congratulations of the Body with regard to the Minister's decision to publish the report?

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Yes, thank you.

The remaining questions will receive written answers.

I thank the Minister for giving us his time and for answering the questions so comprehensively.

[Applause.]

The sitting was suspended at 6.01 pm.

Tuesday 25 April 2006

The sitting was resumed at 10.04 am.

BUSINESS REPORTS FROM CHAIRMEN OF COMMITTEES

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP):

We now come to the business reports from the Committee Chairmen. Perhaps I could remind colleagues that business reports should be brief — about five minutes — and to the point, since we need to go on to the substantive reports from the Committees themselves. Members also have different travel arrangements that we will try to accommodate.

REPORT FROM COMMITTEE A (POLITICAL AND SOVEREIGN AFFAIRS)

The Chairman of Committee A (Mr Jim O’Keeffe TD): The main issue under discussion in Committee A was ID cards, but since that is a separate item on the Programme of Business, I will say no more than we have a report for consideration that can be discussed in more detail shortly.

As a by-product — if I might call it that — of our discussions, Committee members met the DUP when they were in Westminster to meet Home Office officials. We had dinner with Peter and Iris Robinson, and that gave us an opportunity to discuss the DUP’s attendance at the Body, which culminated in the arrival of four members of the party in Killarney yesterday.

The issue of penalty points has been under discussion for some time. Committee A conducted an inquiry into penalty points and has made several practical recommendations in the past. There are huge concerns about the very high number of road deaths on the island of Ireland. From that point of view, the “interoperability” of penalty points is an important issue.

At the last plenary in Edinburgh, we noted that not much progress appeared to have been made by the two Governments in progressing the issue. Our two distinguished co-rapporteurs, Senator Brian Hayes and Lord Dubs, have kept in close touch with developments, and the Committee intends to revisit the issue and monitor progress. Penalty points are now under discussion in the framework of the British-Irish Council, and we look forward to the terms of reference for a proposed feasibility study next month.

We examined possibilities for future work. For some time, the Committee has felt that it would be useful to examine barriers to mobility, in particular barriers to trade, north and south of the border. Such an investigation raises issues of real concern to people’s everyday lives.

We are, however, cognisant of the economic problems associated with any such inquiry. I have had some discussions with my colleague Deputy Séamus Kirk, who is Chairman of the Economic Committee. It seems to be moving in the same direction, so we will intensify our co-operation. Some people have already been nominated. We will co-operate fully and confine ourselves to the political implications in that area. There will certainly be no clash about the matter.

Committee A intends to travel to Belfast before the next plenary in October to have discussions with

the political parties there. We will be in a position to give an up-to-date report at that plenary.

REPORT FROM COMMITTEE B (EUROPEAN AFFAIRS)

Senator Paschal Mooney: Committee B is in the process of completing a report on European funding in socially deprived areas of Northern Ireland. I will give the Body a progress report that outlines what has been happening in that regard during the period of the report's gestation. The report — part of which has been circulated and Members will have seen — is at a stasis, and evidence has been taken in various locations. The Committee intends to arrange a meeting with European Commission representatives in Brussels, London or Dublin. Members have been unable to arrange that meeting, due to other parliamentary commitments. That meeting is vital to the completion of the report; the fact that it has not yet taken place has contributed to the Committee's not being in a position to produce its usual in-depth report, which would include recommendations for the Government.

In order to do full justice to the inquiry, the Committee members believe that it is crucial to have an input from the European Commission. However, we considered that the Body would find it helpful to be informed of our progress so far. I am hopeful that the Committee will be in a position to present a completed report at the next plenary.

The Committee is also pursuing its report on common security and defence policy in the European Union (EU) and its impact on our two countries. The Committee intends to visit Finland — which assumes the EU presidency in June — and to take evidence in that regard. Finland and Ireland constitute two of the four neutral countries in the EU.

I apologise for the absence of my colleagues Robert Walter MP and Séamus Pattison TD — the Chairman and Vice-Chairman respectively of the Committee — due to parliamentary commitments.

REPORT FROM COMMITTEE C (ECONOMIC AFFAIRS)

The Chairman of Committee C (Mr Séamus Kirk TD): Thank you for the opportunity to present the report formally to the plenary. The report on the small farm sector has been some time in coming, but those who have had an opportunity to read it will find that it captures the essentials of the subject material contained in it.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP): Séamus, just one second. There are two separate reports. The intention of the first report is to give an update on the business of the Committee, and later we will move to the substantive issues. I think that you might have misunderstood.

Mr Séamus Kirk TD: We formally placed the report before the Steering Committee, and there will be an opportunity at approximately 11.30 am to debate it in fuller detail.

REPORT FROM COMMITTEE D (ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL)

The Chairman of Committee D (The Lord Dubs):

Committee D is examining the life chances for young people from economically deprived areas of Belfast, and yesterday a couple of Committee members mentioned how dire the situation is in some parts of Belfast. The main ambition of some young people appears to be to join the paramilitaries, as they have left school before school-leaving age, and so on.

Our report is at an early draft stage. We have had a good deal of help from Members of the Body. For instance, Séamus Kirk has pointed me in the direction of Aidan Savage, who is the national co-ordinator of the schools completion programme in Ireland. He has been very helpful. I had a long chat with him on the telephone, and he is sending us some information on the subject. The Committee is also due to have a meeting with Minister Hanson.

Baroness Blood has also been incredibly helpful. She has given the Committee much advice and pointed us in the right direction. She accompanied the Committee in Belfast and made sure that we had meetings with the right people. The Committee is enormously grateful for the extraordinary amount of effort that she has taken.

In March, Peter Hain announced a two-year funding package of £60 million for children and young people. Normally, our reports are submitted to the plenary in October and are issued to the Government only after the plenary when the report becomes the property of the Body. However, my concern is that if we leave our report to then, the Government might have decided how to spend the £60 million package without being influenced by our conclusions.

Therefore I would like the Body to agree that, in exceptional circumstances, we can submit a late draft of our document to the Ministers in Northern Ireland in the hope that it will influence them even before the report is the property of the Body. I hope that the Body is agreeable that that is the most sensible way forward.

10.15 am

For the next study we propose to look at aspects of the Irish community in Britain. Two small strands of that study are already under way. Two members of the Committee are working in Dublin on the facilities for the return of elderly Irish people who want to spend their remaining years in Ireland. There are difficulties with housing, for example, that Senator Paul Coghlan and other members of

the Committee are pursuing. Moreover, the British population census is believed to understate significantly the size of the Irish community in Britain, and that has an effect on funding and priorities. I have a meeting with the Office for National Statistics and with the Federation of Irish Societies — and I see that Eithne Rynne is here — and we will be talking to those bodies to try to get a better question on ethnicity in the next British population census.

The main work of the Committee will be to take on board further work on behalf of the Body to look into the situation of the Irish community in Britain, particularly the Government's tendency to ignore the size of the Irish community, as well as to ignore some of the problems that members of the Irish community face. We are finalising how we project that. We will also look at the work of the Department of Health, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, local government, the Health Service and of voluntary organisations that provide services, to see whether we can establish how good they are at identifying the needs of the Irish community and how effective their programmes are at dealing with them. That study will start later this year.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP):

Thank you, Alf. We move now to the substantial reports from the Committees, and I should remind Members that a great deal of the Body's work is dealt with in committee. Therefore we thank the Chairmen and members of those Committees for their work.

We have three Committee reports to consider. Committee A's report deals with identity cards; that will be followed by Committee B's report on socially deprived areas of Northern Ireland; after receiving the tenth annual report we will move into the challenges and opportunities that face the small-farm sector.

I believe that there were problems with the photocopier this morning, but by now Members should have received Committee A's report. I call on Jim O'Keeffe to move the motion and to open the debate.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE INTRODUCTION OF BRITISH IDENTITY CARDS FOR THE COMMON TRAVEL AREA

Mr Jim O’Keeffe TD: I beg to move

That the Body take note of the Interim Report of Committee A on ‘The Implications of the Introduction of British Identity Cards for the Common Travel Area’.

This is a live issue, as the Identity Cards Bill became law at the end of March. It foresees the phased introduction of ID cards in the UK: they will be voluntary from 2008 and compulsory from 2010. Committee A’s concern was not what would happen within the exclusive, sovereign jurisdiction of the UK except in so far as it affected Irish people. At an early stage, the Committee concluded that the British ID card proposals raised concerns from an Irish perspective.

There would be concerns in regard to Irish citizens in Great Britain and Northern Ireland and issues in relation to consistency with the Good Friday Agreement.

There were also issues with the common travel area and the movement of Irish citizens within that area, and, of course, there are ramifications for British citizens who are resident in Ireland and who may occasionally visit Britain. There are even cases of British citizens living in Ireland and commuting to Britain — indeed, there are a few in my constituency, and some of them may be resistant to being registered or to holding a British ID card.

Committee A examined those issues in great detail, and we raised our concerns with both Governments. Members will find in the report a memo from each of the Governments. As I mentioned earlier, meetings were held at the Home Office with Andy Burnham MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, and a couple of weeks ago we had a meeting with Michael McDowell, the Irish Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The Committee concluded — and this was confirmed at yesterday’s Committee meeting — that the potential implications from an Irish perspective were not considered in any great detail during the passage of the British legislation. We also felt that the introduction of the British ID cards in tandem with other initiatives, such as the e-Borders initiative, has the potential to significantly affect the operation of the common travel area that exists between Britain and Ireland.

The common travel area refers to the fact that citizens of Ireland, the United Kingdom, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands may travel between their countries without a passport. In some ways,

that common travel area has already been affected by the activities of certain airlines, such as Ryanair, which has its own specialist requirements — I simply mention that in passing.

Committee A makes a number of recommendations. We think that it is hugely important that both Governments engage in detailed dialogue and consultation with a view to resolving anomalies relating to Irish citizens as a result of the introduction of the British ID cards. As I understand it, the legislation is enabling legislation, and the devil will be in the detail. Therefore, we will be interested in, and affected by, the outcome of that detailed regulation.

The Committee wants to ensure that the British Government, in formulating that detail, ensure the integrity of the common travel area. We also want to ensure that similar considerations are given to any possible impact on the common travel area with regard to the development of the e-Borders initiative. We are particularly concerned that due consideration be given to the sensitivities of residents of Northern Ireland, including their rights under the Good Friday Agreement, and we are also concerned that the sensitivities of some Irish people residing in Britain be taken into account.

There is also the question of whether similar proposals should be introduced in Ireland. Let me be clear: there will be an election in Ireland soon, and no party is going to go into that election on the basis that it will introduce ID cards. However, there is a common sense that we are watching what is happening in Britain and that we are concerned. We are interested in how it will affect Irish people at home, in Northern Ireland and in Britain, and there is a sense that, down the road, Ireland may have to introduce something similar. Whether that will be an Irish solution to an Irish problem, I am not sure, but it will not be for some time. However, there are developments in Ireland with the plans to introduce a public service card, which would — at least initially — facilitate secure authentication of identity for access to essential services, and replace the social services and medical cards.

It is not envisaged — and it is certainly not classified — as an ID card, but it is fair to say that, as it is presently framed, it may have, in due course, many similar functions to an ID card. Perhaps we might look to the Irish solution, where we will not have an ID card, but we will have a public services card.

In the introduction of any proposal of that kind, we also must consider the implications vis-à-vis Irish/British relations, the position of Northern Ireland

residents and the common travel area. We believe strongly that future developments regarding ID cards or other similar documents in Ireland and Britain should aim to achieve a measure of compatibility and interoperability, no matter what ultimate product emerges.

Two further points, Co-Chairman: first, the Committee sees this as an ongoing issue, and our report proposes revisiting the matter as the implementation date draws closer and the details of the scheme have been elaborated upon. Secondly, I thank all the members of Committee A who offered views on this, but special thanks go to my co-rapporteur, Andrew Mackinlay, whose interest in this matter, as in all things Irish, has been a source of inspiration to the development of the proposals.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP):

Thank you, Jim, for that comprehensive account of your deliberations on this important issue. Senators Paschal Mooney and Martin Mansergh would like to speak on that matter.

Senator Paschal Mooney: Thank you, Co-Chairman. This is a timely and interesting report, and I must say that I am not intimidated, but conscious of the wide expertise of my friends and colleagues Andrew Mackinlay and Jim O’Keeffe and the distinguished members of the Committee, who have gone into this matter in great detail. Therefore, I will confine my brief contribution to the implications of this proposal to the common travel area.

Jim O’Keeffe touched on this issue, but Members will recall that, yesterday, during questions to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Dermot Ahern, my colleague and Chairman of Committee B, Robert Walter MP, mentioned his experience of entering the Republic last Sunday through Cork International Airport, where he was asked for his passport. He did not elaborate, but I know from discussions with him that he was particularly annoyed, not because he was an MP, but because, as a citizen of the common travel area, he should be required to provide proof of identity when passing between Britain and Ireland. I am afraid that that is the problem. I am sure that the Committee examined this matter in more detail than perhaps is highlighted in the report. Because we live in the post-9/11 world, increasingly it is becoming the norm, irrespective of where one travels, that one provides valid identity documents. I am afraid that, although the common travel area should remain sacrosanct, in the world of realpolitik no Government will abrogate their responsibilities to their citizens or put them in harm’s way.

Jim O’Keeffe is right; the common travel area has been eroded between Britain and Ireland for

many years. It is not true to say that one will not be asked for identity documents when travelling in either direction. It depends on the airport at which you land and — this is my perception, although it may not be true — on the individual police or immigration officer, as to whether one will be stopped and asked for ID. At Gatwick airport, on departure — I used to think that this applied only to Irish citizens, but I have since established that it applies to all those travelling on domestic flights, including flights to Ireland — everyone is stopped and photographed, and a little dot is put on his or her boarding pass. At the boarding gate, one is again stopped by immigration or police officers in order to check that the person who went through departures is the same person who boards the plane, and that is common practice.

There are wider implications for the common travel area. All Members will be aware that Ireland had an opportunity to join the Schengen travel area, but did not do so in order to protect the common travel area between Britain and Ireland. Because the UK has the sovereign right to protect its borders and verify the identity of those who pass through its borders, it decided not to join the Schengen travel area, and Ireland followed suit. That is why we are not part of it.

Andrew, as someone who is a member of a number of European institutions, will testify that Schengen has been a catalyst for a whole range of nefarious activities, criminal and otherwise. The Schengen area has certainly exacerbated the terrible trade of human trafficking because, once you are in the Schengen area, you can move around freely without any documentation.

That is the context in which the report has been introduced. I am not sure how far the Committee intends to go with it, but there are serious implications for the common travel area in the new environment in which we now operate. I do not have a solution; I am just posing the problems.

10.30 am

Senator Martin Mansergh: I wish to follow up on a few points made by my colleague Senator Pascal Mooney. The Schengen area is a land mass. People travel freely between the North and South of Ireland without identity checks, and that reflects the difficulty of providing any check system when you have a land border.

I compliment Andrew Mackinlay on his report. I wish to clarify a sentence at the bottom of page 4, which states:

“However, there are passport checks in all airports in the Republic of Ireland.”

That is to be understood as potential identity checks, rather than passport checks. If people travel between Britain and Ireland, they do not have to — nor are they required to — carry a passport. However, there is an exception. Ryanair demands that passengers either carry a passport or a driver's licence. There was a recent case in which no less than a Government Minister was refused permission to board a plane because he did not have either document with him. He is from this county, I believe.

I have some reservations about the fact that if one is not a driver — many young people and some older people fall into that category — a private airline requires that one carries a passport when travelling between Britain and Ireland. That may not be against the letter of the common travel area, but one could argue that it goes against the spirit of it, which is supposed to be passport free.

It is a question for legislation and agreement between the two Governments as to whether they wish to regulate how airlines operate. I have reservations about specific instances in which an airline requires a passport, but the laws of both countries do not.

Deputy Mike Torode: As all Members have been reminded this morning, the Channel Islands are also affected by the common travel area restrictions. Travellers leaving either Guernsey or Jersey to go to any destination must produce photographic identity. The airlines are, at present, accepting a passport or driver's licence, but one carrier has suggested that it will not accept a driver's licence after 1 January 2007.

There are two reasons, or two excuses, given. The airlines tend to say that it is for the prevention of fraud, because e-reservations make it fairly easy for someone to claim to be an individual whom they know to have made a reservation by computer, pick up the travel document and travel under that person's name. They now want proof positive of ID.

I am led to believe that, from 2008, the sea carriers in and out of the islands will be requiring the same form of photographic proof. With the advent of biometric passports and the biometric ID card, that will be the norm before too many years have passed.

All of you will know that for entry into the USA, after October of this year, any new passport to be issued must be a biometric passport. In other words, it must have either an iris-print or a finger-print on it. That trend will develop and all sorts of other biometric proof will be required, such as DNA. That is still being worked on.

Anyone coming in or out of the Channel Islands, whether resident or tourist, has to produce photographic ID before they can check in. For four or five years now, passengers at Gatwick Airport have been photographed as they go through the security point, and that is checked again at the departure point.

Gatwick is the principal airport for the Channel Islands. There are no services to Heathrow any more. We fought and argued to maintain services into Heathrow, but while airport slots can be sold for large sums of money all of us, including the island of Ireland, have suffered at the hands of dealers in airport slots.

We have met with some opposition from individuals who see the provision of ID cards as an erosion of the freedom of the individual. The counter-argument is that, if you have nothing to hide, there is nothing to worry about in carrying an ID card. Most Europeans carry one as a matter of course. There are others who see ID cards as useful. Ireland is calling them public service cards, and that is how we are trying to sell ID to the public at home. Those individuals who are 18 or over, but do not quite look their age, are being asked for proof of ID when they purchase alcohol. The passport is a fairly bulky item to carry, particularly in a girl's handbag, and one does not want such a valuable document damaged or destroyed through constant use for non-travel purposes.

We share some of your concerns and problems. I shall be interested to read the report and see its full findings. I shall observe what happens between the UK and Ireland with great interest, because I am certain that there is a lot that we can learn from it.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP): I will ask Peter Brooke to contribute, and after him, to wind up, Andrew Mackinlay.

The Lord Brooke: I will be brief. I am a humble journeyman in the shadow of our two distinguished rapporteurs; I intervene only to reinforce Jim O'Keeffe's admirable exposition of our report. It is a particular and peculiar feature of this Body that we are so well qualified to comment on this issue, on which there has not been much comment from other people. This is in itself a *raison d'être* for this Body.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP): Iain Smith wanted to make a contribution.

Mr Iain Smith MSP: I am sorry that I did not indicate earlier that I wished to speak. I was listening to the debate and deciding whether I wished to contribute. The Scottish Parliament has recently taken the decision that it will not require

the UK identity card to be used to access services provided by the Scottish Parliament — health services, education, etc, in Scotland. That position could change after the next election if a different Executive with different policies is formed, however.

It is now fairly common for domestic carriers to require photographic identification, not only for travelling to Ireland but within the United Kingdom. Recently, I had to fly to Belfast for a meeting of Committee D, but when I turned up at the Flybe check-in desk at Edinburgh airport I discovered that I had brought the wrong passport with me — I had picked up my partner's passport by mistake. Fortunately, Flybe accepted my Scottish Parliament identity card as sufficient proof, so I was able to travel. It can be a problem when people suddenly discover that they do not have the appropriate identification with them.

I am concerned about the introduction of identity cards in the UK because I think that some of the implications have not been thought through. I think that they are unnecessary and will not deal with the many issues that the Government claim they will deal with, such as terrorism, fraud or identity. I am particularly concerned about the National Identity Register, which seems to be an unnecessary Big Brother operation. It may have serious implications with regard to the relationship with Irish citizens, and there may be serious problems in Northern Ireland that identity cards might also exacerbate. Some citizens in Northern Ireland may choose not to have an identity card, and at some point that may cause tensions which are not there at present. The UK Government have not thought those things through, and I hope that they will take time to rethink the whole issue and abandon this expensive and unnecessary exercise.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP):

Thank you Iain. I am not sure whether the Government will abandon the introduction of identity cards, but nevertheless you have given your warning. Finally, Andrew will wind up what has been a very interesting debate.

Mr Andrew Mackinlay MP: I too am pleased that we have found an issue with some meat in it. As my colleague has said, it is really core business for both the Committee and the Body. If ever there was an issue to which we could contribute and debate, this is it. I am also grateful to Jim O'Keeffe, who set up the meeting with Minister McDowell. It was a quality meeting and he listened considerably to some of the issues that we raised. Clearly, the Irish Government are intent upon probing the Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, about this issue, and we may have contributed to that in our discussion with Minister McDowell.

About two years ago, before the last British general election, I raised the subject of identity cards with a junior Minister at the Home Office, and he tried to infer that the Irish Government were fully cognisant of it and that there was some sympathy in Dublin for it. In fact, that is not so.

When one examines the history of the identity cards issue, it is clear that it is knee-jerk legislation arising from the recent terrorist tragedies. However, the Home Office has not given sufficient deference or consideration to its relationships, primarily with the Republic of Ireland and other jurisdictions, such as Michael Torode represents. That is one of the most worrying things.

It has not crossed the radar screens of some of the architects of the legislation that the Irish Republic has a common travel area and that the United Kingdom has a land border with another country. It is manifest that this has been totally disregarded, and there is no recognition of the sensitivities of, primarily, people in Northern Ireland, who have the right, under treaty, to identify themselves as Irish. The legislation is like a ship going down a slipway with people still putting in the rivets and patching things up. In this report, and in our discussions with the Home Office and the Justice Ministry, we have been able to tell them that a great deal of work still has to be done, even though it might have received Royal Assent.

I want to pause for a moment on the issue of folk in Northern Ireland who, under their rights, have identified themselves as Irish.

There is a danger that, even if the British Government do not press people to register, at some stage registration might become one of the key criteria that are needed to allow one the franchise in Northern Ireland. Registration could be introduced by stealth or through some subsequent or consequential Act of Parliament or Statutory Instrument. However, that introduction would create problems and tensions.

10.45 am

We must make a distinction between two quite separate issues: first, this ill-thought-out legislation; and secondly, the UK e-Borders initiative. That is a prudent initiative that requires the state and sea and air carriers to be satisfied that the people who are on the manifest are those who are actually travelling. Its initiative is worth looking at, and, indeed, we can keep our fingers on the pulse of that issue and make further observations. However, the initiative is precisely that — an initiative — and it will have to be discussed with other EU member states. It is very worrying that the Home Office was completely unaware of the history of the

common travel area and of how mutually valuable it is, and I stress that point.

I support Jim O’Keeffe in commending this report to the Body, and the Committee will be keen to find out how it develops. In October we can seek a report on the outcome of discussions that are to be held in Dublin between the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Michael McDowell, and the Home Secretary, Charles Clarke. Now that we have whetted our appetite for this issue, we will keep our fingers on the pulse of the e-Borders initiative and on the security and travel implications for our various jurisdictions.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP): I thank Andrew for that very good winding-up speech in which he mentioned that the issue is to be kept under review. We will doubtless return to it when we meet again in Belfast.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Body takes note of the Interim Report of Committee A on “The Implications of the Introduction of British Identity Cards for the Common Travel Area”.

EUROPEAN FUNDING IN SOCIOALLY DEPRIVED AREAS OF NORTHERN IRELAND

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP):

It should be noted that in the programme the word “Belfast” appears in the report’s title; it should be “Northern Ireland”. Conclusions and recommendations should be forwarded to both Governments and devolved administrators for their observation.

Mrs Rosemary McKenna MP: I beg to move

That the Body takes note of the progress report of Committee B on “European Funding in socially deprived areas in Northern Ireland”.

The report was not circulated in advance, as it should have been. However, it should now be with the Members, and I shall go ahead and comment on it.

This is an interim report that deals solely with European funding in socially deprived areas of Northern Ireland. The Committee is working on another report, but I shall comment on the interim document. It was undertaken as a result of the Steering Committee’s direct instruction that Committees should examine economic deprivation in Northern Ireland. The European Affairs Committee decided that we should examine European funding programmes and, in particular, why organisations in Unionist areas are less likely to apply for EU funds than those in Nationalist areas.

The Committee identified three principal programmes that we should look at: Peace, INTERREG and the CO-OPERATION programme. We were extremely grateful to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) — the managing authority for the programmes — for the arrangements that it made for us on our recent visit to Belfast.

We are sorry that this is not a final report, as we had hoped. However, we have experienced great difficulty in getting the parliamentarians together. Different voting patterns in the various legislatures make that rather difficult, and the Clerk of the Committee, Mike Clark, has a tough time getting everyone together. However, he does an extremely good job.

We have also had a change of chairperson. Andrew Mackay has left to become senior political and parliamentary adviser to David Cameron, the leader of the Opposition. We welcome our new chairperson, Robert Walter, who unfortunately cannot be here this morning. However, I hope that he will attend in future.

On a personal level, I want to record the Committee’s sadness at the passing of Margaret

Ewing MSP. Tributes have already been paid to Margaret, who was an assiduous member of the Committee. I met Margaret in 1974 when, as a young Margaret Bain, she became MP for the constituency in Scotland that I now represent. She was a well-liked woman, and her passing saddens us all.

Our visit to Belfast was excellent. We saw some good organisations and spoke to those people who are involved in delivering the funding. I will not go into detail at this point, but we appreciate that they gave up their own time to speak to us.

On another personal note, I wish that we could have May Blood on our Committee. Perhaps we will take her on as a special adviser, given her expertise in that particular area. The SEUPB organised visits to: the Ligoniel Improvement Association in north Belfast, the East Belfast Partnership, and the Oasis Centre in inner east Belfast. All those visits were informative, and all three organisations are doing extremely important work.

Crucially, we now have to meet the European Commission. We must look at how things will progress in the future, particularly in relation to the reduced funding in the European Community funding programme. There is grave concern about that. We all know about EU enlargement, but the extremely useful work that is done in the communities in Northern Ireland is crucial and must continue. Therefore we hope to meet the European Commission in the near future and make that point very strongly.

I appreciate the work done by members of the Committee, who may wish to contribute to the report. However, we will deliver a final report at the autumn plenary.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP):

Thank you, Rosemary, for that full account of the progress report.

The Baroness Harris: I echo Rosemary's remarks in thanking everyone whom we met, including the NIO, which organised an interesting and well-run visit for us. We had comprehensive and clear explanations of the work that is going on in Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast. Paragraph 9 of the interim report reflects that well and sets out our appreciation.

I was struck by the enormous amount of work that many individuals do. I was struck particularly by their enthusiasm, commitment and concern for the futures of their projects. However, both Governments have let them down because of their lack of commitment to funding of Peace III, compared to the money that was provided under Peace II.

Paragraph 15 graphically illustrates that, and I urge members of the Body to look at it, because it is of great concern.

Lack of funding was a theme throughout all our meetings. There was genuine concern about how the impetus can be sustained and how projects continue to function because of that lack.

It seemed to me ludicrous to give chunks of money to set up and fund projects for a few years and then expect them to carry on without further help. There is a plethora of small, but crucial, projects set up in very difficult areas, which need continuing support and commitment. Overall, if we look at paragraph 16, there is a real concern that many jobs gained from the implementation of Peace II are likely to be lost due to the lack of continuing funding.

We all must agree with the concluding sentence of that paragraph, welcoming:

"the return of devolved Government, which would mean local politicians having to take the difficult decisions themselves, and to live with the consequences of such decisions."

That is important, because they would have to decide the cut of available resources and be answerable to their communities.

I was particularly impressed with our visit to the Ligoniel Improvement Association, which Rosemary McKenna mentioned. We met many committed, hard-working individuals who told us again of their unease and disappointment about future funding. They have done a marvellous job in interface areas and in a particularly deeply deprived area of North Belfast. Paragraphs 18, 19 and 20 describe clearly the problems that they have, and I urge Members to read them.

We saw some terrifically innovative schemes and great encouragement, particularly in IT areas. Later paragraphs in the report refer again to the concern surrounding the reduced funding package of Peace III. The concluding paragraphs of the report suggest, as Rosemary said, that we hope to visit the European Commission and put some trenchant questions to it, which we hope will be answered. There is still an enormous amount to be done before we finish the report. However, it has been a great privilege to be part of this Committee and to see for myself the excellent work going on behind the rhetoric of the political parties and see what the people of Northern Ireland are able to do in their communities when people like us let them get on with it.

Mr Jeff Cuthbert AM: I want to remark on paragraph 19 in the report, which mentions literacy and low standards of learning. The situation is

remarkably similar in south-east Wales. In my constituency, for example, 35% of adults have poor literacy and numeracy skills and about the same percentage of adults have no formal qualifications whatsoever. The situation described in paragraph 19 looks very similar.

I make a plea for joint working. I know that when I mentioned the issue of the Lisbon Agenda and its importance as a major priority for future European structural fund spending, particularly in the new convergence programme, Minister Ahern said he was "underwhelmed" by the Lisbon Agenda so far. I accept that, and no doubt that is why it was relaunched recently. However, if adopted properly by the member states, the Lisbon Agenda can make a key difference to improving skill levels and learning levels within deprived areas.

As the chair of the Objective 1 Monitoring Committee for West Wales and the Valleys, which represents the part of Wales that was below the 75% threshold of the European Union, I have seen the benefits in that area of schemes that have been designed to improve skill levels so far. I look to the future, from 2007 onwards, to see that greatly enhanced.

We have developed new schemes in Wales to improve learning rates in the most deprived areas, such as Learning Pathways 14-19, which acknowledges that people learn in different ways, and where young people can have a mixture of traditional academic and vocational education. A young person may not be good at sitting academic exams, but that does not mean his or her future should be blighted. There are other ways of learning, for example, through work experience, which all need to be developed further.

There is joint working with the Community First areas, which comprise the 100 most deprived wards in Wales, and through partnerships set up involving local people. Learning is a key issue, and in my constituency the local further education college has seconded a member of staff to work with Community First partnerships to beef up the process of adult learning.

Essentially, this is a plea for some joint working. The contents of this report are remarkably similar in several respects to the situation in parts of Wales, and we can learn from each other's experiences.

11.00 am

The Baroness Blood: I remember when the ceasefires were called in Northern Ireland in 1995. We obtained Peace I funding on the heels of that, and I was part of the Northern Ireland Partnership Board that administered the first Peace I

money. It was interesting to see that people immediately began to have confidence in their own area, and that confidence began to grow when they found that they could make a difference in their own area.

Last night, I said to Rosemary McKenna that the scheme was cleverly put together. When we were looking at the 18 areas to be funded in Northern Ireland, one EU requirement was that women had to make up 33% of each funding body. That caused a lot of dissension in at least five areas; they said that they could not find any women. They were then told that they could not have the money. A week later the women were found. That set a very good example of how people in Northern Ireland can work together.

I would like to think that the work done during the years of Peace I was the forerunner of the Good Friday Agreement. It showed that people could work together — including Sinn Féin and the DUP — on issues in their own area. European funding allowed for that local effort to be made. The rules were changed for Peace II and things became a little more bureaucratic, but nonetheless people persisted and got money.

The report found that funding was skewed towards Nationalist areas. This fact is used very often in Northern Ireland. For example, last September the reason given for the rioting on the Shankill Road that caused damage worth £2 million was that funding was being given to the Catholic community and not to the Protestant community. I am on record as saying that that was absolute nonsense. Research had shown that the Catholic community was accessing more money than the Protestant community, but it had nothing to do with the religion of the area; it was due to capacity, and the fact that the Roman Catholic community was already well down the road as regards community development while the Protestant community was only learning. Therefore, when a Catholic group asked for a large amount of money and was able to use it effectively, the Protestant group was struggling to do the same. Things have changed slightly, and we are beginning to see some growth in capacity building in Protestant areas.

One of the results of the Peace programme was that it was used to set up social economies. The European Affairs Committee saw several groups, and I could name another 30, who have used the money to set up social economies and produce jobs. One fear is that some of those jobs will have to go when the funding dwindles. Of course some of them were never going to be sustainable and we must take that on board. However, there is important hard-core work that must be funded.

The peace process started back in 1995 with the ceasefires and the Good Friday Agreement followed in 1998.

Leading politicians from Northern Ireland were here yesterday, saying that they still need more time. The same criteria should be applied to community groups, which are trying to make a difference in their own areas. That time has to be invested. I urge anyone with influence to consider how Europe can be persuaded to continue that work. It is the bedrock of what is going on in Northern Ireland.

I notice that in paragraph 14, and it amused me, that the Committee:

“was told that European money was somehow seen as neutral. This allowed a range of work to be undertaken which would not have been possible had the money available been perceived as either ‘London’ or ‘Dublin’ money.”

I know of no community group in Northern Ireland that would not take money regardless of where it came from. Interestingly, on the Shankill Road there is a programme for young fathers, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Dublin. All things are possible.

Mr Mike German AM: I am pleased to follow May, because the issue she raised about the skewing of the funding is very important indeed and it is about capacity. I remember starting with the Objective 1 Programme of £1.4 billion of European money in the year 2000. The number of people in Wales at that time who were capable of handling major, community-based projects, with a large amount of money behind them, could have been counted on the fingers of one hand. It takes a long time to build up a level of usefulness to be able to handle matters. There is a policy vacuum: an issue of training and skill-raising for capacity use which could have been addressed right at the beginning.

There are some worrying signs in the report. They were amplified by Dermot Ahern’s answer yesterday. He said, and we know, that there will be a reduction in the amount of money. However one should consider the quantum of money involved. Only the money that is used in cross-border, transnational projects is under discussion here. I use both terms because some are North/South and others are North/South east-west, depending on where one comes from. The current programme is over €2 billion worth of activity, which may well be reduced to only €1 billion in the next period, from 1 January 2007, but that is still a significant and important measure of policy intervention by Governments.

That area worries me. Dermot said yesterday, and I wrote it down, that policy sometimes bypasses parliamentarians. These matters are important

because there are key issues relating to how to focus use of these moneys, which have to come before politicians of all sorts and all sizes. The Northern Ireland Assembly is not up and running, and there is a special obligation on the Irish Government to take a lead in this matter with UK Government Ministers, to ensure that there is specific focus on how this money should be used from 1 January next year, including on issues such as capacity-building among communities to be able to handle how projects are built on the ground.

Another issue is the lack of a driver for integration. All the Committee’s discussion with the SEUPB did not give me the feeling that integration was number one on the list; that we were trying to use this money to build, on the ground, communities coming together. While it happens, and while there are people doing it, it is not the key policy driver being put in place by the Irish and British Governments respectively. That is something that may become a recommendation further on.

As the Minister agreed yesterday, the SEUPB is not a policy developer; it is a policy implementer, and there needs to be ongoing policy, drive and focus by the two Governments.

The report pointed out that there have been some inefficient uses of European money. Administration costs of 9% are extremely high for European funding, which means that money has been diverted to people administering the whole process, rather than developing front-line activity in communities. One of the problems with that is the over-complicated nature of the application forms. A certain amount of blame falls, not on the Government of the UK, but on the processes by which we got those forms.

In 1999, the application process was being reviewed for the new round of funding, but the funding was delayed as there was no agreement with the European Union about the nature and the size of the budget. In the UK, there was a rush to get the applications through, and in that rush the forms that had been used from 1994-99 were re-used, which meant that we did not actually simplify the process.

I have had many meetings with European Commission officials who recommended, sometimes in the course of mid-term reviews of European programmes, that we should simplify the application process. That is another task which must be dealt with immediately, because 1 January 2007 is the start date for new funded programmes. There will be limited funding, so we must ensure that the new application processes are in place. That is why work is ongoing with the Commission to produce

the report with a further recommendation, which may be directed specifically at the UK Government.

When there is a reduced allocation there must be an exit strategy for those people who have been dependent upon European money. There are many people whose jobs have been dependent upon this funding and who may now find that their jobs are in jeopardy. There is a special task to be done in Northern Ireland to ensure that those jobs are not lost altogether but that posts are diverted towards alternative sources of funding. In one of the projects that we visited we were told that people were looking for alternative sources of funding, and the social economy was one source. However, there must be greater emphasis on helping people move to meaningful community development work that does not require European funding. There must also be better targeting and better policy drivers from both the UK and the Irish Government. I hope that the answer to this problem will be the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly. That would put the policy drivers in place because the local politicians are closer to the ground and understand what needs to be done most urgently.

I wish to add my thanks to all those who organised the visit. It has been very helpful in providing us with as much information as we needed to come to the conclusions that we have reached so far. It shows that there is openness among public officials in Northern Ireland to telling us the truth as they see it.

Ms Helen Eadie MSP: Thank you for the privilege of speaking at today's debate on this issue. This is my third visit to the Body, and it has been a learning process for me. This is one area where I feel that I can make a contribution but, having said that, as an associate Member it is always difficult as you dip in and out of some of the proceedings and that brings some frustration with it as you wish for greater continuity. However, I have been heavily involved in the whole process of trying to draw down European funding, as I was a project manager at one stage. I can identify with many of the points made in the report about the grave frustrations of those who apply for funds and the complications and complexities in applying for funding. Then, no sooner do they get the funding than they have to think about applying for the next stream of funding.

I have obtained a copy of the Scottish Parliament's strategy for dealing with deprivation, and I will pass that on to the Clerk of the Committee, but I will not go into detail on that today.

One of the main things that impresses me in reading this report is the whole issue of the limited

time span of PEACE II funding. That is why I welcome what Rosemary and other Members said about the need to go back to Europe for an extension of that funding. We cannot expect problems, such as those in my area, to be resolved in the short term and — judging by the comments that I have heard today — such problems are much more severe in Northern Ireland. That places undue stress on everyone involved and raises expectations that cannot be fulfilled. The Committee might want to look at how the Scottish Executive improved application forms online to simplify the process for our people.

I will take home with me the fact that Poland is the only EU country that has a lower literacy level than Northern Ireland. That really had an impact on me as I read the report last night, and it will remain imprinted on my memory.

11.15 am

I wish the Committee well in carrying out this important work. Areas such as my own, and other areas of Scotland, have suffered multiple deprivation as a result of the loss of the mining and ship-building industries and the naval dockyard at Rosyth. Fife once had sixty mines; now it has none. I see an opportunity for our communities to share and exchange experience and knowledge of the issues that have been mentioned today — we can all learn from one another.

Our area has a social enterprise school; there are not very many of those in Scotland, and I am not sure how many there are in the UK. As Baroness May Blood said yesterday, giving people at grass-roots level the tools to empower themselves can make a profound difference. Social and community enterprise can do that. I hope that the top-down approach and, more importantly, the bottom-up approach are given the support that they deserve.

Senator Paschal Mooney: I endorse everything that Rosemary said. As I said in my introductory remarks, as a Committee member I believe that this is an important report.

I want to emphasise a point that various Members made. There is an obligation on us, as Members of our various Parliaments who can influence Peace III funding, to ensure that it is maintained. It is unfortunate that, due to the perception of improved prosperity on the island of Ireland, particularly in the border counties — although I question that perception — Brussels seems to feel that such programmes should be funded from the exchequers of the individual countries rather than from Europe itself. I contest that view, and I hope that we can emphasise that point when we get an opportunity

to visit Brussels. That is why the progress report notes that it is vital that we meet the European Commission.

I would also like to endorse Rosemary's comments, and those in the progress report, on the outstanding contribution that our friend and colleague, the Rt Hon Andrew Mackay, made to the Committee in his role as Chairman. He energised it and was always totally committed to its aims and objectives. He will be a very big loss. Robert Walter, whom I have known for some time, has an equal commitment and dedication to the Body and to the work of the Committee. I look forward to working with him.

I, too, was saddened by the tragic loss of a parliamentarian as outstanding as Margaret Ewing. She was full of life and was totally wedded to the Body, its aims and objectives. We will all miss her. *Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam.*

A great deal of emphasis has been placed on paragraph 19, and rightly so. May Blood touched on this as well, and, contextually, it probably encapsulates part of the underlying problem of tribal warfare in Northern Ireland. It reminded me of Prime Minister Tony Blair's famous policy of some years ago — he said that his Government's priority would fall to three things: education, education, education. I am sure that you remember that well.

For the information of the Body, a concept called Bookstart commenced in Birmingham during the mid-90s, where packs of books were provided to mothers of babies and children up to the age of four. It proved so successful that, last summer, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Ruth Kelly, rolled out the programme nationwide at the cost of £27 million over three years.

The Irish equivalent of Bookstart — Babies Love Books — spluttered into life and then came to an ignominious end over a two-year period from 2000 to 2002. Because of my unique position as the Library Association of Ireland's nominee in the Senate, I was able to see the impact of that particular programme at first hand. The Library Association was charged with the purchase and distribution of the book packs through health centres and libraries across Ireland, in much the same way as the Bookstart programme, which it mirrored.

It is important that all parliamentarians be aware that it was proved beyond doubt that those who were exposed to books at that age had higher numeracy and literacy skills when they entered the school system than those who had not. I ask that those Members who have an interest in that area and in the report enquire further into the Bookstart programme and find out whether it is operating in their area. I am sure that it operates in some regions, because it has been rolled out

nationwide throughout the United Kingdom. However, because of devolution, I am not sure whether it extends into the devolved Parliaments and Assemblies. It is a superb scheme and one to which I am totally committed, because I see the benefit of it, and it would certainly address much of what is in the report.

As Rosemary McKenna said, we are in a holding pattern, where it is vital that Peace III funding continues. We hope that our visit to Brussels will reinforce that view.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP):

Thank you, Paschal. You mentioned May Blood's interesting account of events in Northern Ireland in regard to European funding. I am reminded of a time when, as a European Minister, I went to a local authority in Northern Ireland, which I will not name. All hell let loose in the chamber: they were shouting, hollering and raving at each other about I know not what, but it was a dreadful business.

An hour later, I went to see the Committee responsible for overseeing the distribution of European funding to communities in Northern Ireland. Exactly the same people were there, working together and consulting one another on how they intended to spend the money. As they were engaged in sorting out money for important cross-community schemes and realised that if they did not do that they would not get the money, it was a first-class way of bringing people together in Northern Ireland. May Blood and others reminded me of the importance of European funding not just because of the money, but because of how it is distributed. It was an interesting debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Body take note of the report of Committee B on European funding in socially deprived areas in Northern Ireland and that conclusions and recommendations should be forwarded to both Governments and devolved Administrations for their observations.

TENTH ANNUAL REPORT

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP): I beg to move

That the Body take note of the Tenth Annual Report of the Body [Doc. No. 118].

I will not take up much time because Members have read the report. It is comprehensive, and I have just two or three points. It illustrates how the Body, when it sits in plenary session, deals effectively with the big issues of the day, as was evidenced yesterday by the presentation by the DUP and the address by the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The other point that we have been dealing with today is how the Committees work. I have been impressed with the detail in the report and with the dedication and commitment of Committee members in going about their business. This morning, we saw a graphic illustration of how Members from Scotland, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man come together with those from Britain and Ireland to share our experiences in a special way. That is the great value of the Body.

Along with Members, those who work for the Body do a great deal behind the scenes in the various Administrations and Parliaments to make the Body work so successfully. I want to pay tribute to the Body's Clerks and those who work with them, as none of this would have happened without their enormous dedication.

Although the report does not mention it, we will be meeting in Belfast in October, as the Body felt very strongly about that when it last met, in Scotland. Our next meeting, which is to be held from 22 to 24 October in Belfast, will be particularly significant, because we will be meeting at a time that could be critical in the peace process. I therefore recommend the Tenth Annual Report to the Body.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you, Paul. It falls to me to reiterate what Paul Murphy said. I have been very impressed since taking over as Co-Chairman with the work that the Committees do — a seamless area of work is being pursued. That was launched, to a certain extent, by the discussions that we had with Stephen Kingon in Edinburgh last year and by the analysis of Paul Bew and others. The work of Lord Dubs and others with sectoral groups is an important contribution. Without being selfish about it, I think that the broader discussions on Northern Ireland issues have been framed to a great extent by analysis that has emanated from the Body. That would not have been done without the commitment of every person here.

It would be churlish of me not to pay tribute to Paul Murphy for all the work that he did in the background to ensure that the DUP visited the Body. Members will note in the annual report that we were to write to the DUP. You know what happened: we wrote, but it needed a great deal of persuasion and encouragement from many people to make the DUP visit come about. Paul Murphy's work will pay dividends down the road, and I look forward to the day when there will be a completely inclusive group around the tables at the Body's meetings.

The North/South dimension is being well articulated, but we must try to ensure that the east-west dimension of our work continues to be emphasised too. One will not work without the other.

I pay tribute to all the staff who have been working with the Body; some have moved on to other tasks, and some have just joined us. We are deeply indebted to all the officials who have worked in the background without any great oversight from Members to make sure that our work is prepared and ready for delivery.

On that note, I conclude the debate on the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Body take note of the Tenth Annual Report of the Body [Doc. No. 118].

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACING THE SMALL FARM SECTOR

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): We move on smartly — some Members have tight travel commitments — to item 5: the report of Committee C, ‘Challenges and Opportunities Facing the Small Farm Sector’.

I call on the Chairman of Committee C, Séamus Kirk TD, to move the motion and to open the debate.

11.30 am

Mr Séamus Kirk TD: I beg to move

That the Body take note of the report of Committee C on “Challenges and Opportunities facing the Small Farm Sector” and the conclusions and recommendations should be forwarded to both Governments and devolved administrations for their observations.

Co-Chairman, I thank you for the opportunity formally to present this report to the plenary session. It has been some time coming, but we have succeeded in capturing the essentials of the subject material. The background to the report is the current common agricultural policy (CAP) and, of course, the proposed World Trade Organisation (WTO) reforms. Nowadays, the conduit for support is mainly through the single farm payment. We have a decoupled system in the Republic, and while there is a variation on that model in the UK, it is basically the same.

The common agricultural policy and the proposed WTO reforms have profound implications for the agriculture industry. There are many real issues around the viability and sustainability of the small farm sector, which was the focus of this study. The significant growth in the number of part-time farmers is an indicator of the changes that are taking place.

During the course of our study work we visited a small but successful dairy farm and suckler enterprise outside Enniskillen, in Fermanagh. The farmer’s son had a flair for motorcycles, so they set up a separate diversified project on the farm on motorcycle tuition and test preparation. Their proximity to the border meant that they had a market both North and South for the courses that they were running. It was an impressive illustration of how a bit of innovation and initiative can do much for the economics of the holding in question.

The main issue that emerged is the lack of funds for capital investment. They are not being generated on the farm, and, consequently, the lending institutions are a little apprehensive about advancing money in those circumstances. The significant and ongoing increase in the number of part-time farmers and

the low economies of scale are problematic. People are obliged to consider farm diversification to find supplementary income. The security of farm supply in both the medium and the long term was highlighted in the general discussion about the industry during our recent visit to Scotland, when we visited a farm outside Edinburgh.

Reading the agriculture press today on the subject of the CAP and the production position within the European Community, one commentator makes the point that we are currently producing 11% over market requirement. The CAP is geared towards a reduction in that production level and a move towards the project’s mark of equilibrium, and that will have profound implications for both small and medium-sized producers.

The Curry Commission’s report — ‘The Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food’ — was published in the UK in January 2002. It graphically illustrates what the future will hold for the industry, particularly in the UK. It has concluded that farming has declined in economic terms and has had to deal with a market environment in which there are falling world prices, where the consolidation of industry, both upstream and downstream from the primary production, is a fact of life, and where there is increased competition in the marketplace. One statistic worth noting is that in Northern Ireland the average farm income amounted to roughly 50% of the minimum industrial wage. That is clearly not sustainable in the long term.

We are going to have fewer full-time farmers in the future. We are going to have a greater emphasis on farm diversification, and we are going to see a continuing exodus to other industries and the service sector in particular. We feel an uncertainty about the security of food supply in the medium and long term.

In summary, that is what we have concluded in our deliberations for this report. I would like to thank the members of the Committee for their help. It was not always easy to get meetings arranged, but through the diligence of our secretariat we succeeded in completing our visits. I compliment our staff for compiling the report that has been tabled today.

As you have just said, Co-Chairman, I am under some pressure. The Whips’ office is saying that I am needed urgently, so I will probably have to depart before the debate concludes. However, I thank the plenary for their indulgence in the presentation of the report. The Committee proposes to move on to the issue of alternative and renewable energy, and the policy and market condition positions

both here in Ireland and in the UK. It is a subject in which there will be considerable interest.

Jim O’Keeffe mentioned earlier that we are working towards closer co-operation and harmony between Committee C and Committee D. Several people are interested in subjects such as cross-border workers and the problems that exist, particularly in the Donegal and Derry areas, and that is certainly worth examining. Paul Flynn has mentioned the question of cross-border industrial development and the sort of potential that exists. I spoke with Jim O’Keeffe earlier, and it will be possible to consider that subject by way of a joint effort from the two Committees.

Mr Iain Smith MSP: It is particularly apposite that we are having this discussion this morning on the future of the small farm sector, on the day that Tesco announced profits of £2.25 billion. That comes in at about £71 or €100 a second that Tesco are taking in profits — profits that come at the expense of the UK farming sector. The report makes reference to the issue of price pressure, and it is important that that is addressed, because if it is not, we will end up without a UK farm sector because it cannot afford to continue.

I have in my constituency one of the largest produce suppliers in the UK — Kettle Produce Ltd, which supplies vegetables to the supermarket sector. If you buy a carrot in a UK supermarket the chances are that it will have come through the Kettle Produce plant at Freuchie, in my constituency. However, they are under price pressure from the supermarkets all the time. Last year they had to create more than 100 redundancies because of the cost pressures; this year they have announced that another 60 redundancies are likely to occur this summer.

The consumer does not often realise that when a supermarket offers a “buy-one-get-one-free” deal, it is the supplier — Kettle Produce or whoever — rather than the supermarket, who picks up the cost of the “30% free” offer or the extra bag of vegetables. That is not a sustainable situation for those businesses. They need a reasonable and sensible price that allows them to continue.

That also happens in the milk sector. I can assure you that the milk price war currently being run by the supermarkets is not affecting the profit levels of Tesco, Sainsbury’s or any other supermarket. It is affecting the profit levels of the wholesalers, who then pass it on to the farm gate. At the end of the day it is the dairy farmers who have to meet the cost of the price war in the supermarkets. They cannot afford to continue at that level, and so many of them are going out of

business that soon we will not be able to produce milk in our country.

At the end of the day, price pressures will mean that instead of east European workers coming across and working on our farms to pick and pack our vegetables and fruit, the growing and packing will take place in eastern Europe and there will not be any jobs in the agriculture sector in much of the UK. It is a very worrying situation, and I hope that the Body will take it up on the basis of this report, and perhaps some of the other Committees will also address it.

I would like, briefly, to mention biofuels, because Séamus mentioned that his Committee was going to look at renewable energy. Biofuels is a subject that they could examine and which could have a positive impact on our agriculture sector. We have not done enough in that area in the UK, or, I presume, in Ireland. Biofuels can provide a stable income for farmers as well as providing huge benefits for the environment, so I hope that from the report the Committee will pick up on biofuels as part of their enquiry into renewable energies.

Mr Paul Flynn MP: I also congratulate the Chair and members of the Committee who worked on this report, and I will get my mea culpa in now in that I have been unable to attend any Committee meetings. However, I have been involved in the Council of Europe as a rapporteur on a monumental report on the Common Agricultural Policy. I have talked to many farmers and farm organisations over the past couple of years throughout the 46 countries in the Council of Europe.

I read this report, having very little knowledge of the situation in Ireland, with a certain amount of alarm, because I believe it shows — and I only saw the figures last night — that:

“Direct payments to farmers have continued to increase ... and now account for €1.6 bn or 75% of aggregate farm sector income.”

If the figures are the same as those I examined throughout Europe, then they represent the highest subsidy paid to any country among those in the Council of Europe.

The position is that the old 15 EU countries get an average subsidy of 32% of their income, the new accession states get about 15%, and Switzerland, which I would have regarded until this morning as the highest in Europe, gets a subsidy of 64% of its income. The position in Northern Ireland is that, as the report says, the total income of the farming industry is £185 million; the total amount that is paid in subsidies and grants is £230 million. By the standards of any other industry or commerce, an industry in that position would be bankrupt.

The other point in the report which is extremely alarming — the worst I have seen anywhere — talks about the number of viable farms in Ireland as being 3% of the total number of farms, and that by the year 2015 it will be half that figure. This is an extremely dangerous and fragile position for an industry to be in, because when you look to the future and a possible downturn in the economy, Ireland could find itself in the same situation as New Zealand, where — without anyone planning it, and without any political party being in favour of it — they cancelled all subsidies overnight.

The position with the single payment also makes the subsidies very vulnerable. I do not know if it has happened in Ireland, but in Britain the figures on where the subsidies are going — now published under the Freedom of Information Act — produced something of a shock.

In Britain subsidies were promoted as contributions to small farmers; contributions to the environment and for preserving communities in sensitive areas. Speaking as someone from Wales, the precious, last repository of the heritage of minority languages is in those rural areas, and that is true throughout the continent — throughout the areas of Uralic languages and Spain and France — where there is a cultural imperative.

However, what appeared when we had complete transparency was that the main subsidies are going to huge companies — some of whom, such as the sugar companies, get more than £100 million — and to many millionaires and billionaires. In fact, the man who owns most of the UK does not pay anything in tax because his subsidies cover his tax bill.

When you read about several members of the royal family, for instance, getting £500,000, and about many other people who are already rich, you can see that a large chunk of the subsidies paid under the common agricultural policy (CAP) and the single payment is a form of income support for millionaires, which I do not believe the public will tolerate.

I appreciate that things are very different in Ireland, but it seems extraordinary that still 9% of the gross domestic product (GDP) is from this sector, while in Britain it is now less than 1%.

I was pleased to see in the report the attention, and the practical view of the future, that was given to the need for diversity — the examples quoted on the farms that were visited were very useful — and the need to develop energy crops. However, the farming industry is overproducing, and we must look at other imperatives, particularly the developing world. We know that the effect of the

CAP and the agricultural policies of Japan and America have been to impoverish farmers in the developing world and damage their economies. That is another major factor we will have to consider in the future.

The report is a very useful snapshot of the current situation in our countries, and it quite rightly refers to the emergence of niche markets. Farmers have experienced 50 years of dependency on Europe because of their immensely powerful lobby, but it is not reasonable to assert that future developments must be based on future subsidies. There must be some priming money, but, over the next decade, we must not see a repeat of the level of subsidies that have been paid throughout our continent. The single payment is not paid to farmers for producing crops, but for owning land. That is an extremely vulnerable situation, and there will be public resistance to what will be seen as a farm tax.

11.45 am

The Consumers' Association has calculated that farm subsidies and higher food prices cost the average British family £14 a week. Those families face the full rigor of market forces if they happen to work in the car industry, the steel industry or hundreds of other industries. Industries become bankrupt and close down, costing people their jobs. There would be a limit to the tolerance of the non-farming public if they had to continue to subsidise the farming industry for the foreseeable future.

Mr John Ellis TD: I look at this from a different angle. My views are closer to Iain Smith's than to those of Paul Flynn. When we compiled the report, we discovered that the future looked bleak for farmers who are not engaged in intensive or large-scale farming. Unless they have some other form of income or engage in diversification, they will be in serious trouble further down the road.

I do not agree fully with Paul when he says that subsidies have affected world food production. The Americans have their own way of subsidising their farmers and they dump into the world markets, causing a major problem for producers in Europe. Paul mentioned other countries where food is produced using extremely cheap labour and where people are paid little or nothing for their work. The big players are manipulating that situation. Ranches in Brazil are increasing production at a phenomenal rate, and they are run by large companies who pay their workers little or nothing, and then they try to tell us that they are being very good to their workers.

We should not be apologetic for ensuring that people involved in the agriculture industry in Europe have a decent standard of living. We must look to the future, but the situation appears to be very poor, and farmers will get it very tight, except those producing for a niche market.

The scale of a farm is also important. Last week, we visited a pig farm outside Edinburgh that produces 5,000 pigs per annum. The owners told us that they had to find a new location and double the size of their unit if they were to remain viable in the long term. They have exactly the same problem as Iain mentioned: their processors are being forced to produce for the multiples at totally uneconomic prices. The knock-on effect of that will be that producers will have to lower the production price. The subsidies to which Paul referred are towards the consumer, in the end, because they are aimed at trying to keep a cheap- food policy in place.

If the energy crisis continues and oil prices continue to rise at such a phenomenal rate, much of the land in Europe and across the world will be used to produce alternative energy crops. The net result will be that, in most instances, those alternative energy crops will not make any contribution towards food. We must be very careful. I would not be surprised if massive subsidies were introduced in Europe within the next 10 years for people to produce food, because climate change is also affecting the countries that provide cheap food.

Hygiene and quality are becoming major issues for consumers. People have to produce to the highest standards. Changes relating to the nitrates Directive (91/676/EEC) and others could have a serious effect on production.

Iain mentioned milk. A phenomenal amount of milk quota has been transferred from the mainland to Northern Ireland in the past couple of years, because people have been encouraged to do that. Northern Ireland dairy farmers have become very intensive. They have bought quota from the mainland and used it. The net effect is that, if milk prices are forced down much more in Ireland or the UK, farmers are not going to be able to produce it. They will go out of business and we will become further dependent upon outside sources. In the long term, it is important to ensure that food policy, whether subsidised or otherwise, is viable for producers and consumers. Consumers have a right to get the highest quality product at a reasonable price, but they cannot expect farmers to maintain production standards and quality and yet provide food at very low prices.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): I now call upon Seymour Crawford TD to conclude the debate.

Mr Seymour Crawford TD: Before concluding the debate I will add a few comments of my own. Some have been covered already but must be reiterated in view of the comments by my colleague Paul Flynn. One of the biggest players in this area, and one of the main parties demanding change at the World Trade Organisation, is the USA. Those who have studied the situation realise the tremendous hidden subsidies that are paid there and will continue to be paid whether we like it or not.

The other issue that the European Union, including the UK, must consider is food security and quality. The CAP was set up to guarantee the supply of food. Food is possibly somewhat oversupplied at present. However, to say that the CAP is the problem for Third World countries is naive. Brazil and other places like that cause many more problems and will continue to do so.

Another issue that came across clearly during the Committee's inquiry is the problem of funding at farm level. In Cavan, we discovered that the only way a young farmer could provide the cattle housing necessary to conform to the EU nitrate Directive was by selling his site. He would not consider borrowing again, because of the difficulties he got into in the early 1980s.

The other frightening thing on that farm was that he had neither received insulation aid, nor was he in the Rural Environment Protection Scheme. There are major question marks about the level of support given in that instance by the Department and the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority. Those things are now vital. Sale of sites is now closed off in Northern Ireland because of the new law. The other issue that has arisen since the report was written is the drop in milk prices as a result of pressure from the EU and supermarkets. In Ireland we have totally lost the sugar-beet infrastructure, so that is an element of farming in serious problems.

In conclusion, it was very difficult to produce the report. I apologise for missing some meetings on account of sickness. However, in my 12 years' involvement in different Committees of this Body, I have never seen such reluctance from UK Members to become involved in an inquiry. I do not apologise for saying that. There was no interest in the farming situation, whether good, bad or indifferent. I sympathise with the Secretariat, which had to call and cancel so many meetings because members of the Committee had no interest. I have worked on reports on health and other matters, and we spent days away from our business to deal with them. The farming thing was frightening. I am anxious for the future.

Some Members have apologised, but there was simply no interest in the matter.

Mr Smith mentioned the supermarkets' war on milk, which is a serious problem across the community. Paul Flynn then spoke about Tesco's massive profits, which are further proof of the problem. The report shows that many farmers will soon be forced out of business, mainly because supermarkets are using food products in their power struggle to attract customers.

Paul Flynn also said that subsidies are vulnerable. I spent some time as chairman of the EC beef and veal advisory committee, and I accept that that vulnerability is a danger. Europe will have to consider that seriously. In the early 1980s, a lady from the American Embassy spent several months travelling around Ireland promoting yellow soya-bean meal. She was a lovely woman, and the soya-bean meal was very cheap, but, unfortunately, the weather conditions in the USA changed the following year and neither the lady nor the soya-bean meal could be found. Therefore I warn my colleague, Mr Flynn, that there must be some degree of food security.

I said to John Ellis earlier that he and I sometimes do not agree, but he discussed some matters about which I am anxious. We agree that the future of farming looks bleak. Farmers have to meet stringent guidelines, such as the EU Nitrates Directive. I agree with that, but we are competing against countries that do not have to meet any guidelines. Consumers demand that we produce good-quality stuff, but when the price is right they are quick to buy products from other countries. That will affect farming in a big way in the long term.

The visit to Scotland showed that the owners of a reasonably-sized Scottish farm will have to double their production; they will have to run instead of walk to keep going, which is a major problem. Recently, a young couple from County Monaghan told me that their sister and brother-in-law own a thousand-acre farm in New Zealand. There were six full-time workers on the farm; there is no such thing as part-time farming there. They do not work the same hours as our farmers, because they do not have the same wintering or cost problems. Therefore we need to compare like with like.

In conclusion, as a farmer and as the Member who raised the matter, I was disappointed by some Members' commitment to the inquiry. The report contains good recommendations, and both Governments should consider them. I commend the report to the Body.

12.00 noon

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you for that conclusion. You mentioned Members' availability, and there may be increasing problems with that in the future. However, perhaps the Steering Committee will review our ways of working.

The Lord Gordon: I will intervene briefly. As an associate Member, I would very much like the opportunity to play a part in the work of Committees. I appreciate that this may cause some structural difficulties, but could the governing body see if it is possible — it would help to resolve the difficulties that arise when Members are unable to attend meetings.

Mr Robin Harper MSP: To echo that, I would have been delighted to sit on Committee C, had I been given the opportunity.

Mr Séamus Kirk TD: We may need to examine the flexibility with which Committees work to try to ensure that the momentum is maintained. It is not easy for the secretariat to co-ordinate schedules and ensure that Members are available on a particular date. I spoke to Jim O'Keeffe about this earlier, and a solution could be for the two Committees to work together and co-operate to ensure that adequate membership would be available for visits and meetings.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): The Co-Chairman, the Clerks and I will work on presenting proposals to the next Steering Committee meeting in July on mechanisms that would allow for the greater involvement of other Members.

The Baroness Harris: It is my understanding that associate Members could be members of Committees. Indeed, I am an associate Member and a member of Committee B. As I understand it, had there been vacancies, I could have been on another Committee. Associate Members must be given a very clear opportunity to sit on Committees.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): We will take that on board.

Mr Paul Flynn MP: A Committee member made the point this morning that she had been given only 10 days' notice of a meeting, and I have had exactly the same experience. Most Committee members' diaries are full long before that. Some advance planning is needed to enable members to attend — the alternative is to enlarge the Committees so that there would be a greater number of members from which to choose.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): We hear what is being said, and we will work on those issues.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Body takes note of the report of Committee C on “Challenges and Opportunities facing the Small Farm Sector” and the conclusions and recommendations should be forwarded to both Governments and devolved administrations for their observations.

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): I have been asked to announce that the coach for Cork Airport will leave the hotel at 1.15 pm.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD).*]

ADJOURNMENT DEBATE

The Lord Brooke: Those of us who have been to Killarney before will have had a clear idea of what to expect, but some Members may not have been before, and they no doubt received a massive public relations barrage from Senator Paul Coghlan — who modestly left the room a few moments before I uttered those words. Even with Paul’s barrage, it is very much a case of the Queen of Sheba’s remark on visiting King Solomon:

“Behold, the half was not told me”.

Although I greatly enjoyed my time at the Killarney Park Hotel — both during our last visit and last night — it is a particular pleasure to have stayed slightly outside the town, because the perspectives have been broader and wider in terms of the countryside. I thank everybody in the hotel who has made this occasion so worthwhile. The “browsing and sluicing” to which P G Wodehouse used to refer has been of the highest order. An English schoolboy was once asked in a divinity examination to name the most disappointed character in the parable of the prodigal son, and he replied, “The fatted calf”. Well, we must be extremely grateful that the fatted calf has been with us in the past two days. Nor would an appropriate toast, in any way, have been that of absent friends, coupled with the name of the wine waiter.

Ethnic jokes go around every 25 years, but I define the best of them as those that have no edge and no unkindness. One that has come round after the past quarter of a century is that about the British general, who, having had a good dinner in the Guards’ club, comes down the steps and observes below him a huddled figure in a greatcoat, around whose neck is a notice: ‘Veteran of the Falkland wars. Please help.’ As the general had dined well, he reached into his pocket and placed a fiver in the lap of the greatcoat, and out of the greatcoat emerged the words, “Muchas gracias, señor.”

[*Laughter.*]

The other guests and I thank our Irish hosts most profoundly for their hospitality over the last two days.

It may have happened before I became a Member of the Body 10 years ago, but in my experience it was a unique initiative of the Steering Committee

to arrange the reception on the first night in a place other than the hotel in which we were meeting. When I reached Muckcross House, I enquired of Arthur Morgan what he could tell me about it. In many ways his reply was the most memorable remark of the last 48 hours. He said, "Peter, you will observe it is one of the very few houses we did not burn."

[Laughter.]

That location is a paradigm for the multilateral and heterogeneous integrity of the Body. Henry Arthur Herbert, grandfather of the Henry Arthur Herbert who built Muckcross House, was Member of Parliament for East Grinstead in Sussex in the 1780s and, 20 years later, became MP for Kerry — thus, in himself, an index of the membership of the Body.

His grandson, Henry Arthur Herbert, who built the house, entered the Westminster Parliament in 1847 as MP for Kerry, which he remained until he died. He entered as a supporter of Sir Robert Peel who was of course a Tory, but Lord Palmerston — a County Sligo landowner who had been a Tory but was by then a Liberal Prime Minister — appointed Henry Arthur Herbert as Chief Secretary for Ireland.

Finally, Henry Arthur Herbert's wife — the co-builder of Muckcross — was the aunt of Arthur Balfour, who was a Tory Chief Secretary for Ireland before he became a Tory Prime Minister. Those Irish responsibilities on the one hand, and the fact that at least six different parties were represented by a combination of only two or three characters, are also an index of the Body.

A final coincidence relating to Muckcross is a topical echo of events here this weekend and next week. In 1932, the Bill that took Muckcross into state ownership went through the Dáil in a fortnight — a comparable speed to the celerity with which the Bill for the next stage of devolution in Northern Ireland will go through Westminster in the next week or so.

Muckcross was a marvellous place to start. I reassure the Co-Chairs that even though I have until 12.25 pm to wind up, I will not go into so much detail hereafter. This has been a memorable meeting. I advise those who are attending their first meeting of the Body that if they come again, the high standard may not necessarily be maintained — but I hope that it shall.

Yesterday morning's debate was of high quality; commendably it was not repetitive, and it was good-natured and thoroughly purposive. The afternoon was devoted initially to the visiting DUP delegation, whose courage in coming has been widely praised and whose presentation was, in its thoroughness,

a compliment to the Body. The quality of Peter Robinson's address was not a surprise to those who know him well, but it was an outstanding overture to the session and one that many found broadly encouraging.

For those who have not experienced him before, he worked from a text yesterday, because he was behaving like a Minister and could not risk saying things that he did not have recorded. The fact remains that such is his fluency, he could have delivered that speech without a note of any sort.

The concise, relevant and open answers that he gave to a wide variety of questions was encouraging, and the other members of his delegation mirrored that pattern of responses. The organisation of the individual respondents was admirable. It provided a good omen for future relations and was a great reward for all those in the Body who had worked so hard to make the visit happen. We are grateful to all those Members.

The traditional episode of ministerial speech followed by parliamentary questions is a worthwhile part of our Programme of Business, and that was wholly fulfilled yesterday by Mr Dermot Ahern TD, the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

This morning has been a particularly good example of our winding-up session, with excellent reports, matched by the exposition of the Committee Chairmen or Vice-Chairmen, and thoroughly worthwhile debates.

I am conscious that the Adjournment debate should make constructive remarks about the future as well as reporting on the past. There is no edge to those remarks at all. The great Lord Brougham, who was Lord Chancellor in the early part of the nineteenth century — and who, incidentally, introduced the palm tree into Europe — was once entertaining a lunch party when a lady arrived extremely late, thus holding up the meal. The lady explained that she had been buying a chandelier. Brougham said quietly to himself, but in a voice loud enough to be heard by at least one other person, that he knew of a lady who bought a chandelier after lunch.

That is not to criticise anybody, but we do occasionally lose time and momentum in our proceedings because some parliamentarians are unable to consume a cup of coffee during the coffee break but think that it is special to consume it immediately the coffee break is supposed to have ended. We sometimes lose 10 minutes that we could protect, because we then find ourselves in a hurry at the end.

This is a suggestion for the consideration of the Steering Committee: there might be a virtue in rationing the time allocated to individual questions for oral answer. It is quite difficult for the rest of the audience to continue to take a keen interest in quite detailed exchanges that can go on for 10 or 12 minutes. I leave that as a possibility for the Steering Committee to consider.

We approach what those who have sung the hymn 'Abide with Me' in French will recall ends with the words "le dernier rendezvous". It has been a great plenary. Those who remember their Lewis Carroll will recall the prize-giving moment when the Dodo says:

"Everybody has won, and all must have won prizes."

That really is the case today. I want to thank everybody who has made the plenary possible, from our Co-Chairmen downwards, with efficiency and charm. I recognise absolutely the condition of the swan, whose progress above the water is serene, but where one hell of a lot of activity is going on beneath the surface. We are conscious of the contribution that has been made by those staff. I thank everybody in the same terms that I used in relation to the hospitality of the hotel.

I end on a quotation from Robert Graves's "Goodbye To All That". He reported a padre saying goodbye to a departing battalion during the first war with the memorable words:

"God go with you everywhere. I can only come as far as the station."

12.15 pm

The Co-Chairman (Mr Pat Carey TD): Thank you very much, Peter. Even if I could, I would not even dare to follow that. It has been a huge privilege to have had the opportunity of co-chairing the conference with my good friend and colleague Paul Murphy. We have been ably assisted by Alda Barry, Eoin Faherty and the rest of the staff. We have all had a productive stay here in Killarney, and Killarney has also enjoyed our stay.

I now declare closed the thirty-second plenary conference of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body. The next plenary conference will be held in Belfast in October.

Adjourned at 12.16 pm.

Written Answers to Questions

The following questions were not answered during Oral Answers to Questions on Monday 24 April 2006 and accordingly received a written answer. The answers have not been subject to the normal Official Report process and are published as issued by the Minister

Forum for Peace and Reconciliation and Political Developments

8. **Senator Brian Hayes** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs to outline the Government's position concerning a recent proposal by the SDLP that the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation be re-established; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

9. **Rt Hon Michael Mates MP** asked if the Minister for Foreign Affairs will make a statement on the peace process.

13. **Mr Jim O'Keeffe TD** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs to give an outline of the up to date position in relation to the restoration of institutions under the Good Friday Agreement and the likely time frame.

17. **Mr Joe Sherlock TD** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs to outline the timetable for the re-establishment of the institutions created under the Good Friday Agreement; if the two Governments recognise the difficulty in re-establishing the Assembly without an Executive for an indefinite period; the options that will present themselves to the two Governments in the event of the Assembly and/or the Executive failing to be re-established; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr Dermot Ahern TD): I propose to take questions 8, 9, 13 and 17 together.

I am pleased to report that since the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body last met in November 2005, there have been important developments in the political process. When the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair met in Dublin on 26 January 2006 to consider the way ahead, they reiterated their commitment to achieving restoration of the power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland. They also said that 2006 would be the decisive year for the peace process and announced the commencement of a series of talks with the parties with the aim of setting out the arrangements and timetable for the restoration of the institutions. During the months of February and March, Secretary of State Peter Hain and I held discussions with the parties to test their views on the way forward and to listen to their concerns.

In light of those discussions and additional bilateral contacts between the Governments and the parties, the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair met in Armagh on 6 April 2006, where they set out the Governments' joint strategy for achieving a fully functioning Assembly and Executive in 2006.

The Assembly will be recalled on 15 May and asked to begin immediately to prepare for Government and to form an Executive within six weeks. We are fully aware that there are obstacles to progress that need to be addressed and resolved for a sustainable power-sharing Government to be successfully formed. This can only be done by the parties themselves. If the parties cannot overcome these obstacles within six weeks, we are prepared to give the Assembly some additional, but limited, time — until 24 November this year — for the express purpose of implementing the agreement and establishing an Executive. The deadline of 24 November is explicitly set out in the draft legislation introduced by the British Government at Westminster last week.

As indicated in the joint statement at Armagh, if, at that time, restoration has not been achieved, the two Governments will exercise their responsibilities to ensure that the Good Friday Agreement is implemented to the fullest extent possible. However, I emphasise that securing restoration of the institutions remains our clear objective, central to our work in the period ahead.

As regards the suggested reconvening of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, I am, of course, aware of the important role it has played, including at difficult periods, in asserting the primacy of politics. At this juncture, I would, however, think it important to keep our sights firmly fixed on the determined efforts currently under way to secure the restoration of the devolved institutions. Our primary focus now must be on securing the return of a fully functioning Assembly and Executive. To the extent that reconvening the forum was raised in the context of "dealing with the past", the Government are conscious of the many complexities involved in considering the events of the past and are ready to consider how best this sensitive issue might be approached. They will, of course, want to do so in a manner that ensures that existing inquiries and procedures are not impeded.

We are committed to do all in our power to restore the institutions in 2006 and return devolved Government to those elected by the people of Northern Ireland. The onus is now on the parties to grasp this opportunity to make positive politics work in Northern Ireland. The difficult decisions in the coming weeks will be for them. We hope they will take the opportunity to move forward.

Bridge at Narrow Water

10. **Mr Séamus Kirk TD** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will provide an update on the possibility of building a bridge at Narrow Water between Warrenpoint, County Down and Omeath, County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: The provision and improvement of non-national roads, including the construction of bridges on non-national roads, in County Louth is a matter for Louth County Council, to be funded from its own resources supplemented by state grants. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government's role regarding non-national roads relates to the provision of funding to supplement local authorities' own resources for the provision, improvement and maintenance of such roads.

I understand that the construction of a bridge at Narrow Water is an objective of the County Louth development plan. As this is a cross-border project, an agreement with the relevant district council in Northern Ireland would be necessary regarding its contribution towards the project. I understand, from enquiries made by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government of Louth County Council, that there are ongoing discussions regarding possible funding for the project between Louth County Council, Newry and Mourne District Council and the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), which administers, inter alia, the INTER-REG programme. I understand that the SEUPB is currently considering the possibility of giving assistance to both councils to undertake a survey and study of the proposal.

In August 2005, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government invited non-national road grant applications from road authorities for consideration for funding under the 2006 EU co-financed specific improvements grant scheme that is administered by that department. The initial selection of projects to be submitted for consideration for funding under this scheme is a matter for road authorities. Louth County Council submitted a number of applications but these did not include an application for the construction of a bridge at Narrow Water between Warrenpoint and Omeath, County Louth. I understand that that department will again be seeking applications under the scheme later this year and it will, of course, be open to the council to submit applications for consideration for funding under the scheme in 2007.

All-Island Approach to Road Traffic Offences

11. **Mr Damien English TD** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs how plans are progressing between An Garda Síochána and the PSNI to co-ordinate their efforts in investigating and prosecuting those who commit road traffic offences within their respective jurisdictions, specifically for offences committed in the Republic of Ireland by Northern Ireland (UK) licence holders and vice versa.

16. **Mr Seymour Crawford TD** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs what consideration has been given to the possibility of an all-island approach to traffic control, especially regarding speeding and penalty points, and if he accepts that the region has an unacceptable level of road accidents and deaths; and if he will he make a statement on the matter.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: I propose to take questions 11 and 16 together.

The ministerial meeting of the transport sectoral group of the British-Irish Council on 9 February 2006 reviewed progress to date on the group's work programme. Following the meeting, the Minister for Transport exchanged letters with the UK Minister of State for Transport in which they agreed to enter into bilateral arrangements on the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications as envisaged in the EU Convention on Driving Disqualifications (98/C 216/01) in advance of the convention fully coming into force. Officials are now working towards introducing a bilateral agreement between the UK and Ireland later this year. The proposed agreement will allow the relevant Administrations to recognise and take action on driving disqualifications occurring in the other jurisdiction.

Mutual recognition of driving disqualifications will tackle the most serious motoring offences. However, it was also agreed that officials should examine the prospects for greater co-operation in the treatment of other road traffic infringements, the penalty for which falls short of disqualification. It was agreed that officials report back by the end of May, with a view to undertaking a study of the practical feasibility of co-operation on lesser road traffic infringements.

Statistics relating to road accidents, based on information provided by the Garda Síochána, are currently published by the National Roads Authority (NRA) in its annual 'Road Accident Facts' reports. The most recent report, now entitled 'Road Collision Facts', relates to 2004 and is available on the NRA website, www.nra.ie.

The statistics in relation to the number of persons killed in each county during 2000–04 are available

in 'Road Collision Facts 2004'. Those reports also contain details of collision rates per 1,000 population, per 1,000 registered vehicles and per 10 million vehicle kilometres of travel for each county. Statistics relating to 2005 are not yet fully analysed or authenticated.

The statistics do not in general indicate greater problems in the border regions, such as Cavan and Monaghan. The counties that have shown the highest number of collisions per population, the highest number of collisions per 1,000 registered vehicles, and the highest number of collisions per 10 million vehicle kilometres of travel, from 2000 to 2004, have included Cavan, Longford, Louth, Cork, Leitrim, Waterford, Carlow and Dublin.

In these circumstances, there is no evidence to suggest that there is a greater road safety problem specifically in the Cavan/Monaghan region than in the rest of the country.

Broadcasting and the Irish Diaspora

12. **Senator Paschal Mooney** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs, in light of the recommendations of the task force on policy regarding emigrants published in 2002, which recommends that consideration be given to developing the role of television as a contact point for the Irish abroad and that funding should be made available for the provision of a service that showcases the best of Irish culture and includes topics of particular interest to emigrants, news, sport, religious programmes and a variety of home-produced programmes, to outline Irish Government policy on this important issue for the Irish Diaspora and to state what steps will be taken to introduce such a service.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: As the Senator may already be aware, there are no specific legislative impediments to commercial broadcasters who wish to broadcast to the Irish community in Britain, or elsewhere in the European Union, on a purely commercial basis.

As regards public service broadcasting, RTÉ's statutory mandate, as defined in section 28(1) of the Broadcasting Act, 2001, provides that RTÉ's radio and television services shall be made available, in so far as is reasonably practicable, to the whole community on the island of Ireland.

As such, RTÉ's statutory mandate does not extend to the provision of radio or television services to Irish communities living in Britain or elsewhere. As a consequence, RTÉ may not use the proceeds of the television licence fee to provide such services.

However, it should be noted that many people living outside of the island of Ireland already enjoy

access to a considerable quantity of RTÉ's television programming by way of the Internet, and to RTÉ's radio services by way of satellite, long wave and medium wave, and the Internet.

In the light of the recommendations of the task force on emigration, the issue of amending RTÉ's public service remit to include the provision of television services to Irish communities in Britain is currently being considered in the context of development of the legislative proposals that will form the basis of the proposed broadcasting Bill. It is anticipated that these legislative proposals will be published in the coming months.

Transport Infrastructure

14. **Mr Arthur Morgan TD** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs what steps are being taken to integrate the transport infrastructure, North and South, and if he would agree that such integration on an all-Ireland basis would be of benefit to those living in the border region in particular.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: It is estimated that over the next 10 years a total of €100 billion could be spent on infrastructure on the island. This is an unprecedented opportunity for us to work together, North and South, to develop an integrated all-island infrastructure that will benefit everyone throughout the island.

The Secretary of State and I are agreed that there is significant potential for us to co-operate on a range of infrastructure and spatial planning issues. We have requested responsible departments, agencies and regulators to identify further projects for North/South co-operation and to bring these forward.

There is a wide range of North/South co-operation already under way, in particular, on developing a joined-up transport infrastructure on the island. I have been personally committed to the development of a motorway standard route between Dublin and Belfast. With the final section from Dundalk to Newry being currently put in place, we can now see the hugely positive benefits joined-up planning and investment can have for those living along the border in particular.

The Government are making a significant investment in other key cross-border roads as part of Transport 21's €34-billion investment over 10 years. The completion of high-quality inter-urban road links to the north-west — Letterkenny and Derry in particular — is a key issue for the Government. The roads authorities, North and South, are currently jointly considering the future of these key routes. The development of City of Derry airport is a further important component in the transport infrastructure

of the north-west. For this reason, the Government decided last year to invest in the airport, jointly with the British Government.

CAP Harmonisation

15. **Senator Francie O'Brien** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if any thought has been given at Government level to harmonise the common agricultural policy (CAP) regimes, north and south of the border; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: The common agricultural policy (CAP) applies throughout all of the European Union. Discretion is occasionally given to member states in relation to the implementation of certain elements of the CAP. The Luxembourg Agreement of 1993 provided certain discretions to member states in the implementation of the reform measures.

Following publication of the EU Council Regulation 1782/2003 in September 2003, and having regard to the outcome of consultations with farmers and other interested parties, Ireland decided that the livestock premia and arable aid schemes would be fully decoupled from production with effect from 1 January 2005. The UK, including Northern Ireland, also decided to decouple these schemes from production from the same date. However, the method of distributing the decoupled payments is different in Ireland to the methods used in the UK, where they are operating three different payment models.

The single payment scheme in Ireland is based on the "historical model". This means that the scheme is applicable to farmers who actively farmed during the reference years 2000, 2001 and 2002, who were paid livestock premia and/or arable aid in one or more of those years and who continued to farm in 2005. The gross single payment is based on the average number of animals and/or the average number of hectares (in the case of arable aid) on which payments were made in the three reference years.

Northern Ireland, on the other hand, is operating a payment system known as the "static hybrid model". This payment method is a combination of a flat rate payment per hectare and historical premium payments. Like Ireland, Scotland and Wales are operating the historical model of the single payment.

There is, of course, regular and ongoing consultation and exchange of information between the Administrations, North and South, on the operation of the CAP. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the North and the Department of Agriculture and Food in the South are in very regular contact on a range of issues of mutual interest, not least in preparing for the threat of an avian flu outbreak on the island.

All-Ireland Programmes for Agriculture and Tourism

18. **Mr John Ellis TD** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs what progress has been made with regard to the introduction of all-Ireland programmes for agriculture and tourism over the past two years.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: As the Deputy is aware, agriculture and tourism are two of the areas for North/South co-operation specified under the Good Friday Agreement. Although the North/South Ministerial Council has not been able to meet over the past two years, there has been much progress in co-operation in these areas that has been of benefit to both parts of the island.

Over the past two years the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Agriculture and Food have made progress on the development of an all-island animal health and welfare strategy. This involves converging animal health and welfare policies, North and South, and developing joint strategies for dealing with animal diseases.

The main achievements to date include the development of complementary approaches to preventing animal disease. This comprises the strengthening of co-ordinated contingency planning, particularly on BSE and cross-border fraud, and the convergence of policy on scrapie.

Ongoing work continues on a wide range of live trade issues. We are working together on animal identification and traceability and disease-testing programmes, as well as on animal welfare, the alignment of disease-testing programmes and bio-security.

An area of practical co-operation in particular at the moment on which we have been working hard is the cross-border dimension of a possible avian flu outbreak. Next week Peter Hain and I will discuss our emergency preparedness again.

In the area of tourism, Tourism Ireland was set up to market the island of Ireland as a whole abroad. Tourism Ireland has shown just what we can achieve when we work together, North and South.

In 2005, for example, the work of Tourism Ireland saw visitor numbers to the island increase by 6%, with 8.1 million visitors attracted to our shores that year. This represented a new peak in the number of visitors to Ireland to date, despite a globally adverse tourism climate. To give a sense of what that means for the island's economy, overseas tourism revenue for 2004 was €3.7 billion, or £2.5 billion.

Co-operation on tourism and agriculture has shown us the practical benefits of working together, North and South. I am determined to continue to advance this kind of co-operation for the benefit of all.

Walsh Visa Programme

19. **Mr Séamus Pattison TD** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs to make a statement on the operation of the scheme known as the Walsh US visa scheme and if it is intended to continue this scheme.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: The Walsh visa programme is designed to give young unemployed people from Northern Ireland and the border counties an opportunity to work in the US for a limited period. The programme aims to provide improved employment skills and a fresh perspective on cross-cultural understanding and conflict resolution. Sponsored by Congressman Jim Walsh, it complements other US measures in support of the peace process. The programme was launched in 1998 and was originally scheduled to run for five years. It has since been extended to September 2008.

Since its inception, approximately 1,000 young people have taken part in the programme, which is jointly administered by Fás and the Northern Ireland Department for Employment and Learning. The programme was reviewed in 2004 and under revised eligibility requirements, all participants must have been unemployed for at least the previous 12 months and may not have a degree from a higher-level institution. A further 273 participants have also taken part in employer-to-employer exchanges under the programme.

The Government recognise the valuable contribution that the programme has made to peace and reconciliation efforts in the North and the border counties and were pleased to welcome its extension.

I am aware that Congressman Walsh has recently indicated, in light of Irish economic development and significant advances in the peace process, that he does not currently propose to seek a further extension. The Congressman hopes, however, that the programme might be replicated to address high unemployment and cultural divides in other areas of the world. The programme will continue as planned for the next two years and we will keep the situation under review.

North-West Issues

20. **Ms Cecilia Keaveney TD** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs, in recognising the north-west geographical entity as including Donegal, to outline the efforts being made to address the issues that affect the region on a daily basis and which are being held back in areas such as education, employment, the environment, health, and physical infrastructure, given the lack of a north-west politically accountable decision-taking mechanism and the absence of North/South Ministerial Council interactions.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: I have made a strong commitment to work with Secretary of State Hain, on a North/South basis, to address the development of the north-west region. It is clear to me that the fortunes of the entire north-west region are interdependent. Development in Donegal and Derry must go hand in hand.

Generating economic development and more jobs requires a strong infrastructure base, including transport links, telecoms interconnectivity and energy. So we are taking a joined-up approach to infrastructure development and spatial planning in the north-west. For example, last year both Governments decided to jointly invest in City of Derry airport. This investment benefits the entire north-west region.

Attracting inward investment and fostering the growth of indigenous small business sectors are further important elements of economic growth. We have been exploring ways of doing this together for the maximum benefit of all the people of the north-west region. For example, the IDA and Invest NI have developed a virtual cross-border technology zone. This incorporates modern telecoms linkages between business parks in Letterkenny and Derry city.

We have also been looking at how we might work together in the area of public services, such as health and education. For example, last year the Government secured access to radiotherapy treatment services in Belfast for patients from Donegal.

I have been pursuing co-operation on the north-west with the Secretary of State through the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. When the conference meets again next week, we will be discussing further potential interventions that we might undertake on a North/South basis for the benefit of the north-west.

Sellafield

21. **Mr John Carty TD** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs for his view on the proposed sale of Sellafield by the British Government to a private concern; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Mr Dermot Ahern TD: Late last month, the United Kingdom's Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) published a new strategy document. This document outlines how the UK proposes to tackle the clean-up of its historic nuclear facilities, including those at Sellafield. The decision by the UK Government to approve the sale of the British Nuclear Group was made in the context of this strategy.

The UK authorities have confirmed to my colleague Minister Dick Roche TD that the privatisation of the British Nuclear Group does not alter the fact that the site and the operations undertaken there

remain the responsibility, and in the ownership, of the UK Government through the NDA. The Irish Government have consistently held the UK Government accountable and responsible for the operation of the Sellafield complex and will continue to do so. While the UK Government have a sovereign right to manage their affairs to best serve their interests, the Irish Government reserves its sovereign rights to ensure the health, environment and safety of its citizens are not adversely impacted by any decisions taken by the UK.

The decision by the UK Government to approve the sale of the BNG raises concerns in relation to accountability, transparency and the risk of compromising safety in the pursuit of profit in a privatised entity. My colleague Minister Dick Roche TD has raised these concerns in meetings and correspondence with representatives of the NDA and has emphasised that safety and environmental standards must not be compromised in any way.

The Irish Government consider that the NDA is fundamentally compromised by the fact that it continues to engage in commercial mixed-oxide fuel manufacturing, and the continued operation of the reprocessing plants (THORP and MAGNOX) at Sellafield. These operations continue to generate additional waste and radioactive discharges to the Irish Sea.

Minister Roche met with UK Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry, Mr Alan Johnson MP, last October, to convey *inter alia* Ireland's serious concerns in relation to the THORP incident the previous April. He also conveyed in the strongest possible terms the view of this Government that reprocessing at Sellafield is unwelcome, uneconomic, environmentally untenable, compromises safety, and should be brought to an end.

The policy of this Government in relation to Sellafield remains clear and unambiguous, and we will continue to pursue all legal, political and diplomatic options to secure its safe and orderly closure.

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