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Assembly

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 26 May 2015

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

OFMDFM Question Time

Mr Speaker: Before we start today's proceedings, I confirm that I have received a communication in writing from OFMDFM requesting that its Question Time slot at 2.00 pm be deleted from today's business. I am sure that Members will understand the circumstances. At this point, I will also take the opportunity, on behalf of the entire House, to wish Mr Peter Robinson, the First Minister, well and a speedy and full recovery.

Executive Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Final Stage

Mr Speaker: As a valid petition of concern was presented on Friday 22 May in relation to the passing of the Bill, the vote will be on a cross-community basis.

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 13/11-15] do now pass.

Before proceeding, first of all, I express our sincere thoughts, best wishes and prayers to the First Minister and my party leader, Peter Robinson. We continue to remember Peter at this time, as well as Iris and the family, and we trust and pray that Peter will make a speedy recovery.

No one knows more than I how much we depend upon the ability of our First Minister and my party leader. During all the discussions over the last number of weeks and months, he has been a tower of strength and has been by our side, and I want to personally say that we miss him in the Chamber today. This debate

will be the worse for not having him with us as we proceed.

Over the last few weeks, welfare reform has never been far from public consciousness. Much of that has been due to media speculation surrounding our lack of progress and the ramifications that that could have for these institutions and, more importantly, for wider society. As Minister with responsibility for these matters, I feel that it is incumbent on me to say a few words to put today's proceedings into context and to underline my personal commitment, and that of my party, to Members to oversee the implementation of welfare reform measures contained in the Bill together with the schemes of mitigation agreed by the five main parties at Stormont Castle in order to deliver the best possible welfare system for all the citizens of Northern Ireland into the future.

I think that we all recognise that the Bill sets a new and very different course for our welfare systems. No one could possibly argue with the overarching policy intent to reach out to individuals who have become detached from the rest of society and who are, too often, trapped in a state of worklessness and benefit dependency as well as to ensure that our system is fair to the taxpayers who fund it and is sustainable into the future. The Bill represents a concept and a contract with individuals and families who are in need of support. For those who are able to work, we believe fundamentally that work should always pay, and, for the most vulnerable in society, we believe that our welfare system should provide the support that they need.

Those are the basic principles upon which our welfare state was founded, and, in bringing forward this legislation, it was those basic principles that received support from a wide range of stakeholders during the legislative passage of the Bill to this stage. Similarly, it was the engagement of political parties at Stormont Castle in December that helped me to frame not only this legislation but the package of mitigating measures that parties have agreed are essential in order that we do not lose sight

of those principles. We can debate the levels of support that are needed and provided as, indeed, we have done during the fraught passage of the Bill, and that is only right, given that the cost of social security benefit in Northern Ireland is in the order of £5 billion per annum. I believe that, if we adhere to the two fundamental principles that work pays and that the welfare system supports, we will go some distance in providing a better welfare system.

As elected representatives, we have a responsibility to ensure that the hard-earned contribution of taxpayers is sufficiently recognised in how we deliver welfare to the wider population. It is undoubtedly a fact that we all, as elected representatives, would like to do more for those impacted by these reforms and who are dependent on social security benefits. That much is evident from the amount of time and the extent of debate that the Assembly has given to the Welfare Reform Bill. However, I firmly believe that the time for talking is now over. I believe that now is the time for decisions and for getting on with the implementation of reforms. Unfortunately, the fiscal reality for Northern Ireland is that we cannot afford a more expansive and expensive welfare system than the rest of the UK. If we spend more on benefits, the harsh reality is that we will have less to spend on schools, hospitals and all the other public services that we rely on. I believe that, with the mitigation schemes that we have negotiated with DWP, Her Majesty's Treasury and internally in our own political structures, we have achieved that balance between mitigating measures in the Bill and spending on public services for Northern Ireland.

It may also be helpful to some Members if I can provide assurances that claimants will be supported throughout the reform process. As Minister with responsibility for the voluntary and community sector, I understand and value the work carried out by the independent advice sector in providing support and guidance to many people in Northern Ireland, particularly when they are at their most vulnerable. On a daily basis, benefit uptake officers in the Social Security Agency (SSA) see the value of that service when they regularly signpost claimants to the advice sector for advice and support on debt or money issues. However, I also acknowledge that, whilst front-line Social Security Agency staff do, on occasions, refer claimants to the advice sector, there is not an agreed process currently in agency guidance.

I want to ensure that the statutory and voluntary sectors work closely together when welfare reform is implemented. I have asked the

agency to put in place a process whereby all claimants who would benefit from advice and/or support on debt or money issues will be signposted to the advice sector. It is important that that is introduced into the guidance for decision-makers, particularly those delivering the discretionary support scheme.

I also want to promote the role of the advice sector during the process of the implementation of welfare reform to ensure that claimants understand that independent support and advice is available to support them. The programme of information that my Department will be launching to support welfare reform will include elements that will promote the role of the independent advice sector.

The move towards a system of universal credit (UC), which is designed as an in-work and out-of-work benefit, sits at the heart of the Welfare Reform Bill. The concept of a universal credit was supported and seen as a progressive change by a wide range of stakeholders during the Bill's passage. By the time universal credit is fully implemented, it is anticipated that 37,000 households will be either newly taking up or taking up more benefit as a result of universal credit and that an overall increase in entitlements of approximately £39 million per annum will accrue. A package of transitional protection will ensure that there are no cash losers as a direct result of the managed migration to universal credit where claimants' circumstances remain the same. Universal credit will also tackle other barriers to individuals taking up work, such as providing support for childcare costs, therefore encouraging lone parents to work.

Another issue that was raised was the social sector size criteria, or the bedroom tax as it has become widely known. Members will be aware that my party and I have continually opposed the bedroom tax, and we have secured Executive agreement to measures that will protect current and future tenants from any financial impact of the bedroom tax, initially for the entire period of the new Government.

The Executive recognise that I also have to balance protecting claimants from any negative aspects of the bedroom tax with ensuring the best use of the social housing stock in Northern Ireland and have agreed that I should develop a scheme that protects existing and future tenants from any reduction in housing benefits for their tenancies unless there is a significant change in their personal circumstances or they are offered suitable alternative accommodation.

At Consideration Stage and, again, at Further Consideration Stage, Members may recall there was also a great deal of discussion around the outworkings of the five-party talks held at Stormont Castle in December. Those talks resulted in an agreement to fund a package of mitigating measures to alleviate some of the harsher impacts of various welfare reform provisions.

10.45 am

Let me also put on record my commitment, my party's commitment and that of my party leader to make the necessary resources available to fund the package of measures that the five parties agreed at Stormont Castle. Let us remember that it was a five-party agreement. I have been disappointed in some in the House who want now, almost like Pontius Pilate, to wring their hands and almost to cleanse their conscience as though, somehow, they had not signed on the dotted line. Today, the people of Northern Ireland need to understand very clearly that it was a five-party agreement.

Members will be aware of the subsequent debate on the detail of the mitigating schemes. I reiterate to Members that I believe that we have now attained the balance between what, in an ideal world, we would like to do and what we can afford to do. The schemes agreed between the five main parties of the Assembly will offer additional protections to many. There have been a lot of negative comments about claimant groups not being protected and the marginalised being ignored.

Let us reflect on what was proposed in the Stormont Castle Agreement. For disabled people, a disability protection scheme is proposed to help them to transition from disability living allowance (DLA) to the new personal independence payment (PIP). This will provide for a payment equivalent to up to one year's full DLA payment for people who are unsuccessful in claiming PIP, and it will also guarantee claimants who will receive less under PIP 75% of the shortfall for up to four years. The scheme will also offer victims and survivors who do not qualify for PIP the opportunity to make a claim for a similar payment.

For all benefit claimants and families on low working income, there will be a new system of financial help when they have a financial crisis. This will be related to the levels of minimum wage, and the Executive have agreed to maintain the funding for this service.

For people who might be impacted by the bedroom tax, now or in the future, there will be full protection from any cuts in housing benefit.

For all working-age families receiving universal credit, there will be flexibility in how frequently they receive their benefit and in making direct payments to social landlords. We will also ensure that universal credit payments are made to the main carer in cases where there is concern about the impact of single payments to households.

Finally, I turn to the supplementary payment scheme, which has, in some way, led to today's position. This scheme provides all claimant commitments with full protection. These claimants are families with children, the long-term sick and adults and children with disabilities. It is not accurate for some to claim that my party and I do not support providing protection for those groups. As Members proceed in the debate, I ask them always to be very mindful of the words that they use and the impact that they create on those whom they claim to support and defend. Generalisations often miss the facts and cover the reality of what goes on daily to provide help and support for our many vulnerable and disadvantaged people

The issue is what we can afford and what is deliverable for people who do not currently claim social security benefits. In those cases, we have offered financial support to claimant groups that can show that they are in financial crisis. I believe that our approach has been fair, legal, affordable and deliverable.

Let us remember that those were the criteria that were set out by the First Minister. That was the challenge that was given to the parties over the last number of days. If they had any suggestions, ideas, amendments or proposals, those would have to be within the parameters of what was set out as being legal, affordable and deliverable. It is for others to reflect on the impact of their proposals on the rest of Northern Ireland's public services.

We have come a long way. When we set out on this journey, people said that we could not change things. My predecessor Nelson McCausland negotiated a package of measures, which were the envy of many other jurisdictions. I have heard that said in conferences and in discussions with other persons from the rest of the United Kingdom.

We have now gone further. The welfare reform system that the Bill will bring in is not that of the UK Government. It is distinctly different: it is

made in Northern Ireland. Contrary to what is being said, it provides much greater support for adults with disabilities, for children with disabilities, for families with children and for those who are long-term sick. It not only protects existing claimants but ensures that support is available for future claimants covered by the supplementary payment scheme for suffering financial crisis, which is a direct consequence of the changes. It also protects current and future tenants from the financial impact of the bedroom tax.

This is not simply an aspiration. We are putting substantial resources into this. Over the next three years, our proposals will mean that those in need will receive over £200 million more than they would have received under the GB scheme. In UK terms, that is the equivalent of £6 billion. That demonstrates how far we have gone to offset the harsher effects of the UK Government's reforms. That demonstrates how we have ensured that we have negotiated what we believe is best for Northern Ireland. However, there is only so much that we can reasonably do. We need to strike a balance between welfare and other services on which we all, including those receiving benefits, rely. We cannot and should not focus on the welfare system without taking into account the impact on other services, including our health service, our education service and services for our children and young people.

A tremendous responsibility rests on the House today. It is a question of choice: either we adopt the Bill and secure the real additional benefits associated with our proposals for the most vulnerable in our society, or we do not and instead give way to what will be an immensely worse outcome for those whom we serve.

I place on record my gratitude to the Chair and members of the Social Development Committee for their work. To Members of the House, I say this: we have disagreed, debated and negotiated, but there has been in-depth scrutiny of the Bill, much of which has been positive. Much has been achieved, which involved hard work.

I say to those Members who signed the petition of concern: you will have to explain to the people whom you represent why you have failed to ensure that you protected their best interests and that their welfare was at the heart of your actions. I believe that my party colleagues and I, with those who support the Bill, can justify that we have endeavoured in all good faith.

In conclusion, I want to say that I am disappointed by the allegations made by the party opposite that, somehow, I misled the House and withheld papers and that my officials were involved in some sort of clandestine operation. I want to make it very clear, without any equivocation, that I have expended every effort, all avenues and all possibilities. I pay tribute to my officials, who have worked extensively before Christmas, during Christmas, after Christmas and up until today to ensure that we got an agreement. Others need to ask why that was not enough. I move the Bill.

Ms P Bradley: I rise to speak in favour of the Final Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill. I thank the Minister for bringing it forward, and I thank him for his opening comments.

I believe that when we, as Members, were elected to the Assembly, the public entrusted us to protect the best interests of all society, including the vulnerable, and also to ensure that we maintain good financial control. Often, this is a difficult balancing act, and it involves making some very difficult and unpopular decisions to ensure the long-term viability of this region of the United Kingdom. Both the Republic of Ireland and other regions in the United Kingdom have seen austerity measures being put in place. Welfare systems in both jurisdictions have been overhauled to reflect the different economic landscape that we find ourselves in today. In my view, the Stormont Castle agreement, along with the various measures negotiated, as the Minister said, by my party colleague Nelson McCausland, endeavoured to protect those who may be hit worst by welfare reform. As the Minister also stated, all Executive parties sitting around the Chamber agreed to that.

I find that some people sitting in the Chamber today are completely arrogant to the fact that, for some reason, the economic realities of this present economic world do not apply to Northern Ireland. That astounds me. I believe that the Stormont Castle agreement was the best compromise between facing our responsibilities as elected representatives and protecting the most vulnerable of our electorate. The welfare system was developed from an ideology to help those who could not help themselves; it was designed to be a hand-up and not a handout. Unfortunately, over the years, our system has evolved into one where claimants are finding that they are better off out of work than they are in it and where young people are so disillusioned that they now view the welfare state as almost a career choice. We are bombarded with TV shows that depict those who have made a clear choice to live off

the taxpayer. The welfare system cannot sustain that, and, more importantly, people who genuinely need help find themselves tarred with the same brush and feeling a stigma about accepting the help that they, of course, so genuinely need.

I believe that the supplementary payment scheme in the Stormont Castle agreement will protect those whom the system is designed to help, while those who are capable of supporting themselves will find added impetus to do so. We have invested so much in providing jobs and training that people should not have an excuse for being able to do nothing. When I was growing up, the mantra was that if you were not earning you were learning. This is not a witch-hunt but a wake-up call. If we do not pass the Bill, we could see a collapse of our institution and a possible return to direct rule, which will mean that welfare reform will be brought in as it has in the rest of the United Kingdom, with no protection for those with disabilities, those who are ill and those with children.

We have a moral duty to accept the Bill, with the supplementary payment scheme, as agreed. We have to step up to the mark and be leaders to protect the most vulnerable.

11.00 am

Mr M McGuinness: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First of all, I extend my warmest best wishes to the First Minister, Peter Robinson, for a speedy recovery. I want to make it clear that we have in our thoughts and prayers Iris and the rest of the family.

I have worked with Peter for the last eight years in the Office of First and deputy First Minister. Throughout all that time, even though we have different political allegiances and sometimes different political opinions about how we take our work forward, we have never had anything other than a good personal relationship. Of course, there have been commentators out there who, every time they get the opportunity, try to portray relationships here as poisonous and as though people hate each other and so forth. In terms of my relationship with Peter, nothing could be further from the truth. So, it was with great concern that I learned yesterday morning that he had taken ill and been brought to Dundonald hospital and then on to the Royal Victoria Hospital. I think that he has made a major contribution to the progress that we have made here over the last eight years. It is a source of great concern that someone like him could be hospitalised with the illness that he is

dealing with. We are very sincerely and genuinely concerned, and we hope that he will recover from this and be back in his job.

Obviously, we are dealing today with very important matters in whether we are going to move forward in the Assembly to ensure that, in our deliverance for citizens, we deal with that on the basis of the huge challenges that we all face against the backdrop of the changes that have occurred in recent times. There is a big focus today on welfare. Obviously, the British Government's approach to welfare is a source of great concern, but this is not just about welfare — this is bigger than the issue of welfare. Sometimes I think that, even within the media and people commenting on the predicament that we find ourselves in, you would almost think that it was the only problem that we face. Our concern is wider and is about the grave implications of the further cuts threatened by the Tories as part of a £25 billion reduction that will be outlined in the July Budget. Obviously, our concern has to be about what proportion of that will affect us.

These cuts, which have been described as "eye-watering" by Tories themselves, will affect the most vulnerable and will lead to the loss of thousands of jobs in vital front-line services in areas such as health and education. They also formed absolutely no part whatsoever of the Stormont House Agreement. Last week I spoke to someone who was in Downing Street and who spoke to key officials there. He said that only one word could describe what is coming down the tracks at us in July. The word that he used, which was not mine but his, was "brutal".

This week we are facing into a building crisis in the political institutions here in the North. The immediate difficulties that we are facing into have been triggered by the decision to bring to the Assembly the welfare Bill, which, in my opinion, does not implement the protections agreed at Stormont House and subsequently for children with disabilities, adults with severe disabilities, the long-term sick and large families.

Capitulating to pressure and demands from the Tories in London is, in my view, a major tactical error. However, the crisis we are facing, and I say this to all the parties in the Assembly, is not of the making of any of the parties here or in the Executive. The crisis has been created by the austerity agenda of a Tory Administration in London that is attempting to decimate our public services and punish the most vulnerable people in our society.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr M McGuinness: No, I will not give way. In the recent elections, Sinn Féin stood against Tory austerity and for social justice and equality. Our approach was mandated by over 176,000 voters, almost 25% of the popular vote. In contrast, the Tories received only 9,000 votes in the North, just over 1% of the vote. Chris Hazzard got more votes in South Down than the 16 Tory candidates who stood in the Westminster elections in the North. It is a party that does not have a single Assembly seat or local council seat. They have no democratic mandate for their austerity policies here in the North of Ireland, yet they have already taken £1.5 billion from the Executive's block grant.

The British Government's Cabinet of Tory millionaires has announced plans for further eye-watering cuts of £25 billion to our public services and our welfare protections for people with disabilities, the long-term sick and large families. Those new cuts are set to begin almost immediately, and they will devastate our core public services. In meetings that the party leaders attended last week, they will know that I challenged the British Secretary of State Theresa Villiers on two occasions for a breakdown of how that £25 billion raid would impact on the people of the North. She refused point blank to tell me. She told us that we would have to wait for the July Budget. Here we are, talking about vital budgetary matters affecting the future of our people, and we are being told by the Secretary of State that we have to wait until the Chancellor of the Exchequer announces the July Budget before we will know the implications of where the axe is going to fall on vital front-line services delivered by our Departments and of welfare cuts impacting on people who have already been threatened by the Tory welfare cuts agenda.

Of course, it also raises the question as to what is coming down the tracks at us in July. It will even impact on the negotiations that took place during the course of Stormont House in relation to alleviating the plight of those who would be affected by the welfare cuts. There is all sorts of speculation about taxing carers' allowance and taxing welfare recipients. From our perspective, we need to get everything that we are doing here into kilter with the need to ensure that what is coming down the tracks from the British Government in July is fed into our planning for the delivery of vital services for people in the future.

The approach of the Secretary of State and the British Government in relation to the refusal to tell us how that is going to impact on us — indeed, we are not the only people who are not

being told; they are not even telling people in England thus far — is absolutely unacceptable. We made it very clear in our election manifesto that the Executive need a viable Budget for front-line public services and welfare protections for the most vulnerable. Sinn Féin will not support a welfare Bill that does not contain those protections, and we will not be part of any agenda that punishes the poor and dismantles public services.

In my view, the measure of any society, and, indeed, of any Government, is how it treats those most in need and those who are most vulnerable.

Mr Humphrey: Will the deputy First Minister give way?

Mr M McGuinness: No, I will not give way. In the face of such devastating Tory cuts, our public services, our welfare system, our Departments and the Executive are, in my opinion, not sustainable. None of the Executive parties stood on a platform of implementing those Tory cuts, and Sinn Féin will not abandon children with disabilities, adults with severe disabilities, families with children and the long-term sick. That is why we moved a petition of concern to stop the passage of the welfare Bill, and I welcome the fact that the SDLP has supported our position.

It has always been my view that the outstanding issues in the Welfare Reform Bill can be resolved, but this requires political will from all parties in the Assembly to protect the most vulnerable. Make no mistake about it: the biggest threat to our political institutions remains the ongoing Tory austerity agenda of cuts to our public services and the welfare state. This is a time when the Executive parties need to stand together to defend our public services, particularly in health, education and welfare. We need to stand up for the people who elect us rather than acting in the interests of a Tory elite. We need an immediate negotiation with the British Government for a Budget which protects our public services and for fiscal powers to give us control over our economy.

Of course, we are not alone in our battle against austerity. I note that the Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, will today make an important anti-austerity and anti-cuts speech. Of course, they are on the right side of the argument. They are on the right side of history. I appeal to all Assembly parties to join them. The Scottish Executive have requested a tripartite meeting of the representatives of the

Scottish, Welsh and local assemblies. We should take up this offer and develop a common position in the Executive and with the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly in opposition to Tory austerity. The current crisis has come about solely through the actions of the British Government. It can be resolved only by the actions of the British Government. They have attacked the most vulnerable in society, slashed the Budget for public services and undermined the credibility of these institutions.

We in Sinn Féin are clear on what needs to happen. It is the platform that we stood on in the recent election: protections for the most vulnerable; a workable Budget; and powers to grow the economy and create employment. We believe these are the aims that all parties could and should unite around. Sinn Féin has worked and maintained the institutions over the past eight years in the face of great provocation and attack. Power sharing, partnership and devolution are the only ways forward. These principles are the basis of the institutions here in the North. Any undermining of these basic principles by the actions of the British Government or parties will be unacceptable.

What the people require is an Assembly that delivers and has the Budget and powers to make a difference in people's lives. There is still time for the parties and the British Government to change tack and deliver a new Budget that delivers for our public services, economy and people. If a choice has to be made between standing side by side with the Tories or standing up for people here, our economy and public services, I know what side Sinn Féin will be on.

Mrs D Kelly: Many people have attempted to set the context of the debate in a much broader range of positioning and recent agreements than is the case. I think that we have to remember that where we are today with austerity measures is not just because of the ideological position of the Tory party, which, as the deputy First Minister rightly said, has got no mandate here in the North, but because of the more recent crash in the banking regulation sector. We are asking the most vulnerable people in our society to pick up the bill. We ought to remember that in setting the context of the Welfare Reform Bill debate. We do not want to be complicit in the Tory party's morally unjustifiable attack on the most vulnerable and marginalised. There has to be a much broader debate about what type of society we wish to create and live in.

Whilst I was canvassing during the recent election, I was struck by the number of people

who are at home all day, having had to give up not only their jobs but a large part of their life to care for others. As you all know, we have an increasingly ageing population. I met a number of people on the doorsteps who are caring for family members who have dementia or indeed have had a stroke and who are still on long waiting lists for adaptations and home improvements. There is little help from others; certainly not from the public sector because there is just not the money to provide that help. That is something that struck right at the heart of me, particularly as I came from a health and social care background. It is those very people, who look after the most vulnerable in society, whom the Tories wish to attack further, if we are to believe their leaked manifesto and budgetary commitments, in which they talked about taxing disability living allowance.

11.15 am

We have not come to our decisions lightly. It ought to be remembered that the SDLP, along with the Ulster Unionist Party and the Green Party, sought to amend the Bill. Over 30 amendments were tabled and rejected by the DUP and Sinn Féin. In fact, the DUP lodged a petition of concern against those amendments, so, rather than us going to Sinn Féin's position, we welcome Sinn Féin following us on welfare reform. I recall that, on the day, we warned Sinn Féin that the bedroom tax was, courtesy of its votes, in the Bill. We hear much today about how we risk losing the mitigation powers for the worst excesses of the bedroom tax, but that is not the case. Scotland has already mitigated the bedroom tax in its delivery of welfare reform.

My party colleagues and I wish the First Minister a speedy recovery. I hope and pray that he makes a good recovery and that his family are supported. As someone whose family have suffered a recent illness, I know the stress that it causes and the effect that it has on the wider family circle. We certainly wish him a good and full recovery. Nonetheless, a few months back, Mr Robinson and, I believe, the Finance Minister were allowed by the deputy First Minister to go off and make a deal at Westminster. That is against the joint nature of the office, and the deputy First Minister could have referred the matter to the Attorney General had he chosen to do so, but he did not. He allowed the First Minister to go off and do his own deal. It was out of those meetings that, we strongly suspect, welfare reform was coupled with the block grant. We feel that we have had a gun put to our head — metaphorically speaking, thankfully — with the threat of fines. The British Government should

remove that threat. That is the first thing that they should do.

In their approach to the North of Ireland, this British Government are the most partisan that we have seen in 20 years. In fact, they have threatened to breach the Good Friday Agreement with their proposals on the Human Rights Act and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). We will not stand for that. We will take whatever action is necessary to fight against that, including redress to the courts if need be. I welcome the intervention of Charlie Flanagan, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade in the South, on that, as well as the Irish Government's robust stand and their challenge to the British Government.

We have been asked to vote for a Bill that we do support and that we had sought to amend. In the recent correspondence that has now been shared with all the parties, I note that other parties shared our concern. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mike Nesbitt registered his protest at the side deals that have been a feature of this Administration and were a feature of the previous Administration, in which Sinn Féin and the DUP are and were the two largest parties. As we have seen all too often, those side deals start to unravel. They are seldom in the interests of all the people right across the community in Northern Ireland and, indeed, are very often in those parties' political interests.

Therefore, over the past week, we have — for the first time, in some cases — had access to some of the papers being exchanged between the DUP and Sinn Féin.

I, like many others, do not know why Sinn Féin was so slow to pick up that the vulnerable — people with disabilities, children with disabilities, and the long-term sick — would not be protected under the Welfare Reform Bill, because those were some of the very amendments that we sought to enshrine in the legislation. We wanted those in statute, not in guidance or regulations. We wanted to make sure that that was part of the type of society that we wished to create and part of the type of protections that we wished to give to those same people.

My party and I recognise the difficulties in setting a Budget and the time constraints that we work within, but it is not yet too late for all parties to get around the same table and thrash out the concerns about welfare reform that we each have. Therefore I ask the DUP to consider the time frame again and whether it would be in the best interests of us all to have a

mature negotiation in which all of the parties are included all of the time.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will.

Mr Storey: If the narrative that the Member is painting to the House and to the public is the case, then why did her party, along with the four other parties, sign the Stormont Castle agreement? Let us be very clear: all the information was available to everybody in the room. I ensured that the most senior civil servants were available: the head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service was there; the head of the Social Security Agency was there; and all the relevant information was there. Why did we have an agreement and why, today, does that agreement lie in tatters?

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his intervention, because it allows me the opportunity to state, again, that we reserved the right to amend. My party tabled numerous amendments, which were petitioned against. Was that the best use of a petition of concern — to petition against amendments — if you were going to seriously listen to our concerns? You cannot have it every way. You cannot say to us, "Let's have a mature debate, let's hear your concerns" and then petition against them so that they are chucked out and do not stand any reasonable chance of being heard or being reflected in the legislation.

There are others who, over the last few days, have spoken to the SDLP about our responsibilities in protecting the institutions. They have said that, once again, the SDLP should bear the full and heavy load for others. And, yes, I am proud to say that the SDLP as a political party puts the needs of the people and the institutions before our own political well-being on many occasions. This time, however, we are fed up with the side deals and the bad grace that often persists between Sinn Féin and the DUP from which we all have to suffer. If it was not for the photo ops, we would seldom see them working in unison for the good of the people.

We are asking Members to reflect on what role they have played in the Stormont House Agreement and welfare reform and to reflect on why we have a loss of confidence in the British Government, which, as you know, will be responsible for bringing forward the other aspects of the Stormont House Agreement: parades and dealing with the past. The SDLP is concerned about how that will be brought

about at Westminster, and that is why we have a lack of confidence.

The welfare reform debate is about protecting the vulnerable — protecting children and families — but it was SDLP MPs, such as my colleague Alasdair McDonnell and others, who voted against the welfare and benefit caps and sought to amend many of those amendments at Westminster, unlike some other parties. Here, too, we will defend those who are most in need of a voice.

Others talk about the Tories and making work pay. I think that we could all subscribe to that value or belief, but what are we seeing? We are seeing zero-hour contracts, agency workers and temporary jobs. We are seeing an erosion of many of the rights and entitlements that workers have fought for over the past 100 years, including a decent wage.

I will finish on this note: we have to remember that people here in the North are much worse off, whether in work or out of work, than people in GB. In March 2015, an income tracker by Asda showed that the average disposable income for a family in GB was £185 and only £92 for the people of Northern Ireland. That simply is not good enough. The message that we want to send to the Tories is that we are still a community coming out of conflict. They have ignored our cry for help to move Northern Ireland forward.

Mr Speaker: We need to have some order to hear the contributions.

Mr Beggs: The UK welfare system today is still that broadly envisaged in the Beveridge report in the 1940s: a safety net of support for those who genuinely need it. We want to see the sick, the disabled, the working poor, families, children and our older people all being supported whilst adults who are fit to work but currently are unemployed are supported back into the work space. Ulster Unionists very much agree with the belief that people who are fit to work should be better off in work than on benefits. We want more people entering the world of work, individuals and their families prospering and being better off, and we want Northern Ireland to prosper.

Universal credit was an ambitious project. Despite its shambolic roll-out in GB, it still might just work. The Department for Work and Pensions has claimed the success of transferring the welfare claims of single people to the new benefits system. However, we are still some way from gaining success. Earlier this month, only approximately 52,000 of the 7

million prospective claimants were in receipt of the new benefits, but more and more are being added. Until it starts to handle more and more complex cases, there is little on which to really judge the success or failure of the new system.

When the Westminster Welfare Reform Bill received Royal Assent on 8 March 2012, no one could have expected that it would take more than three years before the Assembly reached the Final Stage of the Bill covering similar rules in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the scale of welfare administration has become increasingly unsustainable in recent times, and reform was inevitable. The dated system was preventing individuals and families from improving their life chances. The trap of welfare dependency was beginning to catch entire families.

This is the most difficult and controversial Bill that the Assembly has faced in recent times. My party does not like everything in it. We proposed several amendments. We were successful with some and unsuccessful with others. The Bill at least delivers some reform to a system that clearly is no longer fit for purpose. Amendments were made to the GB legislation to reflect local concerns, and extra funding was set aside by our Executive through the Stormont House Agreement discussions to moderate the effects of the changes. This has been built into the 2015-16 Budget.

The aim of the Bill is to simplify benefits, improve work incentives and reduce administrative costs. The changes are occurring against a background of the UK continuing to increase its cumulative deficit. Labour, the Lib Dems and the Conservatives have all committed to Budget break-even; they disagree only over how fast they each would bring it into balance. The reality of the recent UK elections is that there is no going back. I think that Labour is even reviewing the position that it took. I also recall Iain Duncan Smith, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, highlighting that, with the old GB benefits system, it took almost an hour for an experienced welfare supervisor, using sophisticated computers, to establish whether someone would be better or worse off if they worked a few hours more.

We had a very complicated system that was very costly to administer, and there was a lack of transparency as to whether individuals would be better off in work. Benefit traps are preventing our constituents from working to help themselves and their families.

11.30 am

We do have choices. If this Bill is not approved, we will be the only part of the UK using the old benefits system. There will be less funds in many other public areas. Let us be clear that there is no money tree. There is no going back asking for more money. We have been there lots of times over the past three years. There were crunch talks around Christmas last year, and we got an offer of a settlement at that stage. If we do not approve this Bill, there will be even less money for health, less money for education and less money for Departments and other publicly funded bodies.

If this Bill is approved, the potential of further penalties and unplanned departmental cuts will be averted. Penalties were discussed earlier. Penalties come simply when we decide to deviate from the welfare system. The Westminster Government simply take that money off our block grant. That is what a penalty is: we choose to differ, and therefore we pay. How can we argue to other parts of the United Kingdom that that is unfair? How can we argue that to this Government, whose members represent areas where they have a different benefits system? Why should they permit us to introduce a more generous benefits system to Northern Ireland and not pay for it? That is an argument that some would wish to win by going back to negotiations. However, I am firm in the belief that that would go nowhere. Experience of the past three years shows that that is the case.

If we choose to deviate from the welfare system that applies elsewhere in the United Kingdom, we will have to pay for it from our block grant. That is the political and economic reality. Fines have been indicated — essentially clawbacks of our deviation to date — of £14 million, then £87 million and then some £114 million this year. The figure is projected to reach £250 million next year, and I understand that the First Minister has said that it could even be £500 million the following year. This is what is coming down the line if we do not implement change. Politics is supposed to be the art of the possible. That means that we all have a responsibility to examine not only the pluses and the minuses of this Bill but the implications that will flow from the Bill not being approved.

In addition to the welfare clawback or fines, if this Bill is not approved the offer of borrowing will not be there. Remember that, because of delays last year, there was an additional £100 million deficit. We were afforded borrowing last year to avert further drastic in-year cuts. Let us remember that, last year, there were in-year cuts of 4.4% across many Departments and the overall Budget to claw back deficits that were

running up. The longer we take to make decisions and the longer we avoid financial decisions, the worse will be the long-term implications. There is poorer and poorer planning around where those cuts can be made, and they are implemented in a much speedier fashion than would otherwise be the case. I understand that, if we do not approve the Bill, the borrowing to cover the £100 million from last year will be required in this year's Budget, and, of course, the hundreds of millions of pounds that were offered to us to pay for a voluntary redundancy scheme will no longer be available. They will not be on the table. That was part of the deal.

What would be the implications of all that and other aspects for the Assembly's Budget, which is with our Finance Minister and is due to be brought before the Executive and ultimately the Assembly to finalise it? Well, to balance the Budget, further cuts would have to be announced. I understand reliably that that figure is in the order of £600 million. The community and voluntary sector has already suffered compulsory redundancies. There is no doubt that if the Budget problem deepens even further if the Bill is not approved, there will be thousands of compulsory redundancies, instead of voluntary redundancies, across the public sector. How else do you balance the Budget? There has to be a balancing of the Budget. If the Executive are not prepared to do that, we know that there are mechanisms within the legislation that will pass that responsibility to senior civil servants who will set the Budget at 95% of last year's Budget.

Take the health service. Failure to implement welfare reform and finalise the Budget could mean an 8% reduction in the health budget — not an increase to deal with those increasing pressures, such as the growing waiting lists and the delays at our accident and emergency centres. There is a huge responsibility on everyone who is thinking of opposing the Bill to explain where the £600 million gap in our Budget comes from. How is that going to be filled? Or, how are we going to avoid the inevitable crash, as I see it, when civil servants will be forced to take such drastic decisions?

The question to Sinn Féin, today, is very clear: vote for the Bill with all of its local amendments and additional safeguards, or reject it and wait a few months for Westminster to implement it for them, with, potentially, no additional protection. If the Assembly survives — I say, "if" — which I think would be highly unlikely, is Sinn Féin prepared to watch these powers and all other powers being handed back to Westminster? There may, of course, be an Assembly election,

but, if there is, we will come back to face the same problems, and the same issues will arise. If there is a failure again, in a few months' time, and if there is stalemate, I do not think the United Kingdom Government could sit around while such drastic cuts would be affecting the people of Northern Ireland, in terms of not only our health service but a wide range of public services.

In addition, if the Bill is rejected, the Northern Ireland social security administrative burden will grow and grow and grow. Let me explain. In Great Britain, there is a clear commitment to move to the new computer system. Recently, an official indicated to the Social Development Committee that the ageing UK current social security system cost £1 billion a year to maintain and run. When, eventually, everything transfers to the new system, that system will no longer be required. So, how is Northern Ireland going to run the current social security system with its rules and regulations? What is it going to cost us to maintain that large, burdensome computer system so that we can have the luxury of having different social security rules and regulations here? I have not heard any costs of that. I am not saying that it is going to cost £1 billion, but the administrative burden will cost hundreds of millions of pounds on an annual basis. So, on top of all the other voids, another cost is coming in. The alternative suggested by the official was that we operate a paper system for our social security in Northern Ireland, which, of course, may have even higher administrative costs. Certainly, that is not a practical option.

Over the years, it will be increasingly difficult and, indeed, almost impossible to calculate the difference between the new system and the old system. That is where the uncosted, Gerry Adams, Sinn Féin, Southern-campaign directive guaranteeing protection against all future welfare changes unravels. It is undeliverable, uncosted and irresponsible. It is so sad that we have major parties in Northern Ireland that are prepared to run with the line that there will be no change to the welfare system in Northern Ireland.

I want to put on public record that, on Friday morning, the Ulster Unionist Party met some Sinn Féin representatives in Stormont Castle.

It was one of the last chances to find out whether there was room for negotiation. Remarkably, the Sinn Féin representatives told us at the meeting that they had costed proposals that would guarantee protections for existing and future claimants and that it would be done broadly within the spending envelope

already agreed in the Stormont House Agreement. We did not believe them, but we were prepared to, at least, consider it. Surprisingly, four days later, and even in the course of this debate, we have heard nothing. We are still waiting for a copy of those proposals. Sinn Féin was being irresponsible once more, even until the last minute.

It was with bemusement that I learnt that a petition of concern had been placed against the Final Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill in March and has been repeated again for today's debate. Sinn Féin has supported many amendments and approved the details of the Bill that are presented today for final approval. In fact, on the specific issue of contributory employment and support allowance (ESA), an issue on which Sinn Féin now professes opposition, this is what Mickey Brady said on 10 February:

"I argue that clause 52 ... is a good clause".— [Official Report, Vol 101, No 8, p102, col 2].

It is so good that Sinn Féin is now wholly opposed to it. Sam McBride quoted Martin McGuinness as having told the Sinn Féin ard-fheis:

"Our protected welfare system has eliminated the Tory cuts",

but then Sinn Féin flip-flopped, when the Southern command wagged the Northern tail.

One of the worst aspects of this flip-flopping is the failure to govern: the failure to lead and the failure to take responsibility, with the knock-on adverse effects that will fall on the people of Northern Ireland. Then again, should we really be surprised, considering that this is the party that claims that it stands against cuts, four years after implementing consecutive cuts? The Belfast Agreement, approved by the people of Northern Ireland, accepted Northern Ireland's position in the United Kingdom. This means that we receive UK welfare benefits and, if any changes are proposed, we must pay for them out of our remaining block grant.

Billions of pounds of subventions are already coming to Northern Ireland and, on average, our citizens are in receipt of thousands of pounds more than those in other regions of the United Kingdom. Yes, there is some argument over whether it is £7 billion, £8 billion or £10 billion, but the reality is that our citizens are receiving considerably more funds from public sources than those in any other part of the United Kingdom. Sinn Féin fails to

acknowledge that reality. It seems to think that extra welfare costs will be paid for from the money tree, and it seems to wish to emulate the Greek form of economics and bring that to the Northern Ireland economy and government. I do not want such failure. Sinn Féin seemed to be willing to implement welfare reform in Northern Ireland whilst fighting austerity in the Republic of Ireland. That failure to govern or take difficult decisions in Northern Ireland will affect every one of our citizens. Have no doubt of it.

This morning, on Radio Ulster, I heard Paul Terrington, the current head of the Institute of Directors, indicate that stability in the Administration is crucial for economic growth in Northern Ireland. He went on to say that the single issue of stability, the continuation of the devolution process around corporation tax and all those things are in a vacuum at the minute. We do not have political stability to sell ourselves elsewhere or bring in new investment and we do not recognise the realities of financing our local Administration. We are creating instability and making it more difficult to bring jobs in and more difficult for existing employers in Northern Ireland to invest. The issue of corporation tax is being held back. It was a part of the agreement but, if it were devolved, what exactly would Sinn Féin be proposing? Would it propose increasing corporation tax, perhaps to pay for some of the additional welfare benefits? The Budget has to balance, and there seems to be a lack of reality in actions that are being taken by those who should know better. Sinn Féin is showing the citizens of Northern Ireland and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland that it is unfit to govern and cannot create stability either in its decision-making or its ability to live within the Budget.

11.45 am

At the last Sinn Féin ard-fheis, Mr Brady said that, during the recent Stormont House talks, the relentless tide of austerity was abated. How was it abated? Our Budget is determined at Westminster. That is part of the Belfast Agreement, and we have to live within the Budget that comes to us. Sinn Féin was so anti-austerity that it agreed to cut 20,000 posts in the public sector; posts that we cannot afford to maintain. It was so anti-austerity that it was a cheerleader for a Budget that has witnessed its own Education Minister admit that he will have to make 1,500 teachers and support staff redundant by September. Again, how has the tide of austerity been abated?

On top of the supplementary payment fund and all the other protections, he even claimed that

Sinn Féin delivered a £564 million welfare package. That is absolute nonsense. Is he claiming that Sinn Féin secured each and every one of the mitigation measures? Is he claiming that Sinn Féin solely secured the additional funding for the transfer from DLA to PIP? Does he forget that many of the safeguards were already agreed over 12 months ago?

The simple fact is that it said originally that it would not implement welfare reform, then it agreed to do it, and then it flip-flopped once again. It is unstable government. It said that future claimants would be protected. They cannot be. That is the reality. How do we continue to calculate into the future, whether it is one year, six years or 10 years, the difference between the benefits that someone in Northern Ireland would get under the old system if we do not change and the system that will be applicable in other parts of the United Kingdom? It said that it has alternatives, but it has never shared them, and we have still not heard today what those alternatives are.

During the Bill's stages, there were decisions by the DUP to kill off the vast majority of formal amendments through the abuse, in my mind, of the petition of concern. Was that done as a diversionary tactic to save Sinn Féin's blushes at the time? Perhaps. But it did, as others said, prevent the Assembly from reaching its view in a simple vote. The Bill we are being asked to vote on today is better shaped than it was three years ago, and there was an opportunity to at least mitigate some of the worst consequences that would flow from welfare reform.

I welcome my party's amendments to the Bill. The early amendments that went down in April 2013 highlighted some of our concerns about the frequency of payments, the need for split payments, the provision of medical evidence and a desire for a Northern Ireland PIP pilot scheme. While the Bill is better for those changes, we would have preferred additional changes, such as improvements in welfare advice.

Let us recognise that there are many positive changes, as the Minister highlighted. The frequency of payment has moved from a monthly universal credit payment to twice monthly. There is provision for split universal credit where there are issues in households. There is the direct payment of housing benefit to landlords to prevent the increasing likelihood of evictions if money that was designed to go to housing benefit was not actually used for housing costs. That is another positive change that was being built in. Then there was the discretionary housing protection. There were

other changes, such as the reduction in the maximum period of sanctions from three years to 18 months. Provisions were built in to protect those who have a disability. That was done in a time-limited and proportionate manner. So, significant changes were built into the raw legislation that came here. I am firmly of the belief that, if we do not approve it, somebody else will, at some point, approve a system of welfare reform for Northern Ireland. We do not know whether they will take those mitigations into consideration. The responsibility will pass to others because budgetary and other issues mean that, in the long term, it is simply not sustainable to maintain the position of not adopting these measures.

During its passage, the Social Development Committee undertook the task of reviewing every aspect of the Bill. On behalf of me and the rest of the Ulster Unionist Party Assembly group, I take this opportunity to thank Michael Copeland for his outstanding hard work on the Bill. Anyone who observed his work on the Committee was left in no doubt about his genuine interest in not only ensuring that the reforms did not have a devastating impact on communities across Northern Ireland but that they were as fair as possible. He certainly set this party's course of direction on the Bill.

Aspects of the DUP's management of the Bill and the financial management related to it have been unhelpful. Unsurprisingly, however, after presiding over the mismanagement of previous Budgets, the DUP sought to lay all the Executive's financial ills from last year at the feet of failure to progress welfare reform. That was despite the £87 million in fines accounting for less than half of the £200 million shortfall in the Executive funds. Of course, never ones to miss a chance to spin a tale to suit their own needs, they almost sounded as if they convinced themselves that what they were saying was absolutely true. Of course, it was not. Basic mathematics and honesty were not important. Nevertheless, the failure to progress the Bill came at a cost of £87 million, which we did not have to spend on other public services. Not only were key public services cut to pay for that, but it happened late in year.

Members will recall that the June monitoring round was finalised, I think, at the end of July, and it was then perhaps another couple of months before each Department announced how it was going to claw back the amount that was levied on it within the short, six-month period that remained. That is the worst way that any Government can manage. Short-term clawbacks, little planning and little notice — that

is poor use of public funds, and we are in danger of repeating that this year. I say this to those who will vote against the Bill: you bear a huge responsibility. That is coming down the track. That is the political reality, and avoiding it does not solve the problem. Other costs will come back from other Departments to pay for the failure of the Bill to go through. Some parties, such as Sinn Féin, saw no contradiction in standing with posters earlier this year saying, "Stop Tory Cuts" while, at the same time, individual Ministers were implementing the reduced budgets that had been handed to them. I mentioned that earlier.

I will get back to the journey of the Bill. It now appears that it will fall at the very last hurdle. Sinn Féin has looked South and remembered that, there, it claims to be the anti-cuts party.

So, they are expressing their opposition to the Bill, regardless of the implications for the people of Northern Ireland, regardless of the most vulnerable and regardless of potential cuts to our health service — perhaps £200 million is coming out of health. How will you explain that to our most vulnerable citizens who are in ill health and need medical interventions? I would like to hear an answer from any Sinn Féin Member remaining to contribute to the debate. How will they solve that? How will they avoid that? Wishing for something different does not deliver it.

The Dublin leadership of Sinn Féin has viewed the Welfare Reform Bill as a threat to exposing the rank hypocrisy of what its party does daily in Northern Ireland compared with what it says, which is that it opposes austerity in the Republic.

So, the question is clear: is Sinn Féin prepared to reject today's Bill, lose the additional protection that comes with it, terminate the supplementary payments fund and remove all the other positive aspects that were linked to it during the negotiations at the end of last year, all for the sake of a few votes in the Republic of Ireland? As we go forward, I ask the people of Northern Ireland to remember how different parties voted on this matter and, further down the line, when the inevitable starts to happen, to realise who caused it and recall the warnings that everybody clearly understood were coming down the line. Yet politicians, it appears, are choosing to ignore the political reality. I support the Bill.

Mr Ford: I will commence, Mr Speaker, as you did, by extending good wishes on behalf of my party colleagues to Peter Robinson. We trust

that we will see the First Minister back in his place and fulfilling his duties at an early stage.

For the record, I should stress that I am speaking from the Back Bench, though I have no doubt that the Minister for Social Development will appreciate the support of at least one Minister in the House today. When I say that I "support" the Bill, it is in the context that Alliance is firmly in opposition to many of the welfare reforms and opposed them in the only place that mattered: the Parliament of the United Kingdom at Westminster. That was where those decisions were taken, not here.

There is much talk about welfare powers being devolved to these institutions. The reality is that welfare powers are not devolved in any genuine sense. Right from the post-war settlement — in fact, possibly even from Lloyd George's old-age pensions, but my memory does not go back that far — we have had the reality that, on the basis that people in Northern Ireland pay UK taxes, they get UK social security benefits. The expenditure under annually managed expenditure (AME) is adjusted to deal with that without regard to the block grant. That is the position that we are in, and that is where we now stand with these measures, which have been passed by the UK Parliament. Our powers to make any change are extremely limited.

It is fine for some Members to say, as Mr McGuinness did, that the Conservatives have a minuscule mandate in Northern Ireland, which is, of course, true. I notice that even the Ulster Unionist Party seems to have realised that casting off the Tories was probably a good thing electorally, but the reality is that, whether we like it or not, whether we approve of the electoral system or not and whether we think that it is fair or not, the Conservatives have a mandate as the Government of the United Kingdom. All parties that accepted the Good Friday Agreement and the principle of consent need to live with that. In the context of a UK Government, the Conservatives have the power to decide things, and we have distinctly limited powers as a devolved region.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: I will.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member acknowledge that, whilst the legislation is required to be approved here and we can deviate from it, we must pay for any deviation? So, we have the authority to change it, but we must pay for it out of our limited block grant.

Mr Ford: I entirely accept the Member's point, which I will go on to in a minute. That is where I believe that the nationalist rhetoric about welfare in this place is simply not correct. We have, as Mr Beggs has just reminded the House again, extremely limited powers to make any adjustments around the margins. We are not an unbridled power or a sovereign state, and we need to recognise the reality of where we are.

12.00 noon

It is fine to talk about issues like the Human Rights Act, where I have no doubt that, because of its particular implications for the Good Friday Agreement, many in the House will seek to oppose any potential changes that the Tories may introduce, but this is not the Human Rights Act. This is the fundamentals of living within our means, dealing with the budget that we are given and making such modifications as we can. We may work with Scotland and Wales on many issues — indeed, in my ministerial role, I work with the Scottish Cabinet Secretary on many issues — but we cannot on the issue of social security, which is fundamentally an issue for the UK, not at all devolved in Scotland in Wales and only nominally devolved here. However, we did make those mitigations and we did make those changes before Christmastime in Stormont Castle amongst the five parties, and then we incorporated them into the Stormont House Agreement, and that recognised the practical limitations of what we can do. We cannot do all that we wish to do. We have to live within the administrative possibilities and we have to live within the financial realities, and we had a very detailed examination of those. Civil servants from DSD and the Social Security Agency put a lot of effort in then, and have since, to put the detail on that, for which we should be grateful, but we need to recognise that that is the reality and that that is what five parties signed up to — to live within the reality, to make the ameliorations and to accept that that was the best that we could do —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: I will.

Mr Wilson: Does he also accept that the changes that were made and presented to the Executive reflected exactly the kind of groups that Sinn Féin and others said, including his own party, that they wanted protections made available to? That has been faithfully reflected, yet oddly enough, despite the fact that the money is there, the protections are there and

the groups that were identified are covered, we now face this situation today.

Mr Ford: Yes; Mr Wilson makes an entirely valid point. We dealt with those issues in detail in Stormont Castle and, working with the Governments, we got them into the Stormont House Agreement, yet we are left in the position where it is unclear as to exactly why some people who made that deal have reneged on it.

We also have to recognise that, when we reached the agreement in Stormont Castle, all of that had a cost to other public services — a very significant cost. If I remember correctly, we started off talking about something in the region of £40 million amelioration coming from other aspects of our budget. We got it up to £93 million annual average cost in Stormont Castle, and that is money coming directly from other services — directly from services that are provided to protect vulnerable people and people in need: health and social care, classically so; housing; job skills and employment work; I might even add in the issue of justice. Those who require those services are all seeing a reduction in those budgets because money is being put into propping up the social security budget.

It is not just a matter of health, although Mr Beggs correctly highlighted the fact that health is the largest of those issues. The £93 million in the Stormont Castle Agreement that is being put into social security funding will result in a direct cost, if it is proportionate, of between £6 million and £7 million on policing in Northern Ireland, and we could look at many other examples. We have made that balance; we have sought proportionate changes that would ensure that we maintain essential public services at the same time as we ameliorate welfare cuts, but we cannot go any further than we have gone, and that was a reasonable accommodation. It is the job of a responsible Government to make those difficult decisions. It is great to be in government at a time of expanding finances and nice opportunities, when Ministers can appear in front of cameras and smile at things, but the reality of government is that we need to learn to take difficult decisions, to deal with the difficult hand when we are played it at difficult times, and to be realistic and accept those.

In that respect, it seems to me that Sinn Féin and the SDLP have to prove that they can be responsible around budgetary matters in difficult times in just the same way, frankly, as Members on the other side of the House need to prove that they can be responsible and

recognise reality in other respects. The critical aspect is that the Government have to make the decisions based on the context in which we are living at the time.

Power-sharing requires compromise, rising above narrow ideology and reaching an accommodation, and it means aspiring for the common good. That is what was required, and that is what I believe we achieved at Stormont House on welfare reforms. If we do not pass the Bill, all that we agreed in the Stormont House Agreement potentially falls.

Do Members really want that? That will mean nothing at all for the voluntary exit scheme for those civil servants who wish to leave and have built up their expectations over the last months that they will get the chance to go. It will mean absolutely nothing for dealing with the past, new institutions, additional funding for inquests and all that was promised to victims, the bereaved and those who were injured. A lot of hopes were built on that, which now stand the risk of being crushed because people cannot agree the Bill. It will mean an immediate loss of last year's £100 million loan, with an expectation that it will be added to the burden of repayments this year, and there will be nothing at all for the additional funds that were expected to be invested in integrated education and shared education. If we do not agree the Bill, we have the prospect of full-blooded Tory cuts with no amelioration whatsoever.

Sinn Féin is making much about its claims to protect those who are dependent on social security benefits. The reality is that Sinn Féin is leaving them in a worse position. It is leaving them with a loss of public services, whether those be health, justice or job skills services, and leaving people worse off because of continuing fines that are being paid back to the Treasury rather than being put into any services here.

The SDLP claims to be the guardian of the Good Friday Agreement. The Ulster Unionists gave up on the Good Friday Agreement a while ago, we were never quite sure exactly how much Sinn Féin was committed to the full detail, and the DUP would claim that it never supported it. If we cannot work the system of power-sharing that is before us, we call into question whether Members have any commitment at all to the Good Friday Agreement. Members who signed the petition of concern are in danger of abandoning the Good Friday Agreement along with the Stormont House Agreement.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: I will give way.

Mrs D Kelly: Under the d'Hondt principles of the Good Friday Agreement, I do not recall the Alliance Party being entitled to two Ministers. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Ford: I am sorry; I am devastated. If somebody cannot tell the difference between a mathematical formula and a principle, we have a real issue.

If people are prepared to throw out the Bill without recognising the effects that doing so will have on those who are most vulnerable in this society and the dangers that lie ahead for public services in general, those who are dependent on those public services and for victims of the past who are expecting something to emerge from the Stormont House Agreement, they really are contradicting the principles of the Good Friday Agreement as well as those of the Stormont House Agreement.

It looks like Alliance will end up being the only party that is in support of those principles and the only party that is prepared to be fiscally responsible and socially progressive. The Alliance Party is not afraid to accept that difficult decisions have to be taken at difficult times. When people reach an agreement, they should stick to the agreement five months later. We will, therefore, support the Bill, not because we want Tory cuts to be implemented but because we want to stop future Tory cuts being implemented.

Mr Campbell: I join others in wishing Peter Robinson a speedy recovery.

Given the removal of OFMDFM Question Time, it seems somewhat strange, when we in an open-ended legislative debate that could go on for hours, for us to take a lunch break of two and a quarter hours; hopefully, the Business Committee will be able to meet. That seems absurd, but I am sure that the Whips are discussing it as we speak.

A number of issues about the Bill need to be brought to a head. When it comes to what most people in the House would like to see, welfare reform does not divide us. We would all like to see a belt-and-braces, super-duper welfare reform package. I presume that almost everyone in the Chamber, as well as outside, would want to see that in place. However, that is what we would like to see. That is what we would want to see in a perfect world. What we have is not perfect. It is rather imperfect, and there is no additional money. Given that we

were told by a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition that there was no additional money, does anybody seriously think that the Conservatives, bereft of the Liberal Democrats and now governing on their own with a complete majority, will say, "Yes, we did say that with the Lib Dems in tow, but we have now had a think about it. We are going to give everybody else in the UK a £12 billion hit, but we will overlook that for you people in Northern Ireland and give you a bit more money."? It is not going to happen. It simply is not going to happen.

The reality is that we have to do whatever we are going to do within the confines of our Budget. When we come to that point — I know that there are some, particularly in Sinn Féin and the SDLP, who do not seem to be at that point yet, but everybody else seems to be — we then have to decide what we do. Do we sit tight and hope, Micawber-like, that something will turn up? When my head comes out of the sand, will somebody somewhere, with this magic money tree that everybody talks about and nobody knows where it is, deliver hundreds of millions of pounds to deliver what we would all like to see? It ain't going to happen.

What do we do then? If we all wish that it was better but know that it is not going to be, do we sit tight and then it will get worse? That is what is going to happen; it is going to get worse. Or do we adopt the better way and try to mitigate the worst excesses of a welfare reform system that is, as everybody else in the UK admits, better than what they have? When I speak to the Scots Nats, Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives and Labour across the rest of the United Kingdom, they say, "I wish we had the system that you people have." When I say that we might not have it, they say, "That is your call." We are making it today. This call is being made today.

Over the course of the last month, we have heard from Sinn Féin a number of pie-in-the-sky economic issues. In fact, I was really glad that our former Finance Minister made the quote before I made it: it was not really Karl Marx economics, it was Groucho Marx economics. I notice that the deputy First Minister referred to the Member Mr Chris Hazzard, and I am glad that he did. Who will ever forget the car-crash radio interview before the election, when the Karl Marx economics of Sinn Féin was that, if you run up a credit card debt, we will write it off? These are the people who will say that we can get a better welfare reform package. Of course, they also said that they want to safeguard not only existing claimants but all future claimants. The current DLA claimant

rate, in some parts of Northern Ireland, is three times greater than in the rest of the UK. If it becomes four times greater, do they want to safeguard it? If it becomes five times greater, do they want to safeguard it? Commentators ask, "How do you account for future claimants?". They answer is that you do not. You cannot, because they are future claimants. You do not know what it will be, yet Sinn Féin wants to say that we have to get a budget and reforms that take account of the unknowable.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: Yes, I will.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member accept that the fantasy economics extends even further than that? On one hand, they claim that there will be £1,500 million lost to claimants as a result of welfare reform over the next five years, yet they believed that, by negotiating with the Government before Christmas for slightly above £500 million, they could ensure that none of the people who will be affected would lose out and that £500 million would cover £1,500 million of reductions. Does he not think that that maybe shows that their grasp of numbers is not great?

12.15 pm

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for his intervention. I think he was underselling it a bit when he said that their grasp of the numbers is "not great". "Not great" does not come close. The reality is that we have a Conservative Government in place for, in all likelihood, five years. The subvention is £10 billion a year. People ask why we cannot go it alone. It is 50 billion of those over the next five years — 50 billion of those. That is why we cannot go it alone.

I have heard a lot about anti-austerity. I remember, and I am sure many here remember, that, four months ago, the talk across Europe, in Spain, Italy and various countries, was that anti-austerity parties were on the rise, which they were; that they were getting more votes, which they were, and that they were becoming more strident in their demands. Then, four months ago this weekend past, an anti-austerity party was not just on the rise, but became the Government of Greece. Then we heard, "You are going to see stuff happen now; you are going to see austerity confronted and smashed." What do we see four months later? The Greeks are at the IMF, saying, "Please, can you bail us out? Please, can you do something? We cannot meet your demands." So much for the mighty anti-

austerity measures and the great anti-austerity party. I wonder where Sinn Féin, the great anti-austerity party of Groucho Marx rather than Karl Marx, will be?

The reality is that we are where we are. We have got to cut our cloth. People might not like it — I do not like it — but it does not change where we are. We have got to get on, mitigate what we can, do our best for those in need and do our best to secure the best deal — and we have got the best deal in the United Kingdom — or else it gets an awful lot worse. I support the Bill.

Mr Maskey: I am speaking for Sinn Féin, which stands for a number of key principles in its involvement with these institutions, including protections for the most vulnerable, a workable Budget that will enable us to deliver on the Programme for Government across all commitments, and the securing of additional powers to allow the Executive and the institutions to grow the economy and create employment.

I have heard it said over the last number of days that Sinn Féin is sleepwalking into this debate and does not listen to people. I remind people that we do listen. We are, in fact, just out of an election, and those of us who were on the campaign trail spoke collectively to several tens of thousands of people in their homes, on their doorsteps and at social gatherings and public meetings. I assure Members, and anyone else for that matter, that we do listen, and we heard loudly and clearly what people were saying. They are telling us that confidence in these institutions is low, and that they are worried about their future, their welfare and cuts to services. It is regrettable that some of them lay the blame at the door of these institutions rather than where it actually belongs, which is with the British Government; but is a discussion for another day.

The point I would make is that our party came out of the election with 176,000 votes. We are very pleased and privileged to have secured that very significant mandate. We have that mandate across the island of Ireland, in all the political institutions that the people have a franchise to elect into, and we are very proud and privileged to have that.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: No, I will not give way. Thanks, Minister.

We are proud of that. What is very clear is that the fundamental principles we stood for were endorsed by that high number of people. They are the commitments that we made during the election and they are the commitments that we are going to hold to dearly as we proceed. What will happen in the weeks and months ahead, I do not know, but I do know this, and Martin McGuinness made the point very clearly earlier: Sinn Féin is not remotely interested in these institutions collapsing, but, equally, these institutions are only worthwhile if they are delivering for the people that we collectively represent, and I mean collectively as in all of the parties here.

I will make the point again that the Tory Government, who are the body responsible for the position that we find ourselves in, have no mandate here whatsoever, whereas the parties around the table here do, and we have a responsibility to discharge that mandate to the best of our ability for the people we represent. Nobody in this room, the last time that I checked, represents any electorate outside these Six Counties.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: No, I am not giving way. I thank the Member.

I just want to make the point that we do listen, and we did listen. Not only that; when we make a promise, we will stand by that promise.

I want to make a couple of points before we go on. People are making remarks willy-nilly. They probably do not understand what they are saying themselves. The first thing is the whole question of fines. People say that we are being fined, and I have heard Members saying that that is money down the drain. Well, actually, I remind people that the money that is being taken off us by the British Government currently remains in the pockets of those welfare recipients. If it were not for Sinn Féin, the SDLP and others who have been resisting those cuts, those people would have had that money removed from their pockets already. Those are the most vulnerable in our society. When all the parties talk about defending the most vulnerable, that is the type of people that we are actually talking about. That money has not been lost or squandered or gone down the drain, as someone mentioned in the last number of days. That money remains in the pockets of those who are most vulnerable and who desperately need it.

I will also make a point for those who like to delude themselves about the machinations of

Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin is a national party, and we do not have to be dictated to by one part of the country or another. When people refer to where Sinn Féin in the North takes its orders from, let me say this: Martin McGuinness, for example, is a member of our national executive, our ard-chomhairle, as are a number of other Members on these Benches. We are not dictated to by any one part of the country or any individual. Sinn Féin has a very strong, committed, collective leadership that has representation from throughout the whole country. Let me assure anyone who has any doubts or any delusions in their minds: the decisions that we come to have been thought out, considered and acted upon on a national and collective basis. I think that is what it should be. You will not find any individual in our party faltering against another because our party is united. We are an anti-austerity party. We are a party that wants to work with all of the other parties, building the economies, North and South, and treating people fairly. That is what we will continue to do. As I said earlier, we are very proud and privileged to have received the very significant mandate that we continue to receive, and we will exercise that mandate very judiciously.

I will also make the point that continuing attacks on Sinn Féin during this debate or, indeed, others is a bit futile because it will not resolve anything. In case you have not learned anything over the years, criticising Sinn Féin is not going to make us shift one way or another. We will do what we have to do, what we need to do and what we think is in the best interests of the people who we collectively represent. Criticising Sinn Féin is really a waste of your time.

I did not want to go there, but I want to make one point, particularly in relation to the SDLP and Dolores Kelly's remarks earlier. I think it is very unfortunate that parties seek to waste their time and energy today in the debate taking sideswipes at Sinn Féin, or, indeed, any other party, when the real focus of our dispute has to be with the British Government. I will say this — I do not want to return to it later today, and I hope that nobody else has to — had the SDLP worked in good faith during the implementation period for the Stormont House Agreement, maybe, just perhaps, they might have been able to deliver on some of the points that they have been making.

That is by the by, however, because the last point that I want to make in regard to that is that the people who we represent want us to work together. They do not want us sniping at one another. They do not want parties bickering,

complaining or criticising each other. They want us to knuckle down, roll our sleeves up and get to work to tackle those very serious problems that people out there face.

The Minister, in his opening remarks, praised his officials, and rightly so. I want to place on record my gratitude and thanks to all the officials in his Department, including the Social Security Agency, who regularly come to the Social Development Committee and take a lot of time to explain things to and work with the Committee, and likewise throughout the whole Welfare Bill issue. However, by the same token, the Department officials do not set policy. That is the job for the parties around this Chamber. The officials do not set the policy.

There was progress. Parties reached an agreement in the Stormont House talks. We all agreed on that. We may disagree about what precisely we agreed — that is another day's argument — but, nevertheless, we made progress. As I have said, subsequent to that, we had further discussions about implementing the Stormont House Agreement. Ultimately, it came back — the Minister made the point earlier — and we were told by officials via the DUP that the deal that we wanted, which was to support current and future claimants, was not legally, operationally or financially deliverable. We dispute that. What we are saying is that the parties should decide the policy that we pursue, and we then have to get that enacted. Officials work very hard — I want to endorse the Minister's praise of the officials — but they do not set policy. Therefore, our party will not determine its policies based on what officials tell us. We have to listen, learn from what they are saying and work our way round the obstacles. We need to get round those obstacles politically, not simply acquiesce to them. That is the point that I wanted to make about the Department's officials.

Crucially for us, even though progress was made, it was not enough, and we have made that very clear. That is why, on 9 March, we said clearly that we would not continue to support the Bill as it goes through the House: it and the commitments and schemes did not go far enough. Essentially, we have two problems that we have to deal with. Both of those problems —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: No, thank you. Both of the problems that we face originate in Westminster. They are the savage cuts to the block grant,

which are well rehearsed — £1.5 billion over recent years — and the equally savage cuts to welfare, which the British Government want us to impose on people. Crucially, we have more of the same coming to us in July. Let us repeat that we are talking about treating with respect the most vulnerable. They include the long-term sick, large families with children who will be affected by the benefit cap, children with disabilities and adults with severe disabilities. Let me make it very clear that the Department's officials gave us figures for those categories: a family with a child on disability premium would lose up to £1,750; ESA time limiting would cost people £5,100; adults with a severe disability premium would lose £4,500; adults with a disability premium would lose almost £1,000; and the benefit cap would impact on some families to the tune of £2,300 or perhaps more. Those are the figures given to us. Of course, we know that the history of figures is that they could change by this time tomorrow, but it will be for another person to deal with that argument.

I want to conclude on a very simple point. In the last while, we have heard a lot of very strong and solid voices from wider civic society, which has stood together. I want to praise them again for coming to the Committee for Social Development during the evidence-gathering sessions on the Bill. There were people from the trade unions, Churches, community and voluntary sector and rights-based NGOs, including the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission. They spoke very well and cogently on the serious and negative impact that the welfare cuts being imposed by London would have if implemented here on the people whom we all represent. We need to focus our minds on those people. We represent people here. We do not represent people in Birmingham or anywhere else. We need to learn from and be in solidarity with all those people. The offer from Nicola Sturgeon to the devolved Administrations to sit down and work together on this issue is a very worthy one, and it would be foolish for anyone not to take up that offer.

I say to those in wider civic society that it is time for those who have identified the problems to work together to find solutions. Solutions do not lie just in the Chamber. Yes, we have the responsibility to pass legislation, or not, as the case may be. Clearly, today, we will not pass it. That is a decision that the Minister has foisted on the Chamber. Nevertheless, I call on wider civic society to work with all the parties here. This problem will not go away. The Bill will not pass today. We are then into unknown territory,

and it is up to the parties to work out where we go. I would far rather that the parties —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: I cannot give way, sorry. The difficulty —

Mrs Foster: You can.

Mr Maskey: OK, I will not give way; it is not the case that I cannot. I do that respectfully. I did not want to go there. This is legislation, and everyone can take as long as they need to talk in the Chamber today. However, the clock is ticking, and the Speaker has warned that he will interrupt.

I just want to finish my remarks on this point: parties here have a major responsibility on their shoulders. We in Sinn Féin have no hesitation in standing our ground against austerity. People inside and outside this Chamber have a responsibility to stand up against the cuts to the block grant and welfare, as well as the cuts that are coming down, yet again, from London from 8 July.

12.30 pm

In the same way in which we are talking to people in the Twenty-six Counties over the head of parties, politicians and vested interest groups, I say that people out there in civic society have a voice and should use it very strongly. The people's voice was made very clear to us in the election campaign, and I presume that other parties heard the same.

We have a job to defend the people we represent, particularly those who are most vulnerable. The parties here who want to challenge the austerity measures that are coming from London and want to work with civic society out there, whether it is the unions, the community and voluntary sector, the Churches or all those organisations that very rightly put on the table the very negative impacts of the cuts if they continue to be implemented, should work together and challenge directly where the responsibility lies. Despite the differences around the Chamber, the responsibility for the cuts does not lie with the parties in the Chamber or the Executive. It lies in London. I call on people here and in civic society to stand up to London, stand together and look after the best interests of the people we are elected to represent.

It is time for people who want to equivocate on where the responsibility lies to get off the fence.

The Government in London are quite clearly signalling that much more savage cuts will be imposed on us. Those will be to welfare and very important public services. We are saying to people who are against that that we should work together to challenge the British Government that are trying to impose those cuts and, if need be, stand up and name and shame the parties who are willing to acquiesce to that agenda.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension.

I intend to discuss with the Business Committee whether we should resume the debate at 2.00 pm to fill the slot that has been left by the cancellation of questions to OFMDFM. I will communicate the decision of the Business Committee through the party Whips as soon as it has been made.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.31 pm.

On resuming —

2.00 pm

Assembly Business

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Ms Ruane: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 26 May 2015.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 26 May 2015.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated and the motion is agreed.

Executive Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Final Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 13/11-15] do now pass.

Mr Wilson: This is an important debate. It is perhaps one of the most important debates that we have ever had in the Assembly. As a result of the decision that the Assembly will make today, we will move into uncharted waters. We do not know constitutionally where this could lead us, and we do not know politically where this could lead us, but the one thing that we do know is that, financially, the consequences of this have been spelt out and spelt out very clearly by the Finance Minister. We can talk in the abstract about the financial consequences of the Budget for this Assembly, but those financial consequences will be felt by every family. That is why the debate should be of importance to the people of Northern Ireland. Every family in Northern Ireland will face

financial consequences as a result of the outcome of the debate today.

It is little wonder that the SDLP and Sinn Féin have taken the stance that they have in the introductions to their speeches here today. There is an embarrassment there. Indeed, it is significant that none of the Sinn Féin spokespeople were prepared to take any interventions. That, to me, is an indication of how weak and paper-thin their arguments are. If they were sure of the ground on which they are opposing this legislation, you would have expected them to at least be prepared to stand and debate and discuss it and to answer questions in the Assembly. They have not been prepared to do that. In fact, we have had the excuses that this is a contrived situation and that, somehow or other, the Finance Minister has pushed us into having the Bill brought early.

I remind the Assembly that this has not come out of the blue. We have been trying to get this Bill through the Assembly for around a year and a half now. We have had meetings of all the parties, extensive discussions, negotiations with Ministers in England and even a crisis summit before Christmas last year. So, it has not come out of the blue, but the one thing that we do know is that the Finance Minister has to bring forward the final part of the Budget to the Assembly so that Departments and all those people who are affected by spending decisions of the Assembly know where they stand, so that schools know how much money they have for the rest of the year, further education colleges know what courses they can afford to run for the rest of the year, those who have applied for voluntary redundancy know whether they will be taking it and community groups know what they will have in their budget. I could go on.

There was no alternative but to bring this issue to a head. It is not contrived, it is not forced and it is not something about which the Finance Minister, the Social Development Minister and the First Minister thought, "Let's ramrod this through." It is something that has been in the making for a long time, and there has been an expectation that it is something that we would deal with.

The second argument that I have heard here today is, "Well, if only we had a bit more time, then we could've resolved the issues. Why couldn't we just sit down and talk?". Mr Maskey said we should work together to make more progress. The parties worked together at Christmas and thought that they had made progress. Before that, the former Social Development Minister worked with the DWP Minister in England and got concessions that,

as my friend Mr Campbell said, are the envy of other parts of the United Kingdom. Since then, the Social Development Minister, on the basis of the agreement reached before Christmas, brought forward a plan as to how vulnerable groups might be protected, all of which has been presented to the Executive. I point out that nearly all those changes have not been as a result of those who claim to have concern for the vulnerable; they have been as a result of the work of a succession of DUP Ministers who took the lead on these issues.

As Mr Ford pointed out, while Sinn Féin poured out the anti-austerity rhetoric, it was not present when the debates about austerity were taking place in the Parliament of the United Kingdom; it was being too precious about its republican principles. That is how much it cares about the vulnerable. If there had been a real concern about the vulnerable, we would have seen Sinn Féin making its arguments in the place where welfare reform had its genesis: the House of Commons. Indeed, Sinn Féin has made it quite clear that, should there be future cuts, it will not be there to defend the vulnerable because it is a party of abstention. Abstention is more important than protecting the vulnerable. Let us not have any more of this nonsense about, "If only we had more time to talk. We're interested in supporting the vulnerable".

It is significant that, although the Social Development Minister has brought forward proposals that, we are told, are still unacceptable, we do not have a clue why they are unacceptable. Have we had any amendments? Sinn Féin has refused to accept the challenges, but I would have thought that I would at least have heard from its spokesmen today some indication as to where the flaws are. However, we have not heard from them, so what more is there to talk about? We have had extensive discussions with DWP Ministers; we have had changes made to the legislation; we have had the Stormont House Agreement and the subsequent papers tabled from it. There has been no new input from those saying that this is still unacceptable. No changes have been proposed.

The other argument is, "Well, if we all went together collectively to speak to the Prime Minister, perhaps he would give us more money". That has been well articulated here today. Those who put forward that argument know full well that it is nonsense. Anyone who thinks that a party that would not give more money when in coalition with the Liberals will, now that it has won an election, is in power in its own right and is going to introduce more welfare cuts on people in England, Scotland

and Wales, exempt Northern Ireland, where it does not have one MP, is living in a fantasy world. Yet those are the arguments that we have had today as to why we should not proceed with the Bill. They are all false and threadbare, and they will have dire consequences because the Bill has to be voted on today. If it is refused and rejected, there will be consequences.

Let us look at what is being proposed. It is not that the Bill is unnecessarily harsh. I remember being on the ministerial group that discussed the Bill. This seems to be a moveable feast because, at that stage, a number of things were highlighted, all of which were dealt with. The first one was the impact that it would have on the social fund, and the Executive put more money into that. The second one was the impact that it would have on people who would no longer be eligible to receive help with their rates, and the Executive put more money into that. The third one was the spare room subsidy and the fact that we did not have the housing stock to move people around, and we got an exemption from that. The fourth one was that there were people who would find it difficult to manage their money, and, if they were paid once a month, they would find themselves short at the end of the month, so we got a change whereby we could make more regular payments. The fifth one was that, in some dysfunctional households, if you paid all the money to one person, they would go out and spend it on drink, so the money should be split, and that was dealt with, too.

All five had financial consequences, of course, in extra administration, but every issue raised was dealt with, and, by the way, it was a DUP Minister who negotiated with a Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions. Those who claim to have a monopoly on being worried about the vulnerable ought to remember that all the issues that they raised were taken on board seriously, dealt with and reflected in the legislation that we have here. We were prepared to put our money where our mouth is and deal with the financial consequences of that.

Then, of course, the issue that came up was that there were still vulnerable groups that needed to be supported. One of the reasons why additional moneys, to the tune of £540 million, £550 million or whatever it was, were found in December was to provide additional support for those groups over six years. The impression has been given that, by some sleight of hand, the Minister for Social Development turned his back on those agreements. The truth of the matter is that,

when you examine it, you see that not one penny has been removed. Every single penny of the money that, before Christmas, Sinn Féin and the SDLP thought was a sufficient guarantee for vulnerable people is still in the budget for this Bill.

The groups that they asked to be addressed, children with long-term disabilities and people with severe disabilities, are covered by the supplementary fund. A discretionary fund has been set aside to look at the cases of future claimants. Where they merited payment, they would get it. Despite what Mr Maskey said, the paper states that the losses to those vulnerable groups, especially those with children, will be covered. People will not lose out, yet we are told that this is not sufficient.

Sinn Féin has tied itself up with its rhetoric that not one person would lose out. The truth of the matter, given that the total welfare budget will not rise as fast as it would have without welfare reform, is that some people were always bound to lose out. Let us not pretend that that was not going to be the case, but the groups deemed to be the most vulnerable have been covered. I am sure that the Minister for Social Development will be more than happy to spell out, and will be more competent than me in doing so, the detail of how those people will be covered. By turning our back on the Bill today, they, the very people whom those who signed the petition of concern claim to want to protect, will not be protected.

2.15 pm

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, in addition to the group of people he is talking about, there is a considerable number of vulnerable people who would have been better off under the welfare reform package that had been negotiated but who, now, will not be better off as a result of this?

Mr Wilson: I was just coming to that. Some 80% of those who will be affected by the changes to universal credit will either be no worse off or better off. Forty per cent, or 80,000, of them will be better off; 40% will be no worse off; and 20% will be less well off — and even they will have transitional protection in that it is only when their circumstances change that they will find that their payments are reduced.

Here is the real danger. I said that we were entering uncharted waters on this. I pay tribute to those parties who recognise that there are difficult decisions to be made and that there are

costs involved in that. At least, they have not buried their head in the sand in the way that Sinn Féin and the SDLP have done. They have been prepared to support this. The real danger is what will happen if we do not proceed with this and if we prove that we are not mature enough to take the hard decisions. Being in government means that you have got to take hard decisions. It is one thing to say that we want devolved government and we want more devolved powers — in fact, I heard Mr Maskey say that he wants not just this devolved, but a lot more fiscal powers devolved — but putting up or putting down taxes will be hard decisions to make because they will have consequences. If you cannot deal with the issues that we have before us, how can we hope to deal with any more powers being transferred to the Assembly? If we do not have the ability to do that, one of the possibilities — I do not want to be alarmist. We have muddled through crises before in the Assembly, and the only people to have suffered have been those who have been affected by the delays and the indecision, and the only thing to have suffered has been our credibility. I do not think that our credibility being affected in that way is good for the political process. Some people play fast and loose with it.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way.

Mr Storey: The Member will recall, I am sure, a document that was published by Sinn Féin, ironically called "Sinn Féin Welfare Reform: The Facts". That is a contradiction in terms. In that document, Sinn Féin said:

"Sinn Féin will not be part of any agenda that punishes the most vulnerable in our society."

Yet, in a Department in which it had control, the Education Minister made a decision without reference to anybody else — and I see the Education Minister is in the House this afternoon — and £1.7 million was taken out of the early years fund. Who has that affected? Who has that punished? That was deliberately a target towards families that are now in a very dire situation. So, when it has the control and the power, it attacks the vulnerable, and that is the accusation that it is making against the rest of us.

Mr Wilson: Furthermore, the vulnerable are attacked as a result of the incompetence of Sinn Féin in dealing with the issue of welfare reform. Of course, that £1.7 million reduction in

the early years programme, which deals with vulnerable families, could have been avoided by simply passing the Welfare Reform Bill. The money we would have saved in one week, rather than it going back to Westminster, would have ensured that those early years programmes were continued. So, not only has the financial situation been brought about by Sinn Féin, but the Minister decides to attack the vulnerable rather than cut some of his pet projects. Of course, he could have saved that money by not pursuing as rigorously his policy of promoting Irish language schools, but, no, Irish language schools are much more important than those families who would have benefited from the early years programme. Again, we can see the hypocrisy of the party opposite. They use such fine statements as, "We want to protect the vulnerable", but, when they have to make decisions about protecting the vulnerable, they are not so good at doing it.

That takes me to the absolute crux of the point that I want to make. We do not know where this will lead us, constitutionally, but one of the options, constitutionally, is for the Government at Westminster to say, "Since welfare reform is not devolved to Wales and not devolved to Scotland, and Northern Ireland can't handle it, we will take it back to Westminster", and all the protections that I have spent some time outlining here today will disappear. Somehow or other, that is supposed to be a good outcome for the vulnerable and for those who will be mostly affected by welfare reform.

If that is the logic of those who have signed the petition of concern, then it is little wonder that the stock of some Members in the Assembly is so low amongst the general public. That is something that has to be given real consideration. Of course, there might be no immediate decision taken by the Government to take this under the control of Westminster, but the one thing that they cannot allow to happen, and the one thing that we cannot allow to happen, is for this festering sore to remain here, because it is going to be more and more costly. Mr Beggs outlined the escalating cost, and I do not want to go into that. As the gap between welfare payments in Northern Ireland and those in the rest of the United Kingdom widens, we will pay back more and we will also pay for the additional cost of administration as we lose the use of the UK-wide system of administration and have to take that on under our own hat and auspices.

It is probably too late, at this stage, to ask those who signed the petition of concern to withdraw the foolish action they have undertaken. I am not an expert on this, but I suspect it is too late.

However, we have spelt out the consequences of it. Putting this on to the Floor of the Assembly was not due to some rush of blood to the head by the decision-makers in the DUP. It was something that had to be done, and was done only after every effort was made to try to resolve the issue. I must say that I am disappointed that we have failed to do that.

I have just one word of warning. Sinn Féin is magnificent with words. This is how Mr Maskey started his speech. He said that the aims of his party were to protect the vulnerable. Well, I think I have shown that they are not protecting the vulnerable in this. He also said they aim to have a workable Budget. The Finance Minister will have a lot to say about how workable the Budget will be if the welfare reform changes do not go through. Mr Maskey also said that his party wanted the acquisition of more fiscal powers. Anybody who would want to add more fiscal powers to the Assembly and to the people who bury their heads in its economic sands would be out of their skull. Indeed, why would you hand fiscal powers to people who clearly cannot even handle the powers they already have?

I do not know whether anybody in the Irish Republic ever watches or listens to the debates in the Assembly. I hope that those in the Irish Republic, who Sinn Féin hope will eventually vote them into some coalition arrangement after the next election, are listening to this debate. If they pay any attention to it, they will realise the financial and political incompetence that rests on the Benches across the way. If their representatives in the Republic turn their backs on economic and political reality, in the way that Sinn Féin has done here, then, if the people of the Republic are foolish enough to put them into a position where they hold the levers in a coalition arrangement, dear help that economy. We do not need the Southern economy to go into a tailspin because of the kind of people who might take up those kinds of positions: claiming to be anti-austerity but not having a clue as to how to run a modern economy in any one way.

We believe that we have brought forward an honest attempt to square the circle of the welfare changes at Westminster, which have inevitable consequences here, just as they did in Wales and in Scotland. In fact, it is significant that, although the Scottish nationalists claim to be anti-austerity, they accepted that those welfare changes had to be implemented. We have brought forward an honest attempt, and we have spelt out the consequences. I hope that, as people cast their

vote at the end of the debate today, they will bear all those points in mind.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will start by picking up on some of the comments made by the previous Member, particularly in relation to his commentary on the electorate in the Twenty-six Counties. The Member should cast his mind back to the European elections: half a million people across the island are consistent with what Sinn Féin does, particularly in relation to our policies of standing up for the most vulnerable and for public services. That is something that we are very proud of, and it is not something that we will stand back from. The immediate difficulties

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member should let me get started.

Despite the fact that, as the previous Member said, we knew that this was coming and we were always going to arrive at this point, we are debating the Welfare Reform Bill in the Chamber today because the DUP and the Social Development Minister decided to move the motion on the Bill, despite knowing that there was no way it would command any kind of support in the House. The reason we are in the immediate crisis that we are in today is that reality.

We have not had the papers come forward. I listened carefully to the Social Development Minister's opening remarks, particularly around the fact that so much information had been provided. There is no doubt that there has been plenty of to and fro in the form of discussions with advisers and across our parties about ironing out all the difficulties and trying to put in place the protections that clearly need to be put in place. However, this is despite the agreement that was arrived at in the Stormont House Agreement, despite the Minister's commitments before Easter that there would be papers coming forward and that we would chart our way through and despite the Minister's promise to the House — I will quote him — that no one in the North of Ireland would be

"adversely affected as a result of the changes" — [Official Report, Vol 100, No 5, p23, col 1].

I ask the Minister this: are the cuts of £1,750 to the child disability premium not an adverse effect? In my book, that is most certainly an

adverse effect and something that the House needs to be very concerned about.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: I am sure that the Minister will take his opportunity when he sums up the debate today to respond to the points. The Minister will have his opportunity to respond to the points that I have outlined. He clearly said, again, that he had done everything that he could to find a way forward, but, again, that is not the case. Where is the bedroom tax paper?

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: Again, the Minister can address these points in his contribution towards the end of the debate.

Where is the bedroom paper? Where is the agreement on the disability scheme? Despite the fact that my party clearly flagged up our concerns and the issues that we need to see addressed, that has not been forthcoming. The Minister created the immediate crisis that we are in today by taking the Bill to the Floor, knowing fine rightly that it will not be agreed today.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way to somebody who cannot respond at the end of the debate?

Mrs O'Neill: Let me get on with my contribution to today's debate. Everybody has the opportunity to put their name down and go through the normal procedure.

The debate so far today has taken a very narrow view. It has been about taking that narrow approach. It has very much been about trying to apportion blame, which is not helpful. It is not helpful to the electorate. We cannot look at welfare as an isolated issue; it is something we need to look at in the round. Sinn Féin has consistently said that it wants to work with the other parties and address the outstanding issues. I have clearly highlighted the opportunities that we have taken. We want to be constructive and continue to be constructive in our approach to all of this. What we have failed to do and what many contributors this morning have failed to do is to focus on the bigger picture. The reality is that there is a black hole in the block grant. The reality is that we have been stripped of £1.5 billion. The reality is that George Osborne has clearly said that he will make more in-year cuts. I challenge the other parties to start looking at the major issues that we have to address collectively in

the time ahead. When Martin McGuinness asked Theresa Villiers for confirmation of the implications of what is coming in the July Budget, she did not know. She does not know, but the Finance Minister in the Executive here knows.

2.30 pm

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: It all leads to the artificially created crisis that we find ourselves in today. I make those points because they are points that need to be made, but I come back to the point that Alex Maskey and Martin McGuinness made, which is that we need to work together. We cannot roll over and just deploy what the Tory Government want — cuts, cuts, cuts to public services.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair)

I listened carefully to Members trying to play welfare off against public services. That is not the way to look at it. That is a disgrace. This is not about one or the other; this is about all. This is about protecting our front-line services and protecting people in relation to welfare. The public will look at the debate today, as they have looked at the debate in recent times, and they must be asking themselves what the vision of the Assembly is. Do the Executive have the vision to stand up for public services and the most vulnerable? When our electorate looks to Scotland, they see the contribution that the SNP has made. Nicola Sturgeon is standing up today and talking about her anti-austerity policies, and this Executive need to take the same approach. The Scottish Executive have sent out a clear invitation to work with our Executive and the Welsh Executive to challenge the Tories on their austerity policy.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: It is comical that Sammy Wilson referred to people burying their head in the sand, because I very much think that the DUP has an ostrich mentality when it comes to standing up to the Tory Government. There are parties in the Chamber that are very happy to cosy up — *[Interruption.]* — to the Tory Government and their austerity policies, but not one party in the Chamber stood for the recent Westminster election on the same Tory policy. Not one person put that in their manifesto. The people in the Six Counties did not vote for a Tory policy of austerity; the people in the Six Counties voted for local, elected politicians.

[Interruption.] That is why we are devolved. We have an opportunity now to stand up and show the electorate of the North that we will work together and face down the Tory policies of austerity. *[Interruption.]* People can choose to sit in the Chamber today and try to apportion blame, but it does nobody any good.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: At the end of the day, we need to work together. I can say it 10 times in 10 ways if you like, but the reality is that that is what we need to do. We need to face down the Tory austerity policies, and we need to do it together. *[Interruption.]* There is still time —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members not to make remarks from a sedentary position. The Member has indicated that she is not giving way.

Mrs O'Neill: There is still time for parties in the Chamber to work together. People should change tack and work with the Scottish and Welsh assemblies. They should clearly stand up for the local electorate, for welfare and public services and to protect the most vulnerable. People must work to achieve a workable Budget. We cannot continue with the raids on the block grant and the £1.5 billion black hole that has been created. We cannot continue with that policy. We need to work together. We need more powers to grow the economy, and we need to create employment. Sinn Féin believes that all the parties in the Chamber can work together. You can all sneer all you want, but that is the reality of the situation. Either you sit here and accept what the Tories give you, or you stand up for the people who elect you.

Mr Attwood: I express my best wishes to Peter Robinson in light of his current ill health. I hope that he makes a full recovery.

This might bring a slight smile to the Minister's face — it might be the only one in the next five or 10 minutes — but, when he was here at Further Consideration Stage, I said that, whilst there was definitely a new broom handle, it was still the same old brush. With that precedent, it seems to me that some of the Minister's opening comments, which were, maybe somewhat surprisingly, very slight — I am sure that he will correct that when he comes to the reply, which, no doubt, will last substantially longer than his opening speech — suggested that some new bristles were being attached to the old broom.

From our point of view, we would like to look further at that and at a lot more, and we will come back to that.

Whilst we have been setting out our stall on welfare today, a number of Members have commented on the fact that the Scottish National Government have been setting out their stall on everything. Whilst I think that some have relied on what the Scottish Government have done today in a rather casual way, it is worth looking at what the Scottish National Party has outlined today, where it outlined it and what it was saying.

The Scottish First Minister went to Hearts Football Club in Tynecastle stadium, and not only did she outline a business pledge with businesses and unions in Scotland and say that she wanted to enter into arrangements whereby a living wage was paid by businesses in Scotland, including Hearts Football Club, which is where they were this morning, she also outlined what their approach to the new Tory Government was going to be.

Whatever our views may be on welfare, we should all take a little bit of time between now and 42 days from now, when the Chancellor will announce the full scale and speed of his first austerity Budget in the lifetime of the five years of this Parliament, to assess what Cameron, the Chancellor and Iain Duncan Smith, who is curiously back in DWP, intend to do, not just to the people of England but to the people of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Given the fact that the DUP attends Westminster, and I welcome that, it will have to make a decision, which is whether it puts its hands up when the Queen's speech is outlined and when the Chancellor outlines what he is going to deliver in the first months and years of this new Westminster Parliament, which is not just going to have an impact on the people on welfare in Northern Ireland and Britain but on thousands of other people in the public and private sectors, especially those elements in the private sector in Northern Ireland that are dependent on public-sector work.

So, if we step back for just one moment and recognise that there are 42 days until the Chancellor and the British Prime Minister announce what they are going to do, it might bring, even late in this debate, a slightly different perspective that would well inform and well serve all the parties here, especially those parties that will be sitting in Westminster and will have to make calls on what the British Chancellor announces in the first week in July.

Nicola Sturgeon said that she was going to try to attack the scale and speed of austerity, work up an alternative to austerity and that she, John Swinney and her colleagues were saying to the British Prime Minister that he cannot ignore the democratic will of the Scottish people. She made the point, which has been proven time and time again, that austerity slows down economic recovery, and she concluded by saying London had to change their approach or lessen the impact on Scotland.

Whatever we think about welfare, if that is not a pathway for what we should be doing in the next 42 days in our engagement with the British Government, we are ill-serving not just those who are on welfare in Northern Ireland but all the people of Northern Ireland, who will live with all the consequences of what the Chancellor and the British Government intend to do in the next 42 days, the 42 weeks thereafter and the 42 months that will be the early months of the next British Government.

I have to say to Mr Campbell that I do not understand his speech. In one way, understandably, it was all about the moment, the Welfare Reform Bill and what it does and does not mean for the political and constitutional authority of this place. However, I do not understand that, in making those observations about the moment and the Welfare Reform Bill, he had nothing to say about the next 42 days. When Nicola Sturgeon, a few hundred miles away, has so much to say about the next 42 days, I do not understand how we can be silent on all of that, when she and so many others are speaking up.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will, yes.

Mr Allister: Perhaps the Member will tell us what his mentor, Ms Sturgeon, did about welfare reform in Scotland. Was she silent on it or did she resist it and succeed in overturning it?

Mr Attwood: I think that that question suggests that, on this occasion, which is a very rare occasion for Mr Allister, maybe he does not quite understand the constitutional arrangements that exist between Scotland and London and Northern Ireland and London. As I think he probably now recognises, when we negotiated the Good Friday Agreement, we negotiated that Northern Ireland would have devolved powers for welfare —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second.

The other parties did as well. So we are in a constitutionally and legally different situation from London. However, this is what she then did: she did things that other parties in the Chamber took a bit of time to recognise as useful and some things that parties in the Chamber still have to recognise as useful. What does that mean? It means that the Scottish Government were the first Government to say that, on a pound-for-pound basis, they would mitigate the impact of the iniquitous bedroom tax.

Mr Wilson: No, that is not true.

Mr Attwood: They were the first devolved arrangement that, on a pound-for-pound basis, mitigated the impact of the bedroom tax. When that suggestion was raised on the Floor of the Chamber, Mr Allister, through you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, it came from the SDLP proposal, and the response from other parties was to mitigate it only for existing and not future tenants. The ball has moved on in that regard, and I welcome that, but I will come back to the issue in my closing remarks, because I have questions to put to the Minister for Social Development arising from his opening comments where, again, I think that he created some muddle — to put it mildly — in relation to the bedroom tax.

Mr Allister, what the Northern Ireland Assembly did not recognise, unlike Scotland, was that welfare was so important that it created a dedicated welfare committee. As the anoraks in the Chamber will know, one of the committees regularly covered by the Parliament channel is the Welfare Reform Committee of the Scottish Parliament. That programme recognises that that Government and that Parliament put in place mechanisms to drill down on what is happening on welfare to try to protect the Scottish people.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: That proposal was rejected during the Consideration Stage and the Further Consideration Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill in the Chamber only a matter of weeks ago when the opportunity for us, collectively, to interrogate welfare reform was available. We will live to regret that. Why? Because of the scale of what is about to hit us when it comes to welfare reform, even to the point where the welfare reform Minister in London, Iain Duncan Smith, briefed the papers over the weekend to say that he is trying to resist the British

Government's imposition of £12 billion more welfare reform cuts. Iain Duncan Smith is telling the Treasury that that is too far, too fast.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: The architect of welfare reform and welfare cuts is now arguing with his own Government that they need to slow it down, even in his terms.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. We know that he has eulogised the Scottish Parliament on quite a few occasions; some of us might wish that he would go and join it. Since he is eulogising the Scottish Parliament — he is quite right that it does not have the same constitutional powers that we do — it did, for example, have the power to set up a supplementary fund to help those who were affected by welfare reform. Did it do that? It did have the opportunity to introduce separate schemes such as we have done for vulnerable groups. Did it do that?

The truth of the matter is that they did not, because they knew the limits to dealing with the aspects of welfare reform, and it was quite convenient for them to say, "It was the bad English and not us".

2.45 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is time for Question Time with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. We will return to Mr Attwood after Question Time.

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Bovine Viral Diarrhoea: Compulsory Testing

1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to make bovine viral diarrhoea testing compulsory. (AQO 8249/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): My Department has prepared draft bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) legislation, which has been approved by the EU Commission and is ready to be subjected to the legislative processes here. Before I can introduce such legislation, Animal Health and

Welfare NI needs to demonstrate that it has sufficient private sector funding to enable it to maintain the implementation of the eradication programme without the need for further public funding. This is important, not only because of the pressures on available public funding, but because of the need for industry to lead in tackling this production disease.

Significant progress on this issue has been made recently, and Animal Health and Welfare NI has presented a draft of its viability and sustainability plan, which is being considered by officials. I also have to be satisfied that Animal Health and Welfare NI, which will be responsible for the implementation of aspects of the legislation, has an IT system that is fit for that purpose. While the current system has been adequate for the administration of the voluntary BVD programme, it is not yet sufficiently robust to enable the introduction of legislation. Animal Health and Welfare NI is working with its database provider to resolve those issues.

I would like to highlight the amount of work being taken forward by Animal Health and Welfare NI, in conjunction with my officials, to facilitate making the BVD eradication programme compulsory. In many respects, this project has been breaking new ground, and it has, of course, presented a number of challenges that have taken time to work through. I also highlight the positive contribution that the industry, both the dairy and beef sectors, are making to that ongoing work.

I am hopeful that any remaining issues can be successfully resolved shortly and that I will be in a position to legislate later this year.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. Does she accept that there is frustration in the industry over the length of time it has taken to get this scheme up and running?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, as I said, trying to get to a stage where we have a compulsory scheme has not been without its challenges. This is very much an industry-led initiative. However, we are very supportive, and we have been working with the industry to get us to the stage we are at. I am pleased that we recently received the viability plan from Animal Health and Welfare NI. Things look good, and I am hopeful that we will be able to move forward and introduce the legislation. We have already had the legislation approved by the EU, so, in terms of the Department's role, we are steps ahead. We want to make sure that the viability and sustainability plan is in place and that we

have everything set out that allows us to take a staged approach to tackling BVD.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. How successful has the uptake of the voluntary scheme been?

Mrs O'Neill: Since the scheme commenced on 1 January 2013, over 4,000 herdkeepers have joined the scheme and, between them, have purchased just over 400,000 tags and test kits. That has resulted in over 300,000 test results being uploaded onto the database, with 289,000 of them negative. The level of persistently infected bovines found is 0.51% of tests, which is about 1,500, and for a further 1%, the results are, as yet, unknown.

Mrs Dobson: As we know, the Minister announced, to great departmental fanfare two years ago, that she was going to legislate for compulsory BVD testing. Can she provide an update on the latest estimated cost to farmers per applicable animal if the scheme becomes compulsory?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have those figures on me. As the Member is aware, we announced it with fanfare, and I still speak about it in those terms. This is an industry approach to trying to tackle a production disease. It is important that we move towards tackling production diseases, as opposed to tackling diseases after the fact, and this is very much a preventative approach that will help improve the productivity farmers get from their animals.

The teething problems are a result of industry problems, not DARD problems. The Department has the legislation on the table and has had it approved by the EU. Before I bring the legislation forward, I need to be assured that the industry can respond to what is set out in it. We have been working our way through that, and I am confident that the industry has produced a sustainability plan that looks very positive. This will allow us to go through due process and bring the legislation to the House before the end of this year.

Rural Micro Grants Scheme

2. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the recently launched rural micro grants scheme. (AQO 8250/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The rural micro capital grant scheme closed for applications just last Friday, 22 May, so you will appreciate that it is pretty

early to give any definitive view on the quality or range of applications. However, I can say that the rural support networks were extremely busy dealing with enquiries and calls in advance of the application deadline. I understand that over 450 applications have been submitted and that the eligibility screening process will start immediately, with the intention of working towards issuing letters of offer to successful applicants by July.

As Members will already know, financial support of up to £1,500 an application is available for selected projects, and that is intended to encourage rural community and voluntary groups to improve and develop their facilities and assets, which, in turn, will contribute to improved community engagement in the local area. I anticipate that over 150 rural community organisations will directly benefit from the initial £200,000 set aside in my tackling rural poverty and social isolation budget for the scheme. The new programme represents an excellent opportunity for community groups to build on their existing roles, strengthening community engagement and improving the lives of those living in rural areas. The response so far suggests that the programme will have a tremendous impact in our rural areas.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she give us some detail on how the successful projects will be selected and the sorts of criteria that she will be using for them?

Mrs O'Neill: The programme opened on Monday 13 April and closed on 22 May. To reduce the administrative burden and the application processing times, once an application is screened against the programme's eligibility checklist, there is no secondary assessment process. That speeds up the whole grant scheme. Each rural support network has been advised of its grant allocation to fund projects in its area, and all eligible applications up to the allocation threshold for the area can be awarded funding. In the event of the network being oversubscribed, selection will be through the use of random selection, which will be undertaken in an appropriate venue and is open to attendance by applicants. Actual selection will be undertaken by an individual who is independent of the entire process, and selection will be verified by attending DARD officials. Random selection is not a first come, first served process. No grant awards will be made until the call for applications is closed and all applications in the

relevant network area have been screened for eligibility. I expect that letters of offer will issue before July 2015.

Voluntary Exit Scheme: AFBI Applicants

3. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) staff applied for the voluntary exit scheme. (AQO 8251/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: AFBI has received 246 eligible applications from staff interested in exiting via the voluntary exit scheme.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister have any idea of how many of the applicants will be successful in getting voluntary redundancy?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have those figures now. Obviously, AFBI has to work through its processes for making successful bids to the scheme. Suffice it to say, it is working very hard on its strategic plan for 2020, and I am working very closely with it to set out its priorities for the years ahead, particularly around research, development and innovation. I want to work very closely with it to make sure that we arrive at a sustainable plan for AFBI to have a successful and thriving institute into the future.

Mr Byrne: Given the cutbacks, will the voluntary exit scheme for AFBI be able to be self-financing or will extra moneys be available to it to warrant and pay for the scheme?

Mrs O'Neill: The same as other Departments and arm's-length bodies, AFBI will be able to bid into the voluntary exit scheme that is being taken forward across the Executive. As I said, we are obviously operating in challenging economic circumstances, and AFBI has very clearly been set a challenge and a task to look at how it will be sustainable into the future. We want to have a thriving AFBI. I want to work with it, and I have done so over the last period to make sure that what it brings forward is something that will create a sustainable AFBI, and the strategy is set out until 2020. We have that paper nearing finalisation, and it also looks at the costed savings that AFBI could achieve. It looks at income generation that AFBI could achieve, particularly around increasing EU receipts. I will consider the entire package of proposals very carefully before coming to final decisions on the future direction of AFBI and on how we envisage it working.

Mr Beggs: The Minister referred to her application to the voluntary redundancy scheme. She will, however, be aware that her party's opposition to welfare reform, on which the scheme depended, means that it is unlikely to be available. Can she advise us whether she has any funding in her Department to pay for a voluntary redundancy scheme, or will she have to overlook a compulsory redundancy scheme?

Mrs O'Neill: I will not be drawn into speaking about what-ifs. Unless the Member has a crystal ball, I do not think that he can say definitively what will happen next. The scheme is going forward as is at this moment in time; if there are changes, we will have to look at all of that.

Mr Allister: What percentage of AFBI staff do the 246 represent? In particular, does it ease the foolish agenda of trying to close the Crossnacreevy testing station? Is the Minister hoping to hide behind that as a means of delivering that austerity measure?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not intend to hide behind anything. I do not have the percentage figure either. The total number of applications is 246. AFBI was planning for around 200 to go out on the voluntary exit scheme. As I have already stated, that is all part of its strategic sustainability plan up to 2020 that we asked it to develop. AFBI has many an opportunity to look at increasing its income, particularly from EU drawdowns, and particularly since the Executive have a target to increase our drawdown under Horizon 2020. There are plenty of opportunities for AFBI to look at increasing its income, as it has done significantly down through the years, which has helped it to be sustainable. Given the economic climate that we find ourselves in and the current financial constraints, particularly the implications that Tory cuts to the block grant will have for arm's-length bodies, it is more important than ever that AFBI has a very clear vision of where it is going. I am working with it, and its 2020 strategy paper is nearing finalisation and includes AFBI's costed savings proposals showing how it plans to live within its budget. It is also about increasing drawdowns and identifying priorities in areas of work that will really help the industry, particularly in relation to research and innovation.

Mr Poots: Does the Minister recognise that both Scotland and the Republic of Ireland are pouring more resource into research in agriculture and that the attack that she has made on AFBI is actually an attack on the entire agricultural community? The community will

not achieve sustainability if it does not have the quality research that AFBI provides, and it will not be able to replace core funding through the other means that the Minister so blandly points out, with AFBI suffering substantial damage as a consequence.

Mrs O'Neill: I can only continue to repeat myself: there has certainly been no attack on AFBI. I have been working very closely with AFBI. There are a lot of misconceptions out there: I have heard figures about reductions in its budget that are incorrect. I understand that a figure of 26% has been quoted. That is very much not the case. On a like-for-like basis, using the same methodology employed by the Department and across the public sector, the reduction to AFBI's budget is about 11.5%. When you compare that against AFBI's overall cost base, the reduction only equates to 7.5%. So, whilst I do not underestimate the challenges that that creates for AFBI, just because something has always been done a certain way does not mean that we should continue to do it that way. This is why AFBI has been tasked, and why I have worked very closely with it, to look at its future direction, how we can work together, how we create a sustainable, thriving AFBI, because a failing AFBI is not in anyone's interests or those of the agricultural industry. I want it to be successful, and I am happy to continue to work with it. We have a strategy in place now. We have a plan, and, as I said, it is nearing completion.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Can the Minister elaborate any further on AFBI's strategic plan for post-voluntary exit?

Mrs O'Neill: It will all come back to the strategic plan, which we are close to completing. That will very clearly set out AFBI's costed savings proposals to show how it plans to live within its available budget for 2015-16 and up to the end of the decade. I am going to consider the package of proposals very carefully before coming to a final decision on its implementation.

3.00 pm

As I said, none of us can continue to do things in the same way. We need to prioritise what we do, consider stopping certain things and find more efficient ways of getting things done. Particularly on AFBI, we need to look at how we can increase its drawdown of European funding. I have clearly set challenging targets, but I believe that it is up for that and the board is working very hard to make sure that it

maximises its drawdown of external funding outside of what the Department allocates, which is quite significant. I do not have the exact figure with me, but I think it is close to £40 million of funding. That is the priority, and it clearly shows that there is a will within the Department to focus on research and innovation. I will continue to do that, and I clearly set out my stall in wanting to work with AFBI to make sure that we prioritise the work for the time ahead.

Forest Certification

4. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the benefits for the Forest Service of retaining forest certification. (AQO 8252/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Following a full reassessment audit by SGS Qualifor, an internationally recognised certification body, I am pleased to report that the Forest Service management system has been assessed and certified as meeting the requirements of a well-managed forest against standards recognised by the Forest Stewardship Council. The certification process recognises the importance of timber production, along with its environmental and social requirements. The impact of that is significant for the timber industry. Last year, it added over £50 million of value to the economy.

In environmental terms, obtaining forest management certification provides independent evidence that Forest Service plans and operations are maintaining and enhancing the biodiversity of our forest ecosystems. The certificate is also important for tourism. Visitors want to know that forests are being properly managed and that plans for cutting and replanting operations comply with the highest standards.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for the detail in her answer. Has the Minister considered further exploiting the potential of our forests, particularly in tourism and recreation?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, an assessment of the potential for forestry tourism development opportunities was jointly commissioned by the Tourist Board and Forest Service, and confirms that some of our forests are strategically important within tourism destination areas because they have the potential to hold visitors as part of a longer visit. The outcomes of that study have underpinned the decision by the Executive to invest £4 million in forestry tourism

projects, collectively known as the forestry fund. That work is nearing completion, and many forests have benefited through improvements to poor-quality and outdated tourism and recreation-related infrastructure.

The forest fund also identified a need to establish a baseline of forest visitor figures in terms of numbers and profile. As a result, a forest visitor survey has recently been completed, and a key outcome will include information on the economic value generated by forest visits. The final report is currently being assessed, and I am confident that the survey will provide a clear evidence base for the value of forest tourism. The information gathered by the survey will also provide an important aid to future recreation and tourism investment considerations and partnership working arrangements. Our forests offer a unique opportunity, and attracting more visitors will have a positive impact on the economy of rural areas across the North.

Mr Swann: Does the Minister believe that the Forest Service currently has the flexibility or ability to maximise its revenue-raising potential, either through timber sales, asset sales or even land leases?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I think that the Forest Service has come a long way from what it did in years gone by. We have social and recreational use of forests and we have seen many examples of very positive working in partnership with councils. Alongside that, the Forest Service also has significant income generation from timber, and there have been no challenges or issues identified to me, but if the Member wishes to raise things with me outside of Question Time, I would be very happy to receive them, because it is very important that we maximise the receipts from Forest Service. I continually engage with the Forest Service chief executive on challenges and opportunities, but we are not coming across major issues or barriers to potential income generation. However, as I said, I am happy to talk to the Member if he has any specific issues.

Mr Rogers: Thanks, Minister, for your answers thus far. In the Republic, there are plans through the new forestry programme to plant over 8,000 hectares over the next 10 years. What expansion plans does DARD have for forestation and creation of woodland?

Mrs O'Neill: I refer the Member to the DARD website. We have very clearly set out our plan and targets for planting. We have our grant aid assistance to help people to plant out. I do not

have the actual details of the targets with me, but I am very happy to provide them to the Member in writing. It is not to say that the targets that have been set and where we have got to with them are not without challenges, but I think that the targets run up to 2020. I will provide those details to the Member in writing.

Ballykelly: Private Sector Development

5. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister she has planned to ensure that, in addition to her departmental headquarters, best use is made of the remainder of the Ballykelly site in attracting significant private sector development. (AQO 8253/11-15)

14. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on her Department's planned move to Ballykelly. (AQO 8262/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, Cheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 5 and 14 together.

As discussed at a recent meeting of the Executive, OFMDFM is taking forward the sale of the site with the exception of the 8.7 acres that has been earmarked for our headquarters and the 85 acres on the lower site that has been set aside for NI Water.

My officials are working closely with colleagues in OFMDFM on matters relating to our relocation. OFMDFM has confirmed that the announcement of DARD's HQ move to the Ballykelly site has generated more interest in the site. OFMDFM is represented on the programme board that is in place to provide the strategic direction for DARD's relocation programme.

A planning application for a new headquarters at Ballykelly was submitted to Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council on 30 April this year. The planning application is for the building and the new access road required to service the building. A series of enabling works and studies are being undertaken at the site and are due to be completed by the end of May. A transportation assessment has been carried out, which concluded that the proposed access road meets the requirements of the new headquarters. My officials have commissioned DFP's Land and Property Services to acquire the land for the proposed access road.

My officials are now working on completing the full business case. I expect that to be completed by November this year, with a view to awarding the contract for construction in December this year and construction beginning as planned in May next year. My officials are also working with DFP colleagues to identify suitable temporary accommodation in the north-west. This will help to facilitate the transition and ensure that the Department continues to provide the full range of its services to the high standard expected throughout the period of transition.

Mr Campbell: Is the Minister aware that the delay and possible derailing of the welfare reform project, which we are discussing today, puts at risk not just the thousands of jobs at Ballykelly but the other thousands of jobs at the Maze site and the tens of thousands of jobs, all in the private sector, that could be created through the corporation tax reduction?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not want to get drawn into that again. I do not think that you need to play welfare reform against the moving of DARD's headquarters to Ballykelly. The Member will know that I have fought very hard for a better distribution of public-sector jobs. That continues to be the case. These jobs moving to the north-west is a major win for construction in the north-west, the ongoing servicing of the building and a fairer distribution of public-sector jobs. That continues to be the case. I will continue on this journey. We have come a long way to get us to where we are now. The planning application has been submitted. I will continue to make sure that we deliver on DARD's headquarters moving to the north-west because I believe that it is the right thing to do for public service. It is a nonsense to start to play welfare reform against DARD HQ.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister have a time frame for the delivery of the planning application process so that there can be no delays in the delivery of the entire project, which is essential for the north-west?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. On 30 April this year, we had a planning application, which was lodged with the new Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, for the design of the new headquarters. This application also includes details of the new access road requirements. Consultations have been ongoing throughout the design development process between my design team and other statutory bodies, such as Planning Service, the Environment Agency and Transport NI, as well as the ministerial

advisory group on architecture. The building has been sited and designed to minimise the impact on the surrounding landscape, with particular focus on the nearby church. The exterior of the building has been designed so as to integrate appropriately into this rural setting, with extensive use of granite, stone and bronze cladding. The building will be constructed in two phases, with the completed building measuring 6,600 metres squared. The building will provide modern office accommodation for DARD staff and will be built to government office standards, making full use of open-plan spaces and modern working practices. Planning Service works to a 12-week target. We expect this to be completed by August this year. We will then proceed to the invitation-to-tender stage, with a view to awarding a contract for the construction of the building by December this year.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's response. I also welcome the idea of her Department coming to Ballykelly. Would she agree with me that that is only a tiny part of a 900-acre site? Will she please explain to the House why, in her discussions with Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and others, they are scurrying about only this week and talking about a master plan for a site that has the potential to create hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs? Finally, will the Minister tell us where else in the world you would have a site like that, with an airport beside it, a railway running through it and a main road going past it? There is still no master plan, and an economic task force has still not been set up, so —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Come to a conclusion.

Mr Dallat: — what is happening?

Mrs O'Neill: I welcome the Member's positive commentary on the move to Ballykelly and the benefits that it will bring. I know that he has been a consistent supporter of the move.

It is very clear that the Executive, and OFMDFM in particular, have responsibility for the wider site. The fact that DARD has become the anchor tenant has, I think, very clearly led to more significant interest in the site. That is something that is obviously very positive and something that we welcome. The Executive have set out their stall on needing to move to secure investment in the wider site. Maybe over the last month or so, they have very clearly set out their stall on what they want to achieve and the benefits of moving quickly. OFMDFM did a soft marketing test, which very clearly set

out that many businesses out there expressed a significant interest in the site. I cannot remember the number, but many businesses did that.

The potential is fantastic. You are right. The location is fantastic, and there is so much potential, particularly from the railway halt and all the other possible travel methods to that area. They are second to none. My main interest is in securing the headquarters in the site, and, as I outlined in previous answers, we are clearly on target to being able to deliver on that.

Mrs Overend: Setting aside the Minister's shameful actions to date on the issue, not least the blatant disregard for public money, does she think that some of the proceeds of the sale of surplus lands could be put into a community fund for the Roe valley?

Mrs O'Neill: Maybe the Member does not understand. When the site is sold off, it will be an Executive sale. The money will not come into DARD, so it will not be my individual responsibility. It will be the Executive's responsibility how the money is spent.

On my regard to public money, I have very clearly set out my stall on why we need a relocation project. I have also very clearly set out my stall on the benefits of moving the headquarters to the north-west. I have also very clear set out the benefits of moving the Forest Service to Fermanagh and the Rivers Agency to Loughry in Cookstown in the Member's constituency. Maybe she thinks that that is a bad spend of money, but she can answer to the electorate on that.

We have very clearly set out the benefits of spending public money in that way, with the fairer distribution of public-sector jobs, the construction jobs and the long-term economic benefits that it will create, particularly if you take the increased footfall into a small area like Ballykelly. To me, the benefits very clearly weigh up in the spend of public money.

Rural Development Programme

6. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the progress being made in negotiations on the new rural development programme. (AQO 8254/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Since the European Commission's comments on the draft rural development programme 2014-2020 were received on 31

March this year, my officials have been engaged in a process of negotiation with the Commission to address the comments that were raised and to gain approval for our programme as quickly as possible. The negotiations have included seven videoconference meetings with Commission officials in Brussels and one face-to-face meeting. So far, our ANC scheme that was submitted in the draft programme has been informally approved by DG Agri, with minor technical amendments. We are hopeful of receiving informal approval for more schemes shortly.

Once the Commission's comments have been addressed to their satisfaction, the full draft programme will be resubmitted formally for approval. A period of inter-service consultation will then begin with the Commission. Formal Commission approval for the programme should be received by July this year or September at the very latest. In the interim, my officials will continue to work on the necessary business cases and the design of schemes so that we can start to open schemes once the EU and business case approvals are in place.

Mrs McKeivitt: Minister, it is generally believed that we are the last region to agree to the new rural development programme scheme. Can the Minister advise whether any rural groups have been put at a disadvantage because of that delay? What protections will her Department give to the groups to help them to deliver on their schemes?

3.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: It is untrue to say that the majority of other member states have had their programmes approved, because that is not the case. The Commission underestimated the fact that it would have to deal with an influx of applications coming forward last year and is struggling to turn all those around and get approvals out. The reality is that we are not at the bottom of the pile. I noticed that the Twenty-six Counties had its programme approved, which is something I welcome, but, as for our approval, we are working consistently with the Commission. As you can gather from what I have said, there has been ongoing engagement with the Commission, and we are hopeful that we will get approvals in the next months.

Alongside the work that is being done in tidying everything up with the Commission, my officials are drafting schemes and getting things moving. For example, we invited applications

for the agri-environment schemes when people made their claim for the single farm payment by the deadline of 15 May, even though we have only had informal approval of that scheme. We are not letting anything sit; we are making sure that we will have programmes open and ready. You will know that rural groups are still receiving funding, but I am anxious that we learn the lessons of the previous programme, that we do not have a slow start and that we get things moving. We can do that only when we have official sign-off from Europe. In the meantime, we have a body of work to get on with.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to topical questions. The Member listed to ask question 1 has withdrawn their name.

Broadband: Rural Areas

T2. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her position on rural broadband provision. (AQT 2552/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that the responsibility for broadband is a priority of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, I have been keen to assert myself and make sure that we work to plug the not-spots of service provision. Anyone who lives in a rural area will be alert to the frustration felt by businesses and by families who may have children who are studying. If you cannot get a connection or have a slow connection, it can be frustrating. My Department has invested £7.5 million in rural broadband over the past number of years. We have assisted 1,700 households in getting a connection. That was done through my tackling poverty and isolation package of funding, and we will continue to work with DETI to ensure that we plug the gaps.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister accept that there is huge frustration throughout the rural parts of our country that they cannot get what they consider to be an essential utility for modern living and that it is perhaps something that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should take on board to drive rather than just leaving it to the techies?

Mrs O'Neill: I think I have just answered that. I said that it was very frustrating for people living in a rural area who cannot get a connection. It is the responsibility of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which has contributed significantly to broadband across

the board. My intervention was merely because rural communities that did not have a connection or had too slow a connection to make any difference were frustrated. That is why I have invested £7.5 million from my tackling poverty and isolation pot of funding. It is also significant that we have been able to assist 1,700 households. However, if you are still in an area where you cannot get a connection, it is only natural that you will be frustrated. I can give an assurance that, from my Department's point of view, I will continue to work with DETI to plug the not-spots and address speed issues in other areas.

Young Farmers: Basic Payment Top-ups

T3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the number of young farmers who have applied for a top-up to the basic payment. (AQT 2553/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have that figure with me, but I am happy to write to the Member. We had almost 2,500 young people applying to take part in the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise-run course, so that in itself was extremely significant. It exceeded the Department's expectations of the numbers that would come forward. I am not sure how many of those translated into applications. The deadline of 15 May has just passed, and we will be able to assess that over the next number of weeks.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister and would welcome written confirmation. She said previously that the top-up payment would be based on 25% of the total direct payments average per hectare, which I think is around €84. Given the Minister's previous answer, I wonder whether she can give some assessment of the financial implications of that.

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is right that €84 per hectare was the estimated figure that we thought we would be looking at. However, that was dependent on the numbers that came forward and the numbers that came out of the scheme. Until we have the final number, I do not want to give a figure that either raises or lowers expectations of the final payment. As I said, it is dependent on the final number of applications that came forward.

Sheep Sector: Country of Origin Labelling

T4. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her Department's progress on country-of-origin labelling in the sheep sector. (AQT 2554/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: It is an ongoing issue that we are attempting to get to the bottom of. The Member will be aware that country-of-origin labelling came into effect in April. Prior to that, as far back as last year, we were dealing with the nomadic issue, and we now have the lamb issue, so I am concerned about what that means for all the other sectors in the time ahead. We have been monitoring recent developments very closely. I am doing everything in my power to address the issue. I have had conversations with Minister Coveney in the Twenty-six Counties, DEFRA in England and Phil Hogan, the European commissioner. I have written to DG AGRI and DG Competition in Brussels about being able to get to a position where we can agree a voluntary label that could be used by the industry — and others in the future if needs be. I believe that we can have a resolution to this labelling issue if there is a will and a way. There is certainly a will in the industry; we need a will from the buyers, such as the big companies that ask for particular labels on their products.

Mr Campbell: The Minister outlined a series of conversations that she had been having. While she has been having those conversations, farmers have seen prices go down. They have declined significantly in recent months. How long does she believe it will be before she starts to see those prices recovering, principally as a result of the labelling saga?

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, pricing is an issue outside the Department's remit; it is a commercial issue. However, suffice it to say that, if there are barriers — if we do not have fairness in or the supply chain or if we do not have conversations across the supply chain — people cannot plan for potential fluctuations in prices.

In terms of country-of-origin labelling, it is my intention to have it resolved ASAP. This is the time when farmers will be selling, so they miss out the longer this goes on. I made that clear to the European Commission, DEFRA and Simon Coveney. I have tasked my permanent secretary — Simon Coveney has done the same with his permanent secretary — with trying to find a solution. It is in the best interests of our local industry that we find that solution ASAP.

Rural Crime

T5. Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on her efforts to address rural crime. (AQT 2555/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am very aware of the real concerns that levels of crime are causing amongst the farming community, including the number of livestock thefts that have occurred on farms. I have met the PSNI Chief Constable and the Minister of Justice on a number of occasions and made them aware of my concerns. I explained the real worry that this was causing in rural areas and highlighted the need for something to be done. Responsibility for tackling rural crime lies primarily with the PSNI, but DARD, through its veterinary service enforcement branch and CAFRE, works closely with the PSNI, particularly in relation to the detection, tracing and recovery of stolen livestock. I am aware of some local PSNI initiatives to prevent rural crime. Those are to be welcomed. I am also aware of joint work being taken forward by the PSNI and an Garda Síochána to combat crime in border areas. I welcome the multi-agency approach that has recently resulted in the recovery of stolen animals, arrests and convictions in the North and ongoing prosecutions in the Twenty-six Counties.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her detailed answer. Can she give us any details of her discussions with her counterparts regarding fuel laundering and associated crime, particularly in the border areas?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. I have recently had a conversation and a meeting with the Minister of Justice, David Ford, about the measures that have been taken forward right across the island to tackle fuel crime. It is something that is 100% condemned. We need to continue to work together to resolve it. As I said, I think that the multi-agency approach, with the gardaí and the PSNI working together, has been most effective. Whilst it is too early to say, we are hopeful that the new detection mechanism that has been inserted into the fuel, which is being taken forward by HMRC, will yield improvements and act as a deterrent to people being able to launder the diesel and things like that. I raised it also with Simon Coveney at a recent NSMC meeting. In terms of my responsibility, I am very clear about making sure that we are to the fore in doing everything we can. My Department will play its role in tackling fuel fraud but also rural crime in general.

Broadband: Newry and Armagh

T6. Mr Brady asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how her focus on rural broadband provision has benefitted the Newry and Armagh constituency. (AQT 2556/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has now invested a total of £7.5 million in rural broadband. This investment has already helped some 17,000 rural dwellers, farms and businesses to access broadband services. The broadband improvement project, which is led by DETI and to which I am contributing £5 million, has been responsible for an additional 14,000 rural premises being able to connect to broadband if they wish. In the Newry and Armagh area specifically, 4,591 premises have been connected through this investment, giving rural dwellers in the area the same opportunities as those living in urban areas.

Broadband is a priority of mine. I want to see all rural dwellers in the North being able to connect to broadband if they wish. To that end, I am investing a further £1 million in the broadband improvement project and allocating £2 million of the next rural development programme to tackling the harder-to-get-at areas that still do not have access to broadband. I want to encourage as many rural people as possible to make more and better use of broadband. I have asked officials to carry out a scoping study to see how my Department can encourage more and better use of broadband so that rural businesses and farmers can benefit from the wide range of government services that are now available online.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her answer. When will all not-spots be connected? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs O'Neill: The additional funding from the tackling rural poverty and social inclusion budget will help to reduce the number of not-spots to around 20,000. The broadband funds in the new rural development programme will also target those remaining not-spots. Other government programmes are in the pipeline, and these will also impact on the remaining not-spots. Signing of contracts is to take place once the business cases and programmes have been approved. The target date is mid- to late May.

As I said earlier, I understand the frustration within rural communities. We have made progress in reducing the number of people who

cannot access broadband. However, we still have a way to go. In terms of my contribution, I am committed to working with DETI and the broadband improvement projects. I have very clearly set out my intention to invest additional funding to tackle broadband and to try to plug the gaps that are there.

Cattle Identification System

T7. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has any plans to introduce a new, more robust identification system for cattle to deter livestock thieves. (AQT 2557/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I think that the system that we have in place is a good system. We look at it in terms of tackling rural crime and how we can address it together. One of the areas that is looked at is whether improvement can be made to the tags. A recommendation has not come forward from the industry that is workable for farmers but also acts as a real deterrent. Outside of that, as I said earlier, the focus has to be on collective and multi-agency working across the island with the gardaí and the PSNI.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for her response. Would she be open to giving consideration to making mandatory the freeze branding of the last three digits of ID numbers on cattle?

Mrs O'Neill: Quite a number of years ago, I was involved in the launch of a freeze-branding project at, I think, Clogher mart. That initiative was taken forward jointly with the PSNI and looked to me like a very beneficial project and a good way to go. However, there was not a lot of industry take-up. I am always very happy to keep things under review. If there is an initiative such as freeze branding, which, as I said, has been piloted but did not have a great uptake, I will always be happy to look at it. If there is something that acts as a deterrent, is easy for farmers to maintain and does not put a cumbersome burden on them, I will be very happy to look at it.

Slurry: Safety Measures

T8. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what criteria her Department uses to quantify the impact of the 'Mixing Slurry Safely' leaflet. (AQT 2558/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have that information with me. It is all published on our website, but I am very happy to get it sent to the Member.

Mr G Robinson: Does the Minister agree that the impact of information regarding slurry safety must be investigated to ensure that resources are being accurately targeted for best results?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I agree with the Member about farm safety and making sure that everybody plays their role. The Health and Safety Executive is in the lead, and my Department plays a key role in collective working on making sure that we highlight the dangers on farm, particularly around slurry and the devastating impact that that can have. I can give the Member that assurance surely.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Gerry Kelly is not in his place, so I call Mr Steven Agnew.

Puppy Farming: Legislation/Enforcement

T10. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, following the BBC 'Spotlight' programme on puppy farming, whether she believes that the problem is that the legislation is too weak or is it that enforcement has been inadequate. (AQT 2560/11-15)

3.30 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I think that it is fair to say that we have some of the strongest legislation, particularly when you compare us with England, Scotland, Wales and even the Twenty-six Counties. The Member will be aware that I have given a commitment and that we have undertaken a review of our legislation to see whether there are ways in which we can improve things. A number of recommendations have come forward as a result of consultation. The Member will also know that I have extended the deadline for receiving contributions to that consultation, given the recent publicity on dog breeding establishments.

Our enforcement officers do a fine job of taking action on reports made to them. However, whilst I believe that the legislation is strong, there is always room for improvement, in everything in life. If we can do something to improve the legislation and help enforcement officers, I would be very much up for that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up. We now return to the Final Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill.

Executive Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Final Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 13/11-15] do now pass. — [Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development).]

Mr Attwood: Before Question Time, I was about to respond to comments made by Mr Wilson. He said in passing that, maybe, I should go and join the Scottish nationalists. I think that it is more the case that we should be like them, not join them by going over there. Everybody now knows, not just the likes of me, and I have been making the argument for a long time, that Swinney, Sturgeon, Salmond and the rest are the most effective Government on these islands. They are a very effective electoral and political machine, and we should be as close to them as we can on issues of common interest in order to maximise our impact on the thinking of the Conservative Government in London.

The Scottish Government may be leaders in so many ways, but they could learn some things from here about welfare mitigation. Whatever the dispute about some of the detail, some of the principles were good. Nobody in this party will deny that or say that the principles that informed welfare mitigation, which the Minister brought forward further to Stormont House, were bad. The principles were good, and they are principles that could apply to other jurisdictions in Britain, including the Scottish jurisdiction, to supplement the multiple schemes that they have already introduced to mitigate welfare reform.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I want to make a broader point. It was touched on in a number of contributions, but I think that it needs further detail. Whatever the dispute around Stormont House, whatever the issues around the protection of claimants and whatever the responses in the Chamber to the SDLP and Green Party amendments at Consideration and Further Consideration Stage, an environment exists now that is different from the one that existed at any time since Stormont House. Sammy Wilson said that people here should not bury their head in the sand on welfare. I

suggest that, if he wants to make that argument, it applies equally that nobody in the Chamber should bury their head in the sand when it comes to the changed environment that exists at the end of May, compared with any time up to 7 May and after Stormont House. Before 7 May, it was anticipated that there would be a hung Parliament. Before 7 May, it was anticipated that either the Tories or Labour would require the support of other parties, which would be a constraint on some of the worst ambitions of either party if it were to lead the London Government. Before 7 May, no party was going to have an overall majority. Now, after 7 May, that is changed. As one commentator put it, when talking about George Osborne:

"Who's going to stop him now? This is a dash to shrink the state, squeeze everything, contract out what can't be cut and return, as his own Office for Budget Responsibility said, to a prewar, pre-welfare state, bare-bones government. These children of Thatcher are ideologues to the core, often without even knowing it. They have breathed in from infancy a 'common sense' assumption that the state is always wasteful, private and market always good, the collective worse than the individualist. As Thatcher said, you will always spend the pound in your pocket better than any government will. Now he tests that – possibly to destruction. All but the NHS, overseas aid and schools will be cut by a third, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies."

So, whatever the context was — I will give way to the Minister in a moment — in Stormont House, at Consideration Stage or Further Consideration Stage, let us not bury our head in the sand about the context that exists in these days after 7 May and in the 42-day run-up to the emergency Budget in July.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Obviously, he believes that I work for DWP and not for the Assembly. Does he not argue against his own point? If the case is as he sets out, it puts the onus on the parties that signed the petition of concern, his own party included. If that had not happened, we would have been able to implement the changes and mitigating measures that we had agreed, and which would have taken off the table the worst elements of what we fear in relation to the current process. What you have done is ensure that what is coming down the road is the GB version, and there will be no mitigating measures.

Mr Attwood: I think that there is a long path in the 42 days between now and the emergency Budget. There is some path to travel between now and then. Either immediately before recess or possibly even after it, the Assembly can convene again and come back to the Chamber to pass a Budget, if it is the wish of the parties. A lot of water will flow under a lot of bridges between now and then, and, in that context, we can do more in respect of welfare reform as it is and, potentially, do more in respect of welfare reform and the Budget proposals that are going to emanate from London over the next 42 days.

Mr Storey: Does the Member not understand the parliamentary process? The petition of concern kills this Bill. It will not come back for six months. That is the period of time during which it cannot be brought back. It could be 18 months before we get another Bill like this through the doors of the Chamber. That is the reality.

Mr Attwood: I do not believe that that is the only scenario that faces the Chamber this afternoon, and I will outline why. If you think it is, you should pull the Bill, and tell London to put its welfare penalties where they should be: in the bin. Tell London that we will now join with Nicola Sturgeon and our colleagues in Wales, and say to them, in terms of what is proposed on 8 July, that we want mitigations, changes, amendments, revisions and protections for our people. Otherwise, if you send the message to London today that that is where we are on welfare, the DUP may as well raise their hands for the Queen's speech and for the Chancellor's emergency Budget on 8 July, because you will be saying to London, Minister — I speak through you, Mr Deputy Speaker — that when it comes to it, a party in Northern Ireland will swallow whatever they propose, be it on welfare reform to date, welfare reform over the next three years or the Budget proposals that are going to come in the next 42 days. This is the moment to join with Nicola Sturgeon and say that, whilst good work has been done in mitigating some of the welfare reforms, we want to see the full colour of London's proposals when it comes to welfare and Budget changes, for the reasons that I am now going to outline.

People say that we do not know what London will propose. I understand that, in meetings held last week, which I was unable to attend, the Minister of Finance and Personnel indicated that she and other parties are unsighted when it comes to what will be proposed in the Budget on 8 July. If we are unsighted, we should listen very closely to what the Chancellor of the

Exchequer told the CBI in London last week. Here we are, 42 days from the emergency Budget, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, last Wednesday, put up in lights what he will propose. It appears that the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Greg Hands, has started to ask Departments whether they can find ways of trimming their 2015-16 plans to fast-track a proposed three-year squeeze.

We have bitter experience of that from 2011. After the election of the coalition Government, the Chancellor went to the House of Commons with an emergency Budget in June. At Further Consideration Stage, I said in the Chamber that there would be a replay of that strategy. Last week, the Chancellor of the Exchequer told the CBI that, when it comes to his emergency Budget in June, there is going to be a replay of what happened in 2011. Osborne told the annual dinner of the employers' organisation that:

"When it comes to saving money, we all know that the more you can do early, the smoother the ride."

He then indicated that the Conservative Party, in its election manifesto, said that it would adopt a three-pronged approach to deficit reduction in the current Parliament: £13 billion of departmental spending cuts, £12 billion in welfare cuts and £5 billion of extra revenue from a crackdown on tax avoided. Treasury sources say the expectation was that the savings would be found from day-to-day running costs — from the pound in the pocket of each person who is in work or out of work — rather than from capital projects. Osborne will use his second Budget of 2015, the one later this year, to outline how he intends to shave about 10% off the £120 billion slice of the welfare budget that is not spent on pensioners. During the election campaign, the Conservatives refused to detail where the cuts would be made, but the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that child benefit and disability allowances would inevitably have to be looked at.

By the time the spending squeeze is over in 2017-18, the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that — wait for this — the budgets of unprotected Whitehall Departments such as Justice, Transport and the Home Office, will have been cut by a third, once inflation has been taken into account. What does that mean for our Justice Department, or for the Minister's Department, or the Agriculture Department of Michelle, after her contribution to the welfare debate? Change that to unprotected Northern Ireland Departments such

as Justice, Agriculture and social security, which will have been cut by a third, once inflation has been taken into account.

That is why the SDLP says to all parties in the Chamber that, given the scale of what the Chancellor has begun to put into the public record and public domain, given that we are 42 days from the scale of all that, which could result in a reduction of one third in unprotected Departments in the Northern Ireland Executive, and given the scale of all that upon all the people who are reliant upon those moneys, be it in the public sector or those in the private sector who are reliant on public contracts, is it not time to stop for a moment and not force through the Welfare Reform Bill? That will send the message to London that, when it comes down to it, that is what the Assembly does in a moment of a crisis when people are talking up the potential collapse of the Executive. That is something that Sinn Féin relied upon as its defence for putting through what it called the best possible Budget in November of last year and in January. The collapse of the institutions was their protection, as they saw it, for putting through the worst austerity Budget that we have seen in this part of this island since 2011.

Is it not time to take time out, Minister, and to say, "Let's not move. Let's gather ourselves and see who our allies are. Let's then go to London."? If we send out the message today that we are going to go quietly when it comes to the scale of what the Chancellor is proposing — he is proposing to get the pain up front rather than later when his tax relief begins to kick in — then we are letting down not only people on welfare, but we are letting people down. They will all suffer the consequences of the scale of that.

3.45 pm

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I omitted to say earlier that our thoughts and prayers are with him and his family on their recent bereavement. He knows that we have been thinking about them at this time.

Does the Member forget that we had a five-party agreement? We sweated it out, had the discussions at Christmas and had the detail, despite what Sinn Féin says about not having the information and the papers. We did all of that and still, when we had got a five-party agreement, parties in the House could not honour the commitments and keep their word. Now, because of the budgetary issues, we are in the crisis that we are in. It is not because I arbitrarily decided to move the Bill's Final Stage today.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for that intervention. I acknowledge his further words today and the words that he conveyed to my family over recent days.

I will deal with that point fully in a moment, but I want him to consider, because he is the welfare Minister, and he will be the Northern Ireland welfare reform Minister, what is now being scoped out in the public and media domains for what the next phase of welfare reform will look like. According to a lot of sources, it has eight or nine different features. Whatever the views of the Minister, the DUP and other parties are on the content or even the integrity of the Stormont House Agreement, I think that what I am about to outline will deliver a withering blow to whatever was agreed at Stormont House unless we all box cleverly and maximise a position of strength when it comes to the Tory Government.

This is what informed sources are now saying is the scale of what the Chancellor, the Treasury and Downing Street are about to propose. First, they are saying that the annual benefits cap — some of this is in the public domain — will be reduced from £26,000 to £23,000 a year. Given the scale of unfunded commitments that are measured by £5 billion in tax breaks and a reduction in inheritance tax, I would be very cautious about believing that a reduction of the benefits cap to £23,000 is even the limit of the Chancellor and DWP's ambitions. Secondly — again, this has been talked about in the public domain — those under the age of 21 who are claiming jobseeker's allowance will be barred from claiming housing benefit. What will be the consequences of that? That could be 42 days away. What will be the consequences of so many —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Can I disturb the Member for just a moment? A Member has a telephone close to the microphone system that is interfering with the Hansard recording. The Member may continue.

Mr Attwood: I will stand up and say that it is not me, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Perhaps others want to declare an interest in that matter.

What will be the scale of that if it transpires?

Thirdly, papers leaked to 'The Guardian' within the past few weeks warn that the £120 billion-a-year legal cap on welfare spending could lead to extremely controversial cuts to benefits. The Minister will be aware that, during the Stormont House negotiations, Mark Durkan repeatedly warned about how London would use its welfare cap there and the notional welfare cap

in Northern Ireland to cap welfare spend going forward. The Government could short-circuit so many of the welfare reform proposals that they are clearly intent on imposing by putting in place welfare limits in London and Northern Ireland that say, "You work within that financial threshold". That would drive a coach and horses through any financial envelope that the Minister had been able to secure in the Stormont House proposals. The plans leaked in that memo also suggest that savings could be found by increasing the bedroom tax by applying it to categories of renters other than just social housing tenants. That point confirms that the changes — *[Interruption.]* — yes, you know what I am going to say — that I introduced as Minister to try to stop profiteering by landlords in the private sector were not subject to the bedroom tax, as Sinn Féin and Mr Wilson tried to claim at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage. Potentially, DWP and the Treasury have plans to apply it to categories of renters other than social housing tenants. The plans also suggest the abolition of statutory maternity pay or alternative proposals to get employers to contribute more to the cost of statutory pay.

Other leaked documents refer to cutting disability benefits, DLA, PIP and attendance allowance and stating that they would no longer be tax-free. Other proposals suggest that those eligible for carer's allowance could be hit by restricting those eligible for universal credit and so on, concluding with this comment from a newspaper article:

"The Trussell Trust charity has estimated that the number of people reliant on emergency food handed out at food banks had increased by nearly a million people under David Cameron's premiership.

But another reason why people should be worried of Mr Duncan Smith's return to DWP is the charity's calculation that nearly half of all those referred to their local food bank between April and September last year were due to failures in the welfare system — including the stricter benefit sanctions introduced since 2010."

I make that point because, on 18 April, every political representative in south and west Belfast got a letter from the Trussell Trust saying that it wanted the cooperation of the political representatives in those areas to help it to communicate and give people access to its south-west Belfast food bank, touching on areas from Twinbrook and Dunmurry to Andersonstown, the Monagh bypass, the Upper Springfield Road, the lower Falls to the Spires

shopping centre and all places in between. What we are about to face in the scale and speed of further welfare reform is captured in all that, yet we are being asked to sign off on something from Stormont House, whatever the dispute might be about the details. When it comes to welfare, you begin to wonder whether the Stormont House Agreement is worth the paper it is written on. Whatever the dispute might be, if that was the understanding at the end of December, it is now five months later, and that is the SDLP's best understanding of where DWP, the Treasury and the British Prime Minister now intend to go.

What is the point in the Executive, on the one hand, giving money to support those in welfare need when, on the other hand, the British Government have plans for the Budget and welfare to take much more money away from us when it comes to those who are subject to public funding or welfare support? You begin to wonder what the point is in trying to negotiate and get a position of strength, even though it was not all the strength that we thought it should be, when we end up in a situation five months later in which that is the scale and speed of London's proposals for the Budget and for welfare. I suggest to the Minister that that is at the core of this debate. Whilst you can try to legislate for what the situation was, despite the disputes ever since over Stormont House, is it not a precautionary position and one of strength to ask about the authority of all that when the carpet will be pulled from under all of us with welfare and the Budget? That is not speculation; it is in the parliamentary diary at Westminster. There will be a Chancellor's statement on, I believe, 8 July. He is not hiding what he is going to do. He may be coy about some of its scale, but he is not hiding it.

Do we not have a responsibility to ourselves and to all those who are subject to public funds, whether it is welfare or otherwise, to say, "We need to see the colour of all that to make our best judgements about all this"? It is a very simple commonsensical political point, and I ask the Minister and his party, even in these latter hours of the debate, to consider that.

I want to make three other points. I missed the Minister's very early remarks, so I apologise if I am picking up some of this wrong. I acknowledge that the Minister appears to have moved further in a positive way on independent advice for those who are on welfare benefits and who may be looking for universal credit. As I understand it, and I stand to be corrected on this, guidance will be issued. I welcome that, although a statutory right to independent legal advice is always the position of strength,

because it guarantees it in primary law. The Minister is proposing that there be some sense of guarantee in guidance. Guidance is very important, and I have always argued that it is very important. That was a lesson taught to me by Eileen Evason when she advised DSD in my time in that Department.

It is very important, but it is less than primary legislation and less than regulation. I will say this to the Minister: in the conversations that we are going to have to have, we are not walking off this pitch. We will stay on this pitch and will have some further conversations. For reasons that the Minister will know, I was not party to some of that over the last short while, but I would like to be party to it over the next short while. This is only one example, but moving the right to independent advice from a point of guidance to a point of regulation would be helpful. However, I have to say to the Minister that the comments that he made on the bedroom tax only confirmed our worst fears and did not give us any more reassurance. The Minister will recall that, during Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage, Mr Agnew, other Members, and the SDLP questioned the Minister on the bedroom tax. I remind the Minister what he said during Further Consideration Stage on Tuesday 24 February:

"Once the social size criteria restriction is introduced"

— that is the bedroom tax —

"and the claimant residing in either a Housing Executive or housing association property is identified as underoccupying that property, the amount of housing benefit that has been made in payment will be reduced. The mitigation measures will, however, ensure that claimants do not see any difference in the amount of financial assistance that they receive to meet their housing costs. It will be only after that point that an offer of suitable alternative accommodation will be made and only when an appropriate-sized dwelling becomes available." — [Official Report, Vol 102, No 4, p73 col 2].

The Minister was asked this question:

"If a tenant's housing benefit is reduced because of underoccupation, the mitigation is on a pound-for-pound basis. If that tenant is then offered suitable accommodation on two or three occasions, let us say, and declines, is the mitigation withdrawn?"

to which he replied:

"The Member has answered his own question: it is all in the term "suitable accommodation"." — [Official Report, Vol 102, No 4, p74 col 2].

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. I know that he suggested that he may have missed some of the Minister's explanation. However, further to that, the Minister said today:

"I should develop a scheme that protects existing and future tenants from any reduction in housing benefits for their tenancies unless there is a significant change in their personal circumstances or they are offered suitable alternative accommodation."

Does the Member agree with me that the DUP is still bringing in the bedroom tax?

Mr Attwood: That is the conclusion that I would have to make, Minister, in response to Mr Agnew. The point of those questions at Further Consideration Stage was to determine whether the bedroom tax, in any shape or form in any circumstances whatsoever, would or would not be in place. The conclusions that the SDLP, and I know the Green Party, drew from Further Consideration Stage, as well as the conclusion that Mr Agnew drew this morning, seem to be that there will be situations in Northern Ireland where personal circumstances have changed and where an offer of suitable accommodation was made and the bedroom tax, having been mitigated in full, will then be reintroduced for that tenant.

4.00 pm

That is the only conclusion that I can draw from what I heard, and Mr Agnew has confirmed it. From what I heard the Minister say this morning, the bedroom tax is going to be in place. It may only be in place for a very small number of tenants — we do not know — but it will be in place for that number of tenants. That is not mitigation in full, it is mitigation in full with the safety net withdrawn in the event of a change in personal circumstances or suitable accommodation becoming available.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Across this debate, from the hour and moment of the first reading of the Welfare Reform Bill, there has not been any stage where the SDLP has not tabled a petition of concern. Whatever

difference of opinion there may have been about what London is at and the mitigation measures that are being proposed, as far as I can recall, at every stage the SDLP has held true and tried to block the Welfare Reform Bill in the event of there not being full and satisfactory answers to the questions in respect of the content of the Bill and now in respect of the content and character of what the Tory Government are proposing in the rundown to, and after, the emergency Budget in July. That cannot be said for every party in this Chamber that tabled petitions of concern at any time.

I remember, at Further Consideration Stage, inviting the party to my right to exit the door behind the Top Table, turn right, turn right again, go to the Business Office and sign a petition of concern to block welfare reform. That was declined. I cannot reconcile it, for the life of me. Sinn Féin now has a right-headed approach in respect of welfare. It seems to me that, belatedly, it has come to that. How could it have had such a wrong-headed approach last November when Martin McGuinness said that the draft Budget — the worst austerity Budget since 2011 — was the best deal possible? How could that wrong-headed approach then endure and escalate to the point of Sinn Féin endorsing that draft Budget earlier this year and blocking every single amendment tabled by the Green Party and the SDLP — every single amendment — that was put to a vote? People can draw their own conclusions about all of that.

I will conclude with this comment, if I may: Mark Durkan coined the phrase last week, in our party meeting and in meetings with the British Government and others, that we needed "mature negotiations". The Minister is thinking that we are not being very mature about things today, but we need to have a concluding phase of mature negotiations, for a number of reasons.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second, because I want to remind Mr Wilson about a meeting that he was at in London just before the election.

According to the junior Treasury Minister, the London Government have spoken to Departments about how they are going to, in the short term, do adjustments that they can announce in the emergency Budget in July. If that is the conversation that the Chancellor is openly saying is happening in London as we speak, and if there is no similar conversation going on with this devolved arrangement or with the Scottish or Welsh devolved Administrations,

what does that say about London's high-handedness? They say that they are having conversations with Departments in London about what more they can cut in the very short term, yet it appears there are no conversations going on with the devolved Administrations. Is it not a breach of the agreement in respect of the devolved arrangements that, 42 days from an emergency Budget, London is having conversations with London Departments but, it appears, is silent when it comes to having conversations with the Northern Ireland Government or with the Scottish or Welsh Governments?

To come back to the reference to Mr Wilson, I make that point to remind people about what was said on Wednesday 11 February 2015, at the Consideration Stage of the Bill to give effect to the proposal in respect of corporation tax. Mr Wilson will remember the meeting because he and Mr Durkan were at the meeting where Mr Gauke, who was then the junior Treasury Minister, gave evidence. This is what I read into the record at Consideration Stage, where I referred to an exchange at the meeting in London on 11 February between Mark Durkan and Mr Gauke:

"This is the reply to Mark Durkan from Minister Gauke when he probed him on what might be the approach of London in relation to a heavy stick being used if our funding here in Northern Ireland was not on a sustainable basis. This is relevant to welfare and to the benefit cap. This is what Mark Durkan said:

'There is some concern, not just because of the experience on welfare reform, where the block grant was fined unless the Assembly passed a Bill that it otherwise would not have wanted to pass ... will the Minister assure us that the judgment that is made on budget sustainability in a couple of years' time will not hinge on the Treasury saying to the Executive, for instance, "You do not have a sustainable budget unless you introduce water charges"

and so on. The Minister said to that:

'my approach to looking at the finances of the Northern Ireland Executive as a whole, in their totality, is that they need to be on a sustainable footing. When it comes to public finances, whether in Northern Ireland or in the United Kingdom—public finances are the sum of its parts—this is a matter of looking at the totality of the public finances'.

He concluded:

'in terms of how the Treasury will view that in future, I would not go beyond the wording set out in the Stormont House agreement.'— [Official Report, Vol 101, No 9, p 4-5, cols 2-1].

I will give way to Mr Wilson in a second, but that is what the Minister said, and that is precisely what London did when they came to the welfare penalties. Whether or not they colluded with the DUP — Sinn Féin absents itself from the relevant meetings — they engineered the situation where the imposition of welfare penalties was meant to break the back of the Northern Ireland Government and Assembly when it came to welfare reform. Mr Gauke, not anticipating that the Tories would have a majority Government, was telling Westminster in February of this year that they would go back for round two and that, if there were not sustainable finances, the London Government might again begin to wave the stick.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. It is on the point that he made about five minutes ago, but I will come back to it. He and Sinn Féin have made much of this argument that we have to have more conversations around this issue of welfare reform. Does he accept that, if this goes through today in the form that it is in, there is no point in further conversations? The Bill is dead. The Bill cannot be introduced for another six months. The Bill will then have to go through the process again, and it will be two years before this Bill, in any revised form, can be brought to a satisfactory conclusion through this House. Meantime, all of the financial consequences that stem from this decision will have to be borne by the Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Attwood: My answer to that is simply that the technical should not get in the way of the political. There have been occasions in the lifetime of the Assembly's mandates —

Mr Allister: That is the reality.

Mr Attwood: Mr Wilson was a Member of the Assembly where things that were done were undone. That is the truth. Mr Wilson might forget that, but things were done that were undone. People who were one designation changed their designation. Why? Because the politics of the moment required the Alliance Party to do so. So, when there are parties in here telling the SDLP that today is make-or-break day, let me remind more than one party in the Chamber that there is precedent in the

Chamber that, when the politics requires it, means are found to address that. I will let in Mr Wilson in a second.

The Alliance Party might want to remember that, as might other parties. Ambiguity might not be a very welcome thing when it comes to certainty in politics, especially considering what happened after the Good Friday Agreement, when the lack of certainty and commitment to live up to the requirements of Irish democracy saw this institution go into suspension on more than one occasion. Politics and the people should drive how we address this matter, and ways and means can be found to get round that.

Mr Wilson missed the earlier part of my contribution, and I am not making any issue about that with him. The point I was trying to make was: what is the standing, perhaps even the worth, of the Stormont House moneys or of that effort, or of some of the principles agreed to, or some of the mitigations that are on offer — whatever disputes there might be about them? What is the standing of all of that if loans are given on the one hand and moneys are then taken back through new and deep austerity on the other? That issue has to be faced up to in this debate.

There are Members in this Chamber who, properly, represent Northern Ireland in the Westminster institutions — the House of Lords and the House of Commons — and in 42 days they will be up and down for votes, just like the ones that people are trying to impose on this Chamber today. They will be up and down for votes at the next phase of Budget and welfare cuts. Mr Wilson, if you do not send out the message today that you will challenge and confront all that, then London will draw the conclusion that there are people who are prepared, even if not willing, to do their business when it comes to Northern Ireland politics.

Mr Speaker: There is a considerable amount of interference with the speaker system. Someone's phone is causing problems. Could you please check? I understand that the Principal Deputy Speaker had to draw attention to that as well. Thank you.

Mr Wilson: I think I should apologise, because at least the Member has been generous in giving way, and he did not need to. I apologise for missing his words of wisdom, but unfortunately I had something else that I had to attend to.

He dismisses the processes that have to be gone through as being mere technicalities that

can be swept aside if politics dictates so. Would he accept, however, that for a major piece of legislation like this, these are not technicalities? The requirements to present the Bill — a First Reading — then for a Committee Stage, public consultation on that, and then a Consideration Stage, are not technicalities, they are legal requirements. It is impossible to do this by having discussions with the Minister some time in the next couple of weeks and then, hey presto, suddenly everything can be reinstated. Indeed, I suspect that his party would be the first to complain if there was not proper consultation as laid down in the Belfast Agreement; or maybe the Belfast Agreement, as far as he is concerned, no longer matters.

Mr Attwood: I will make a number of points and I will deal with his question, but he has to deal with mine. It is this: you sat in the House of Commons Committee on 11 February when the then junior Minister in the Treasury basically said that they would wave the stick again if they had to. That is what he said. What integrity is left to the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement, the Assembly and the Executive, if London, having deployed the big stick approach previously in welfare, are now indicating that they will deploy the big stick approach when it comes to other issues? That is what he said, and he said it in the context of the devolution of corporation tax powers. It was not some passing reference on the Floor of the House of Commons, or an ad hoc comment made at some Committee in the House of Lords. It was made, and deliberately made, at the Committee that was dealing with corporation tax. It was made deliberately because he was putting down a marker.

At that stage, there was some hope that, whatever Government were in Westminster after the election, they would be a coalition that would, somehow or other, reduce the excesses of the primary partner in Government, but that is gone.

How much more keen and ambitious will London be when it comes to, say, the devolution of corporation tax, to do it on its terms? Its terms are sustainable finances, and we are in the moment of seeing what those look like when it comes to welfare. That is why this debate is so important: if we hold the line now, with others, there is some potential that, between now and the beginning of July, a different scenario might begin to prevail.

4.15 pm

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way again. Of course, he knows that others did not hold the line. Others had to accept the consequences of welfare changes in Scotland and Wales, where the amount of money going into the economy will not rise as fast as it would have in the absence of welfare reform. Rather than waving a big stick — let us not get paranoid about it — the Government at Westminster are simply doing what you would expect any Government to do. If we volunteer in Northern Ireland to pay higher rates of welfare to our citizens and take that decision as a devolved Administration, that is not paid for by Westminster; we have to pay for it ourselves. I know that the term "fines" has been used, but we are not paying fines. We are paying the difference between a decision that we made here in Northern Ireland and the rates agreed by the Government and Parliament in Westminster.

Mr Attwood: If that could be done, and done right, with the guarantees and certainties that we and other parties are looking for — I will raise other matters with the Minister in my concluding remarks — that would be welcome, positive and good. Mr Wilson answers the question about the past and where we are now, but he does not answer the question about where we will be in the future. Where will we be when DWP and Treasury begin to scope out — as I tried to do in an earlier contribution — the scale of the next phase of welfare reform? The future is 8 July, when we will see what early, deep cuts the Chancellor, Mr Osborne, puts into the public domain in order to get over the hump, before introducing the inheritance tax relief that he thinks will see the Tories elected to a third term with him as Prime Minister. Mr Wilson and the rest of us have to deal with all of that: otherwise, we are being negligent and neglectful of the interests of people in the North.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second. I will give way to everybody. I do not have an issue with that, but I just want to go back and make this point because Mr Wilson might not have been here for it. Some dispute the quality of the negotiation, as some outside the Chamber clearly do, but what is the standing of the moneys agreed at Stormont House should the scale of what is taken away from us in July be disproportionate to, if not greater than, what we negotiated?

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: We have to ask and answer that question because, if London is giving with one hand, whatever the nature of that giving might be, and then ripping it all back with the other, it does not make any of us look very clever. Worse, it puts in jeopardy and makes vulnerable dozens, thousands and hundreds of thousands of the people whom we are meant to represent.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way and appreciate that he is being generous in doing so, but this is important. He talks about us being very clever, but if all of what he says is right — the Member is always prophesying doom — will he answer one simple question? Where does the money come from? We can try in the House — as others supported in the past — robbing banks to pay for certain things. We can try to wish money into existence, but, in reality, where will the money come from? Will he answer that, or will we just go back to the British Exchequer with a big begging bowl and say, "The poor people of Northern Ireland require more money, so write us a blank cheque". Those days are over.

Mr Attwood: I will not bury my head in the sand about the essence of that question, save to say three things. First, whatever others in the SDLP and I said at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage about the doom and gloom that we were about to face, we were not telling even half the truth. I ask the Minister to consider that, because he rightly berated us about the scenario that we would face after May. Our answer was that it would be bad and would be an emergency Budget. What did we get? It is worse than bad and will be an even worse emergency Budget. Maybe, on this occasion, we were right and the wishful thinkers on the other side of the Chamber were less right.

The second thing is that, if that scenario is right about what we are facing between now and 8 July, where is the DUP outlining to the people of Northern Ireland how it will maximise its strength with the rest of us in order to try to minimise the impact of all that? I do not hear anything coming from the opposite Benches. Maybe the First Minister had this conversation for an hour with the Prime Minister in the House of Commons. Maybe a lot of stuff went on, or not. What our people out there need to know is what we will do over the next 42 days, given the scale of what we know is coming. We did not anticipate even half of it in January and February. What is the answer to that? All that I hear is a debate about the moment, important though it is, and not about the next five years, as acute and critical as they will be in the lived

experience of the people of this part of the North.

Sinn Féin put it in this tiresome way and said, "Let us unite and have a negotiation". That is another meaningless phrase. This is about hard, strategic common enterprise. I hear that Nicola Sturgeon used those words on Scottish radio this morning about a common enterprise by the people in business in Scotland to minimise what London will do and, in the meantime, try to mitigate that and confront London.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: Remember they have 54 MPs. There are a dozen or more from here. That is a wedge to make things more difficult. I will let Mr Wilson in.

Where is the money coming from? The truth of the matter is that the austerity Budget that was voted through in November 2014 and January 2015 — the best deal possible according to Martin McGuinness — was the worst austerity Budget that we have had in five years. Where is the money coming from? There are multiple proposals out there. We have gone through them before.

Jim Wells, when he was Health Minister, took the bull by the horns and agreed to all-Ireland children's cardiac care. Fifty per cent of our Budget and over 40% of the Republic's Budget is for health. Given the issues in the health service and the profile of our ageing population, that amount will grow, but we cannot find tens of millions of pounds. What have we been doing? We have been sitting on our butts. Or, some people have been sitting on their butts with nothing being done until Jim Wells came along. I think that Edwin Poots, to be fair to him, also started to do a bit to take forward the all-Ireland health study, which is in the public domain and was published in 2006. In respect of that, useful stuff has been done in the border area and, now, in children's cardiac care, but not on the scale and range of what is out there.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. It is one thing for him to say that they predicted that there would be huge budgetary pressures. What he will not admit is that this was not a prediction by the SDLP and Sinn Féin. The SDLP and Sinn Féin are the perpetrators of this Budget problem. We are paying £114 million back to Westminster this year that we should not have to pay. We are losing out on hundreds of millions of pounds of loans that would have been available as a result of the

Stormont agreement. We are losing out on capital money that would have been available as a result of the Stormont agreement. That is all because his party has now joined with Sinn Féin today to prevent the economic benefits that may have come from the Stormont agreement. This is not a prediction; this is something that his party, the SDLP, has brought upon the people of Northern Ireland. Why will he not, at least, accept his role in the budgetary problems that we now face, rather than simply trying to say that it is somebody else's fault?

Mr Attwood: For what it is worth, I do think that I get things wrong. I think that Mr Wilson, even when he was the Finance Minister, will accept that principle. I got things wrong in DOE and DSD that I still regret, and, if I had got them right, government and the public in Northern Ireland would be in a better place.

Are there things that we could have done better on welfare? Yes. In my view, the DUP dropped the ball in 2011. They bowled it too short to the London Government on welfare reform and welfare need. Technical things that were useful and welcome were negotiated, but the opportunity to confront London that existed in May 2011 was squandered thereafter. There was an opportunity between 2011 and 2013 to push the boat out very much further before London and the DUP came up with the wheeze of imposing penalties.

Mr Beggs: The Member used the word "squandered". Aside from the £114 million, does he not acknowledge that spurning the offer of the voluntary redundancy scheme, which would enable changes to happen in a sensitive and planned manner, and refusing to pass the Welfare Reform Bill will place the Northern Ireland Executive and our collective Budget in a much worse position? Will he advise how savings are to be made, given the critical situation that our Budget is in?

Mr Attwood: I will answer that question and conclude my remarks generally. I think that it was the Minister who asked whether we would go to London again with a begging bowl. Whilst it is not the appropriate phrase, there will be people in south and west Belfast going to the food bank because they have nowhere else to go to sustain themselves and their families. It is not about going to London with a begging bowl; it is about ensuring that the food bank will be less used and there is no need for more of them in Northern Ireland, given what the Trussell Trust has said about the scale of what is required. *[Interruption.]* The number of people,

Mr Wilson, who have gone to food banks as a direct consequence of how welfare reform has impacted on their life — I will find the figures again —

Mr Wilson: There has been no welfare reform here.

Mr Attwood: Precisely. We learn from what they have done. If the Trussell Trust says to us that that is the scale of need for food banks as a direct consequence of the scale of welfare reform and welfare cuts, let us warn ourselves.

I will answer Mr Beggs's question. Either you accept the scale of what is happening between now and 42 days, between now and the Treasury statement to the House of Commons, or you do not. You will have two Members of Parliament there who will have to listen to it and will have to put their hands up for it, if that is what they are inclined to do. Either you accept that the scale of that, whatever it was before, is now greater and puts more people at risk, creates more vulnerability and puts more people in north and west Belfast and across the North in jeopardy of having to go to food banks, or you do not. If you accept that argument, whatever the history, we are now in a context where, if we do not come together and join the Scottish nationalists to try to do something to impact on the worst excesses of what will be proposed in budgeting and welfare, we will be negligent and neglectful and will let our people down. Even if you do not believe it, you should have the common sense to say that we should exhaust the opportunity between now and 8 July.

I say to the Minister that there are issues that we still want to address, partly because of the election and partly because of the interregnum, if you like, since the election. There are still matters that we want to take forward with the Minister. I make that offer honestly, and I think that he will accept it honestly. The reason I say that is that we believe that, when you get down to it, today is an artificial deadline. The reason that it is an artificial deadline, as Mr Wilson knows, is that we need to have a Budget in place — this goes back to Mr Beggs's question — when the bank account runs dry, and the bank account runs dry in August. Is that not the case, Mr Wilson? He has acknowledged that. The bank account runs dry because the 45% Vote on Account runs out in and around the end of July and into early August.

4.30 pm

It is right that, if we do not have a Budget by then, we are in free fall. You will get that admission from me, if nothing else today: we will be in free fall. However, the point is that we have two months not just to conclude welfare but to put it up to London as fully as we can and as united as we can be on behalf of those on welfare and all the others who are subject to public funding, be it in terms of grants, procurement or jobs. The time frame neatly converges, because, if there is a need to have a Budget by the end of July — God knows we have come back to the Chamber after recess when people wanted to make a song and dance about Red Sky or raise an issue about parading — *[Interruption.]* I did not bring the Chamber back; I did the right thing in DSD. It was you and the DUP who tried to unpick it and lost.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will.

Mr Wilson: The Member is right: the Vote on Account means that there is money in the bank until the end of July. However, he has also run a Department and he knows full well that there are consequences from a Budget. We know that, as a result of some of the decisions that have been made here — for example, we have had to continue paying money back to Westminster, which has impacted on the Budget — changes will have to be made in the Budget. Expecting a Department, on the last day that the money in its bank account runs out, to start making adjustments in its spending for the rest of the financial year is impractical. That is one of the reasons why the Budget process always started in June and was completed by the end of July. He will probably say that it is a technicality, but he knows that there are processes that have to be gone through and that it is not practical to leave this until the end of July. Hence the reason why this is not a contrived deadline; it is a genuine deadline that has to be met because the Finance Minister would be irresponsible to leave things to the last minute.

Mr Attwood: There is some weight in Mr Wilson's point, but the contention that all this has to be done and dusted and concluded today in order to open the door for the budgetary process on Friday, given that it is two months to the end of July is, in my view, problematic and stretches a point. I welcome the fact that Mr Wilson acknowledges that it is at the end of July, and I acknowledge the point that it is better to do it some time in advance of that. However, the notion that it all has to be done and dusted, sorted and concluded in order

to move on to Friday and the Budget process is, in my view, unsustainable. The political point is the self-evident one. We should spend our time exhausting the welfare negotiation between now and 8 July or earlier if we can do it, but not to then say that it is all over and done. London has to understand that we will maximise the pressure on them in advance of 8 July. If we do not do so, we are letting down too many people in Northern Ireland who, this year, are living with the consequences of the worst austerity Budget in four or five years, imposed on them by the DUP and Sinn Féin. We cannot allow that to be done a second time around.

Mr Nesbitt: Let me begin, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, by offering our sympathies to Mr Attwood on the loss of his mother and by repeating what I said outside the Chamber, which is that the Ulster Unionist Party wishes Peter Robinson a full and speedy recovery from the ailment that has the First Minister in hospital. Our thoughts are with the Attwoods and the Robinsons at this time.

What times they are, Mr Speaker, what strange, challenging and disappointing times they are. I am sure that if Charles Dickens were alive we would be ripe material for his latest novel. It was Dickens who told us that you can live in the best of times and the worst of times; that you can live in an age of wisdom but also an age of foolishness; an epoch of belief and an epoch of incredulity; a season of light and a season of darkness.

It is pretty dark in here today, so let me stretch myself to look for some light. Yesterday afternoon, I had occasion to drive down to Newcastle in County Down. Early in the journey, I stopped at traffic lights, and parked beside me was a very nice, shiny, clean 4x4 that was liveried in the words "VIP courtesy car" for the Irish Open golf. I followed it down the road to Newcastle. There was a young man in the front seat. He was obviously one of the European Tour players. I wondered whether it was his first visit to here and what impression he would get, so I tried to put myself in his shoes. It was very positive. There was some fantastic scenery. From Dundrum on the drive into Newcastle, as the number of posters of Rory, G-Mac and Darren increased, the sense of excitement tended to build.

I was going to an event — I see Ms Ní Chuilín and Mr Rogers here, and they were at it as well. It was an invitation from not the PGA or the European Tour but the GAA. The Gaelic Athletic Association was having a demonstration football match as part of the build-up to the Irish Open golf at the weekend.

It was holding out the fraternal hand of friendship to the golfing community. Is that not a huge positive? Is it not what we were thinking about in 1998? Is it not a definition of truly sharing experiences and sharing space, which, in that case, was the space that is Newcastle? That is an example this week in Northern Ireland of the best of times.

Here in the Chamber, however, it is the worst of times. It is an epoch of incredulity. A year and a bit after we failed to reach an agreement under the chairmanship of Richard Haass, we now find ourselves failing to implement an agreement that we did reach at Stormont House last December. Sinn Féin talks about the protection of the vulnerable. That stance is costing £9.5 million a month, or £2 million a week, in so-called fines from the Treasury. The Treasury is implementing welfare reform here in Northern Ireland by deducting the money that we should be saving and taking it off the block grant. That is money that we could and should be channelling to help the most vulnerable. If we give somebody £10 above and beyond the GB system, the Treasury simply takes it off our block grant. Therefore, who is in charge? The Assembly and the Executive? No. We have surrendered control to the UK Government.

Of course, if we listen to the Sinn Féin narrative, welfare reform is evil — pure and simple — but if we listen to DSD officials, we get a slightly different narrative. They tell us that 102,000 households — not individuals — would be better off under welfare reform by, on average, about £38 a week if we implemented universal credit. Yes, some households would be worse off. DSD said that 97,000 would be worse off by £31 a week, but that was before the mitigation package that was agreed at Stormont House.

Martin McGuinness is one of our two First Ministers. His responsibility is to all the people of Northern Ireland, and, yes, that includes the vulnerable. His responsibility is not to the people of the Republic of Ireland. As my colleague Roy Beggs made clear earlier in the debate, Martin McGuinness is being shaken by the tail by Sinn Féin's Southern command. To flip-flop at this time, to claim to have proposals and not share them, and to be focused on your party political electoral fortunes in another jurisdiction is simply wrong, and can in no way be defined as protecting the vulnerable in Northern Ireland.

Martin McGuinness spoke one truth earlier: this is about more than welfare reform. It is about an Assembly that delivers for the people. As the last mandate closed, First Minister Peter

Robinson said that our great achievement was that we survived the full mandate. He was right. It was the first time that an Assembly here survived a full mandate since the 1960s and the first time ever that a cross-community, power-sharing government in Northern Ireland survived a full term.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member also acknowledge that, ironically, other Administrations did not survive because of the terrorism that many people here suffered and the shenanigans of the DUP over those years?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for her intervention. I believe that that is one key factor that history will record in its analysis of the political history of Northern Ireland over the last near 100 years.

Survival may have been the key to the last mandate, but the First Minister went on to say that this mandate had to be about delivery. This one is not delivering. It is failing. Frankly, it is in intensive care. It is about more than welfare reform. It is about our ability to pay our debts, not least the £100 million hole in the 2014-15 Budget. We were allowed to have that on the promise that we would use capital resources to pay that £100 million back during this financial year. It is about the thousands and thousands of our citizens who we said could take the benefit of a voluntary exit scheme and leave the public sector. They said, "Yes, we want that", and now they know that, Tantalus-like, it is out of reach and may remain out of reach because of political failure in this Chamber.

It is not just about that. It is also about avoiding the thousands of compulsory redundancies that may follow if the Budget implodes. It is also about corporation tax and the promise of 35,000 to 40,000 good new jobs that could be created in short measure if we agreed to take corporation tax powers and lower the rate to 12.5% to be competitive with the Republic of Ireland. That number of new jobs would be transformational not just for those individuals but for their families, their communities and our society.

Also at stake is dealing with the past, which was too difficult to handle during the Haass talks. What have we done? We have given victims and survivors what we always give them: hope of better days ahead. Are we going to do what we always do after we give them hope and deny them what we promised? It looks like we are.

What about the mental health and well-being of our people? We have one pretty sparse paragraph in the Stormont House Agreement that commits to helping people with trauma. We have so many such people in this country. To relate it to welfare and to those who claim disability living allowance, 12% of all claimants in Great Britain do so because of poor mental health and well-being issues. In Northern Ireland, it is not 12% but 23%, which is double. There is research that states that the reason why it is so high on a per capita basis here is the Troubles. It is one of the most toxic legacies of our conflict.

Take a map of the Troubles, such as that in the 1999 'Cost of the Troubles Study', which shows the hotspots of bombings, shootings and all those Troubles-related incidents. If you then take a contemporaneous map of mental health issues as measured by attempted and completed suicides, alcoholism and drug abuse, you have a match. The evidence is there. Our higher rates are directly causally linked to the Troubles. We made those people a promise in the Stormont House Agreement, and we are about to fail to deliver on that promise today. We could have had a triple win. Helping people with mental health issues addresses a legacy of the Troubles.

It helps them be less dependent on the welfare state and benefits, and it gives them the opportunity, perhaps for the first time in their lives, to be economically active. That is a triple win. Instead, we are going for a triple defeat. The worst of times seems to be our default option. As a predecessor of mine famously put it, we stand at a crossroads. Will it be the best of times or the worst of times? Will it be a season of light or a season of darkness?

4.45 pm

If we fail today, we are in a budgetary crisis, a few short weeks away from the point at which the permanent secretary of the Department of Finance and Personnel will have to step in and when our Ministers will have to go, cap in hand, to a public official to ask for a budget to do what they want to do. If we reach that point, and we are very close, it will represent the death of democracy in Northern Ireland. So, it is decision time. Will it be the best or the worst?

At half-time yesterday, the exhibition match switched from football to hurling, with a poc fada. A few golfers gave it a go. We are talking about experts in their field. They are world-class athletes — people who spend countless hours on their hand-to-eye coordination. Do

you know what, Mr Speaker? They could not do it; they kept missing the ball with their hurl. They threw the puck up; they had a swipe; they missed. They tried again; they missed again; and they missed again. To me, it is a metaphor. It is a metaphor for us in the Chamber, because we keep missing. We keep failing to connect. There is no coordination.

So, when the golfers enjoy the best of times this week down in Newcastle, we are condemning our people to the worst of times. This is failure on an industrial scale; it is failure for hundreds of thousands of our people. In golfing terminology, Mr Speaker, we have failed to make the cut.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Ross Hussey, and I am quite happy if you wish to speak from a sitting position.

Mr Hussey: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I have sat here this afternoon and this morning and listened to various speeches. The thing we have to remember is that we are part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That is where we are; that is the political reality. The British Government decide how much money is going to come to Northern Ireland. There is not a bottomless pit; there is not a bucket of money that we can go to and take out of every time we want it. We should realise that, and we know that. Anyone who was starting from the beginning with a bottomless pit would, certainly, be looking for a much-improved welfare payment scheme, but, unfortunately, we do not have that.

I am going to quote from the speech made by Pat Doherty, the Member of Parliament for West Tyrone, on welfare reform in the House of Commons —

I am now going to quote from the speech made by Conor Murphy, the Member of Parliament in the House of Commons —

This is how much interest Sinn Féin had for those who voted for them to represent us in Westminster.

Sinn Féin talks about power-sharing. It talks of power-sharing, but it does not want to share power. It talks of agreements. The Stormont House Agreement was an agreement between political parties. What happened when the agreement was made? They reneged. We had speeches here, this afternoon and this morning, talking of "whatiffery". In Northern Ireland, we often hear speeches on "whataboutery". This time, it is "whatiffery". What if the Chancellor does this? What if the Chancellor does that?

Again, in Westminster, my Member of Parliament will make the following speech —

I could almost write it, word for word. I will do it again —

He will not be there to represent me.

They have the hypocrisy to sit in this Chamber and talk about Tory cuts. There are four extra votes for the Conservative Government because members of Sinn Féin will not take their seats. They do not have the opportunity to take the seat in Fermanagh and South Tyrone because it is now taken by an Ulster Unionist.

We hear various things in relation to independent advice and, perhaps, to the independent advice services that we have. The £2 million a week that we are returning to the British Government would be wonderful to give to the independent advice services. How many independent advice services or citizens advice bureaux would dance if they were offered that sort of money? Yet, we are handing it back.

This morning, the deputy First Minister said that the Bill, by going ahead, punishes the poor. Sinn Féin's lack of moral accountability is punishing the poor. Martin McGuinness said that there are huge challenges, not just welfare. The implementation of further cuts is threatened by the Tories, and yet Sinn Féin will not take a seat in the House of Commons to challenge the Tories or anybody else. We all know that, had a Labour Government been returned, there were going to be changes, not for the good of the people of Northern Ireland, but these things are going to happen because we are part of the United Kingdom and must accept the Budget that we are allocated.

We are certainly coming out of conflict and having major issues. Mike Nesbitt made reference to the fact that there are those who suffer from mental health issues. The Stormont House Agreement was a jigsaw, and, unfortunately, that jigsaw is falling to pieces in front of us. Not one representative on the opposite Benches has said anything that does anything for the good of the people of Northern Ireland. Heads are being buried in the sand. I really do not know where Mr Attwood thought we were going to go in two months, because it is quite clear that this Welfare Reform Bill is here today. It either passes today, or there is no Welfare Reform Bill.

It is not often that I quote Sammy Wilson — it is not often that I agree with him — but he made it very clear that this is it. The Minister has made it clear that this is it. We take it or leave it, but

we leave it with the possibility of major problems for the Budget in Northern Ireland.

However, it can all be resolved in two months. Somehow or other, money is going to appear from nowhere. Has somebody bought a National Lottery ticket and not told us? I am sure that the Minister would love to win the National Lottery, and maybe, Minister, based on what I have heard from Mr Attwood, that is what is going to happen. "It could be you"; but I doubt it very much.

I have sat here today, and I am not impressed by the options that have been put forward by those on the opposite Benches. We have no option. The safeguards that are built into the Bill are better than those which most people in the United Kingdom have. They are better than most people have in England. Yet we are prepared to ignore all that and allow our Budget to go down the pan. I personally would love to have a situation where everything in the garden is rosy, but we do not have that. There is no money to hand out willy-nilly. There are no more buckets and no more begging bowls. It is time for tough decisions.

I thought that a brilliant expression was used earlier:

"the technical should not get in the way of the political."

What about practical? What about common sense? We either get it right now or make a total mess of it. This is not politics; this is playing for the next election. Nobody is paying attention to the needs of the people of Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin plays to the people of the Republic of Ireland, saying, "Look what we did in the North. We hashed it up there." The SDLP is playing for the next Assembly elections, but none of it is for the good of the people of Northern Ireland.

I ask Members to seriously consider the good of the people of Northern Ireland and accept the Bill brought forward by the Minister.

Mr Dickson: I commence by sending my best wishes to the First Minister and wishing him a speedy recovery. I also add my condolences to Mr Attwood on the recent loss of his mother, who happened to be a personal friend.

Today Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Greens are actually voting for the Tory cuts: full, unadulterated, red, white and blue Tory cuts. Thank you, SDLP. Thank you, Sinn Féin. Thank you, the Green Party. You have just

chucked out all the concessions that have been negotiated because, as Mr Wilson and others have informed the House, the Bill dies today because of your petition of concern. Let the electorate hear that. Let the people of Northern Ireland hear that. You are the people who, by killing the Bill today, have implemented full-blooded red, white and blue Tory cuts for the citizens of Northern Ireland.

It is with utter exasperation and a profound sense of déjà vu that I stand here today to speak on the Final Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill. I fear not only that we may have thrown away three years of work and negotiations, but that we are now walking wide-eyed into a major crisis of our finances and public services. Even the much-lauded Ms Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland, is not putting her institutions at risk by her actions.

In a representative democracy, the public have elected us to represent them and to undertake the duties of government on their behalf. That means spending the money allocated to us in a responsible manner, taking difficult decisions on how to balance the books and stepping up when necessary to do what is best for the people of Northern Ireland. That is what we have been doing. That is what the Minister and the parties have been doing. It is what five parties did when they signed up to an agreement. They were stepping up for all the citizens of Northern Ireland and negotiating with the British Government to deliver what was best for the people of Northern Ireland.

The Alliance Party recognises that, and it will not run away from the difficult decisions today, unlike others. Neither will it continue to kick the can down the road, as it has been suggested by some that we should use the space between now and the Chancellor's Budget. What bit of "no" — when the Tories won — do we not understand in the House? When the Alliance Party signed up to the Stormont House Agreement, it intended to honour it. It is for others to speak about their actions following their signing of it. That stands in stark contrast to Sinn Féin and the SDLP who, in a misguided election strategy, are hurting those that they purport to want to protect, whilst leaving the whole of Northern Ireland in an unbearable state of limbo.

Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Greens are, by their actions, voting to implement Tory cuts in full. People who work in the public services are waiting to hear whether their jobs will be cut due to Sinn Féin, SDLP and Green incompetence. People on long waiting lists, whose life quality could be transformed by

simple surgery, wait to hear whether their operation will be cancelled due to budget cuts in the health service. A constituent saw me last week and said that the first appointment she could get to see a GP was 17 June. How much longer is she going to have to wait before she gets that GP appointment? Many welfare claimants call at my offices seeking to find out what welfare reform will mean for them. The fear in those people is palpable. It is undue fear, brought on by the scaremongering of parties to my right.

Today, Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Greens will be creating more vulnerable people in Northern Ireland than they claim to protect. The truth of the matter is that, with our mitigation measures, the vast majority of those people will not be any worse off than they are right now. In fact, as we have heard, many will be a great deal better off. Let us look at an intriguing revelation. Although I know it will not suit Sinn Féin or the SDLP's political purposes, the facts should be heard before the rhetoric, for once. NISRA and DSD figures show that the roll-out of universal credit will benefit — we have heard this figure before in the House today — some 102,000 households by an average of £37 per week. They will receive more — these are the most vulnerable whom Sinn Féin talks about — than they will receive under the existing system. In addition, some 90,000 households will see no change to their entitlement. Therefore, overall, some two thirds of households will benefit from welfare reform, which Sinn Féin, the Greens and the SDLP are now holding back.

5.00 pm

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Will the Member not acknowledge that the Tory Government are committed in July to further reductions in welfare of, I think, between £12 billion and £15 billion?

Mr McNarry: What are you going to do about it, Dolores?

Mr Dickson: I will indeed admit that I have read those stories in the newspapers, and I will tell you what I did about it. I stood against a Conservative candidate in my constituency. I was not the person who was elected, but I stood against them. The place to do it was at the ballot box. This is a democracy. They won. We will have to put up with what they throw at us for the next five years.

Under universal credit, more childcare support will be provided to households, meaning that all families, regardless of how many hours they

work, will be entitled to childcare. That provides previously unseen levels of flexibility for parents to enter employment and opens up more opportunities for families to supplement their income. Welfare reform will help to make employment financially beneficial and attractive — that, for me, is an important element — by removing the senseless working hours requirements for certain benefits and tax credits, meaning that people who want to work are empowered to do so and will always be better off financially. Welfare reform will also make the system simpler. Currently, many of the most vulnerable in our society under-claim benefits as they are unaware of the elements or entitlements or are intimidated by the Byzantine welfare system that has developed haphazardly in our society, one that all our offices struggle to work with day and daily on behalf of claimants. Those are some of the real benefits of reforming our welfare system, and with mitigation in place.

Northern Ireland has gained an exceptional deal that is looked on with envy by Scotland, Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom, but that is to be blocked by an inability to see that welfare reform has serious positive aspects for all. All in all, it does not suit certain parties' electoral strategies. Sinn Féin believes that there are more votes in scaremongering and maintaining a fear of change than in actually implementing change. Sinn Féin has been caught speaking out of both sides of its mouth at once, with starkly different messages, North and South. While I greatly welcome the mitigation measures that have been put in place to ameliorate the impact of the reform on the most vulnerable, the additional weight that Sinn Féin is seeking to add to the supplementary payment scheme is quite simply unaffordable.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr Wilson: Do you accept that we do not even know what Sinn Féin wants added to the supplementary scheme? Despite the fact that it has complained that there has not been sufficient talking about this and that the scheme is not suitable for its needs, we have not heard one suggestion in the House today as to what changes it would like to see made.

Mr Dickson: I entirely agree with the Member. Indeed, it is my understanding that, during the negotiations in the Stormont House talks, officials and others had to assist Sinn Féin and the SDLP to work out figures that they clearly

did not understand as the process was being developed and worked through.

If those parties really want the rest of us to put up or shut up, the challenge to you today is to say what you want done and how you propose that it will be paid for. That is the challenge to Sinn Féin and the SDLP: you have to tell us where the money will come from. We cannot print it because we do not print it. We believe that we cannot persuade a majority Government in London to deliver any more money between now and their Budget, and, if they are to be believed, things will get worse, so why do we not bank what we have got instead of squandering it and throwing it away?

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree with me that a better time to bring forward suggestions would have been at Consideration Stage or Further Consideration Stage, when amendments could have been made and ideas taken on board? They voted for the legislation at those stages.

Mr Dickson: Indeed, it would. In fact, in a sense, the argument is very hollow on any of what we are trying to achieve in the House today. There is little or nothing that Sinn Féin, the SDLP or, indeed, the Green Member can do by way of proposals today that will change the legislation. The sad reality is that the legislation will lie dead in the water after this evening.

The mitigation measures that have been put in place to ameliorate the impact of reform for the most vulnerable will assist, but we cannot assess every applicant under the old system and then the new system, because as I listened to officials in the Committee for Social Development, I know that, quite simply, the software is not built to do that. We simply cannot pretend that no one is going to be worse off. Put simply, we cannot run a welfare system in Northern Ireland that is completely separate from the rest of the United Kingdom, despite what at least two or perhaps three parties would like us to do. Yes, welfare is a devolved matter, but the reality is that it is also a parity matter within the United Kingdom. We are not a sovereign state, despite what Sinn Féin might like to think it is running. We have no sources of funds other than those from the Treasury. Therefore, we can act only within the parameters set out to us by the Treasury.

The real fight was at Westminster. It is a fight that, as we have said on many occasions before, Sinn Féin chose to sit out. Destroying Northern Ireland's economy and its public services will not serve the electoral strategies as well as it may think. In contrast, in Stormont Sinn Féin has proved itself, at least on occasions, a formidable opposition, but it is nothing but a woeful party of government. It is clearly incapable of taking decisions that a prudent government must and should take involving spending our money wisely, protecting those in need and trying to keep the lights on for all in our society.

Our welfare system is, in essence, a social insurance scheme. Without contributors to our welfare system, it collapses. If we do not have the tax take, it falls. Can people really continue to work as before if they cannot get work and cannot access health care or, indeed, have the skills that they require to carry out their jobs?

I wonder if it is with a second thought to its electoral ambitions in the South that we see Sinn Féin's tag line of protecting the vulnerable for what is nothing more than a political slogan, because it is on that that it is woefully hypocritical. Sinn Féin talks about its care for elderly people walking our dark streets, in A&E having been injured, or of being victims of crime waiting anxiously for the police to arrive. Are those not the most vulnerable people in society? Are they, together with welfare recipients, not the people that we should all be caring for?

Sinn Féin's actions, as well as those of the SDLP, display a wanton disregard for the wider picture for all in our society. They are making people vulnerable through their intransigence. In the end, it is not about the vulnerable; it is about the number of TDs to be returned to the Dáil next year.

The SDLP tells us that it will not be bounced to an artificial date. If Dr McDonnell were here, I would say, "If you are still the leader of your party, the Welfare Reform Act in England received Royal Assent [*Laughter.*] in March 2012". It has been three years since it came into being. [*Interruption.*] How much more time do the SDLP and Sinn Féin need?

Dr McDonnell: Mr Speaker, is the Member blind?

Mr Storey: Is there a bright light shining in your eyes?

Dr Farry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the light of the comments made by you, Mr

Speaker, last Monday about comments of a personal nature being made from the Floor to Members, calling into question my colleague's eyesight would surely fall under the advice that you gave to Members.

Mr Speaker: I think that the Member is making a very valid point. The debate has been difficult, although it has been conducted in an appropriate fashion up to now. There was a direct reference, and perhaps the Member rose to the temptation, but I think that, if we continue as we were, it would be in everyone's interests.

Dr McDonnell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, I apologise for any personal offence.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Dickson: I had a wonderful quip about wearing specs, but do not worry.

In conclusion, we have a good deal, and it is a deal that five parties signed up to, because it would not have been a good deal if five parties had not signed up to it. We need to implement that deal or we will, in my belief, lose it for ever. Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Green Party must face up to the reality of the Government in Whitehall. If they continue to renege on the Stormont House Agreement, and Westminster takes back welfare, we may well lose all our hard-won mitigations and be powerless to soften —

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I want to finish.

We will be powerless to soften the impact of what really will be Tory welfare cuts for the people of Northern Ireland. We need to bank what we have got, not throw it away. The Bill needs to pass today; otherwise, the future for the Northern Ireland welfare system and, indeed, our economy is bleak, not through turmoil and markets or through civil unrest at home but through the shameful abandonment by our politicians of their duty to lead and to govern. I believe that I speak for the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland when I say that I am fed up with the brinkmanship, the constant deadlock and the endless inaction of this place. Today is the day to get on with it.

Mr Kennedy: At the outset, I join others in offering my good wishes to Mr Peter Robinson

for a full and speedy recovery and to his family and his party at this time.

This is an important debate, with an equally important decision to be made at its conclusion. I say that not just as a Member of the Assembly or, indeed, as a member of the Ulster Unionist Party but as a member of the Executive. This is a critical day. The almost inevitable outcome today means one thing for the Executive: it represents failure. However, there is an air of unreality to this today, with some parties simply unable or unwilling to accept any responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This is a proper political and financial crisis at the very top of the Executive. The stances adopted by Sinn Féin and the SDLP throughout the debate have been nothing short of disgraceful. Even at this late stage, they should reflect again and withdraw their petition of concern, because, outside of the Stormont bubble, people have rightly become cynical of the crises of politics that these institutions are now accustomed to. This place simply does not relate to the lives of the many thousands of people whom we purport to represent, but the outcome of today's date will have a real and meaningful adverse impact on the lives of those same said people.

I have made no secret of the challenges currently facing me as Minister for Regional Development. I am facing a £60 million cut in resource spending in this financial year. The impact of that pressure is already being felt, and Members are already pressing me on it. Bizarrely, those are some of the same people who will troop through the No Lobby later this evening, having already signed a petition of concern, to salve their conscience and make them believe somehow that they are class warriors defending the poor and the vulnerable. How wrong they are, because, when the money runs dry — as it will do, and, by current estimates, will do so by late July or early August — lives will be impacted on, services will be devastated and our political credibility will lie in shreds.

In the next few weeks, as pressure mounts in our health service, as education becomes a wasteland, as essential public services cannot be maintained, as the grass grows even higher, as the gullies are stuffed and blocked even more, as darkness overcomes our street lights and as potholes worsen and road defects increase, does anybody in the House really believe that politicians can keep their credibility? The answer is "Of course not".

5.15 pm

I spoke earlier of the air of unreality in this place today on the issue. Even after this debate and after the inevitable decision is reached to kill the Bill and create a crisis, that air of unreality will continue. It is curious that, as we debate this issue, golfers from all over the world are preparing to participate in the Irish Open at Royal County Down, Newcastle. A huge amount of work and preparation has gone into organising that event, not least by the golfing fraternity and our local superstars: Rory McIlroy, Graeme McDowell and Darren Clarke. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board worked its socks off, and Departments such as mine, including my staff in Transport NI and Translink, have pulled out all the stops. I was in Newcastle over the weekend, and it is looking absolutely pristine. The traders and the townsfolk have excelled themselves, and I saw that at first hand. This is the type of event that the people of Northern Ireland should be enjoying, and for too long we lost out because of political instability.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: Yes.

Dr Farry: I very much concur with what the Member says about the Irish Open, but the Irish Open this week was not just a hook to attract golfers to Northern Ireland: if things had gone differently with our political decision-making over the past number of months, this week we would have seen a major US investment trip to Northern Ireland, with some major blue-chip investors interested in bringing jobs to Northern Ireland. That has long since disappeared, and whether we get it back or not is a major question. The consequences of the delay around welfare are already being felt acutely beyond just golf.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for the point that he makes, and I concur with it. Whilst the Irish Open is a major showcase for sport and tourism, it opened further opportunities for economic benefit to the Province, some of which will now clearly be put in jeopardy by the decision that is likely to be made in the coming hours by the Assembly.

What will we say to the many international visitors when they ask about the current impasse? Frankly, embarrassed silence will not do. It is no longer enough to say, "This is just par for the course in Northern Ireland" and trundle along to the next crisis. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better, and politics in this country must deliver more for the people of Northern Ireland. This place can no longer be

held to ransom by Sinn Féin's southern command, with every policy potentially doomed to failure as Martin McGuinness is shaken by the tail again and again by Gerry Adams.

Sinn Féin's cries of anti-austerity simply lack credibility. They continually voted in favour of a Budget that has delivered the severe cuts over the past number of months, and they have presided over those cuts as they have continued to fall across every Department in the Executive. Equally lacking in credibility are their claims that they are standing up for the vulnerable, because today they will set in motion a series of events that will see further drastic cuts to public services that will devastate the vulnerable in our society that Sinn Féin and others purport to defend. Let us not forget how they have sat on their hands since their flip-flop and watched while this place has haemorrhaged £2 million a week that could otherwise have been channelled into public services. So, I appeal, even at this late stage, to Sinn Féin and the SDLP to do the right thing. Accept your responsibilities. Acknowledge the political reality here. It is not too late to bring this place back from the brink.

Mr Speaker: You referred to a petition of concern earlier, so I make it clear that, once it has been lodged and I have validated it, it cannot be withdrawn.

Dr McDonnell: I will be as brief as possible and speak in general because, in the words of a Phil Coulter song, it has all been said now. Everything has been covered and most of the points made. Making the same points again might emphasise them, but it would not make things any different.

At the outset, I put on record my good wishes and, indeed, the very best wishes of the SDLP for the rapid and full recovery of the First Minister, Peter Robinson. We were all a little shocked on hearing of his sudden illness yesterday morning, and we should note the efficiency and the effectiveness of the health service at its best in providing him with appropriate treatment. I would appreciate it if colleagues could convey our best wishes. We may have differences at times politically, but, at a personal and human level, it is important that we take care of each other and have nothing but good wishes and goodwill towards each other.

I want to emphasise that the SDLP remains fully committed to negotiating and achieving a solution to all the issues raised by the Welfare Reform Bill, and we are committed to the Stormont House Agreement. However, we

believe that the negotiations need to be mature and responsible, which means that they are not bound by an unnecessary deadline or short-term tactics.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. He is repeating the same line as Alex Attwood. The Speaker, just before the Member started to speak, made it clear that the petition of concern that has been signed was valid. It will, therefore, be put into practice here tonight. Once we vote, there is no more negotiation on the Bill. The Bill is dead, so what will he negotiate about?

Dr McDonnell: The point that I was making, humbly and honestly, was that perhaps this week should not have been and did not have to be the deadline. Useful negotiations were taking place, and there was further room. I compliment the Minister: we may not always agree, but he has been masterly in dealing with the Bill on many occasions. Despite our disagreement at times, he has been honest and honourable in all that he has done.

We have consistently highlighted the fact that welfare is bound into a much broader economic landscape in Northern Ireland. There is a need to take a much more strategic approach to protecting the most vulnerable while creating the conditions required for access to prosperity for those in need of opportunities. I emphasise that we were clear at the conclusion of the Stormont House talks that, while significant progress had been made on a number of selected issues, the overall outcome was not as comprehensive, decisive or complete as we would have wished. We made that clear on the day, and we are still of that view. Nothing significant has changed. The SDLP has, since the Stormont House Agreement, sought to amend the Bill at Further Consideration Stage. We sought to strengthen and improve the emerging proposals by tabling a series of honest amendments and engaging constructively in all the implementation meetings that followed. We believe that this latest deadline is ill judged and ill timed and serves only to undermine much of the constructive engagement that we and others have been involved in during the process.

We have repeatedly highlighted our opposition to the British Government's imposition of arbitrary fines and penalties on the block grant. This shallow, British Government tactic of creating financial stress is a crude attempt to exert political pressure, and, for us, it is both reckless and potentially a very destabilising move politically. We remain committed and

willing — I emphasise again — to engage in genuine discussion and negotiation including all five Executive parties, and we call again for an end to the side deals and the back-channel talks that can only lead to further misunderstanding and confusion. We in the SDLP believe that it is only through comprehensive, inclusive and honest negotiations that an equitable and fair settlement may eventually be achieved, not just on welfare but across the whole range of political challenges that face us.

I would like to talk briefly about protecting the vulnerable, because that is what we are about. This protection is not just financial but must be given expression through good advice and support services. I welcomed many of the changes that were made in the development of the Bill, and, again, that is one of the reasons why I commended the Minister. Access to advice and support has improved significantly, but there are still significant credibility gaps in this Bill. We have been told that 37,000 households will be better off, by some £39 million extra per year, which adds up to almost £1,000 per household. Yet we know that somehow or other, even with our mitigating package, something in the region of £100 million a year is coming out of welfare. So, somebody is going to lose. We cannot all be winners.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Dr McDonnell: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: Does the Member accept the point that, yes, many will lose, and because of the course of action that his party and Sinn Féin have set on tonight, along with the Green Party Member, the loss will be much greater? The mitigating measures that Nelson McCausland negotiated will not come into play. If the Tories take it on, it will be Tory cuts endorsed in Northern Ireland by your parties.

Dr McDonnell: I can accept half of what the Member has said, but the SDLP does not endorse Tory cuts.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member also agree with me that the Scottish Parliament has already mitigated the effect of the bedroom tax, and there is nothing to prevent this Assembly from bringing forward its own scheme in the same way?

Dr McDonnell: I do not want to gush too much here, but the Minister has reminded us that a lot of this is down to regulation as it is worked

through, whether here or elsewhere. The devil is in the detail of the regulation.

Another issue that I want to draw attention to is that, although the bedroom tax has been bought out in the short to medium term, it is still there, and it is our belief that it needs to be removed entirely.

We want to put it clearly on record that we took part in the discussions at Stormont House and agreed to many of the issues discussed there, including the mitigation of £94 million per year, or £470 million over five years. But, at that time, on that day again I emphasise, we made it clear that we thought there were still big gaps that needed to be dealt with as the agreement was fleshed out. We expected those gaps to be filled out by discussions and with agreement as the Bill progressed, but, unfortunately, the genuine amendments to the Bill that we tabled were dismissed out of hand using petitions of concern. That was even before — and this is the more worrying aspect — George Osborne announced his second round of brutal cuts.

There are some further points I would like to make briefly without causing undue delay. A lot of mention has been made of the Stormont House Agreement. There were meetings at Stormont House of the two Governments and five parties. There were even five-party meetings at Stormont Castle, but it appears to me that, in the aftermath, with the discussions, anxieties and stories we hear, there was a third set of meetings between Sinn Féin and the DUP that the rest of us were not privy to. Somehow or other, it seems that many of our problems have arisen in that space.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair)

5.30 pm

The big challenge for all of us here is much wider than welfare. Any movement towards curtailing welfare for vulnerable people at the margins of our society and somehow pushing them towards work requires, for example, a much better and more affordable childcare arrangement to allow young mothers to access work. A lack of adequate childcare here is acting as a major barrier for young mothers who want to work, due to the extra cost of childcare and a lack of reasonable access or availability.

The Government-imposed fines to our block grant around welfare reform are punitive and, we argue, must be removed. We see them as a gun to our heads in everything that we do.

The recent threat of further cuts from George Osborne, without much detail, means that we are not having this discussion with our eyes open. Any decisions that could be made today are, in fact, gazumped by a further phase of cuts that will render any decisions that might be made obsolete. They will be swamped and overtaken by his next round of cuts.

There is a clear and real need for economic opportunity to be created and injected in parallel with any changes in the welfare system. It is crazy to talk about people accessing work if there is no work to access. We in the SDLP want a commitment from the two Governments, and, indeed, maybe from Brussels and the US, but from all parties here as well, that we need to be doing more to create more jobs. That is in no way a criticism of what has already been done but a call to take stock and find ways of doing more and doing it better. If we can create a prosperity process, we will be more self-sufficient, autonomous and confident, and, indeed, would have more confidence in our Executive and our Government. From that will flow more tax and more funds for welfare, education and health.

We have, at all times, engaged honestly and honourably in these discussions and this debate. We regret that our genuine needs were not met and we feel that we are left with no other choice but to do what we have to do this afternoon.

Dr Farry: It is very hard to get your head around the stark fact that, after today's vote, if, indeed, parties vote on the basis that they have declared so far, everything will change in Northern Ireland. There will be implications for our political process and our budgeting process. Those implications will be massive and considerable, and the danger is that they will be long-lasting and that all the people of Northern Ireland will pay the price as a consequence. People need to be very clear about what they are doing tonight and not come back in a few weeks and say, "I didn't realise what we were signing up to or what the implications were." People have been warned extremely clearly about the implications.

A different future is available, or was available, to us in Northern Ireland. I go back to the point that I made in an intervention to Mr Kennedy. It was not just the fact that we were due to have a major golf tournament in Northern Ireland this week, which, thankfully, is still going ahead. We were potentially going to have a major US investment trip on these shores, with blue-chip companies potentially looking to invest in our economy. That is now postponed, in the best-

case scenario, and, in the worst-case scenario, is lost. That is the very real consequence of even a standstill in the decision-making process that we have had, or lack of decision-making process that we have had, over the past number of months. I hate to think what the implications are going to be if we actually end up taking the wrong decisions, which will plunge Northern Ireland into deep uncertainty. People are already feeling the pain, at best in terms of investment deferred and, at worst, investment lost, so people need to be very conscious of where things are at present.

We have a stark choice before us on these issues. On welfare, the choice is very simple: we proceed with the local variation of welfare reform with all the flexibilities and mitigations that we have negotiated or we see the full blunt force of the stark version of reform that is taking place in Great Britain. No other choices are available. Nothing else has been proposed. No other sustainable, financially solvent approach has been suggested by any party in the Assembly. That is the choice that awaits us. All those who will block this vote tonight are supporting the full version of Tory welfare cuts in Northern Ireland.

All I can think of to try to rationalise the process is that some people just do not want to have their fingerprints on it. They would rather that people suffer than they have to go through the Lobbies and have themselves associated with something that many of us in this Chamber find distasteful. We recognise that it is our duty and responsibility as the Government and legislators of Northern Ireland. We have to address society as we find it today, not some idealist fantasy land where we can do things differently. We have to face the stark realities before us.

Other major consequences flow from this. Potentially, we will see the unravelling of our budgets. Again, we have what may be viewed as the lesser-case scenario, where the pressures from the unravelling of the Stormont House Agreement build up around us. There will be the loss of last year's mitigation, that is the loan that the Executive received; the fact that we have to pay more in welfare penalties on an ongoing basis; and the fact that we have to fund the voluntary exit scheme. If, on the back of this, we, in turn, do not pass a Budget for this year, we then face a situation where budgets will be struck by civil servants, and there will be astronomical cuts to those budgets — beyond the level faced by any other society in western Europe in recent memory. That is the stark choice that faces us.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Yes.

Mr Dickson: The Member refers to civil servants having to set our budgets and the crisis that would ensue as a result. Can he tell the House whether he believes that that would include, for example, failure by the Agriculture Minister to pay single farm payments to farmers in Northern Ireland? Would it throw that into crisis? Would it also throw into crisis funding from the European social fund?

Dr Farry: There is an issue around accruals. That is the danger that we face. What may bring this home to some people is almost a reverse of what happened on the back of Sunningdale. We had the famous pictures of farmers blocking the Prince of Wales Avenue with their farm vehicles in protest. This time round, we may see the pitchforks up in protest about the inability of some parties to take decisions on the vital interests of Northern Ireland.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member makes a valid point that the political credibility of this place and its budgetary process will be damaged and tarnished. I would prefer that it were not a Tory-majority Government, as I think most Members would, but, as Mr Dickson set out, that is the reality that prevails in the United Kingdom. Does he agree that, if these powers have to be transferred to the national Government in Westminster, the protections that have been negotiated and the mitigations that are in place to protect the most vulnerable in society will not be there in that context and that, in fact, the people who claim to be protecting the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland will have exposed those same vulnerable people to the worst type of Tory austerity measures? It is when those measures come into place and the protections are not there that people will come to their doors and those parties will have to explain why they have allowed that to happen. Does the Member agree?

Dr Farry: Yes, very much so. We are, essentially, at the mercy of the Conservative Government; that is where people in the Assembly will leave the people of Northern Ireland when it comes to welfare. We have to bear in mind that, as many Members have said, we are not here as a sovereign state; we are here as part of a wider UK. We receive our money from the Treasury, whether through the block grant in DEL money or annually managed

expenditure (AME) money. We are dependent upon that. Welfare reform, in practice, is set at a UK level. We have some ability to mitigate and have flexibilities, and we have maximised our ability to run those, both with regard to our ability to negotiate them and to pay them. Every time we negotiate a flexibility, it has to come off the Budget in some other way. We have done the best that we can, but we have to appreciate that we are not our own masters on welfare. We are part of a much wider political system.

We regularly hear comments that say, "The Conservatives have no mandate in Northern Ireland, so how dare they do all this?" One of the fundamental tenets of the Good Friday Agreement is the principle of consent, which means that all of us, including those parties that do not wish Northern Ireland to continue as part of the UK, have nonetheless accepted, like everyone else, that it will remain part of the UK. That means that they accept, ipso facto, that a national UK Government set policy on national issues. Welfare is one of those issues. The logical consequence of anyone's support of the Good Friday Agreement is that they recognise that reality, even those parties that want to see a united Ireland. That is the stark reality that they have to accept, and, at the moment, they are failing to do so. The Conservative Party may not have much of a mandate in Scotland and Wales and no mandate in Northern Ireland, but it won the election across the UK as a whole, fair and square, based on the electoral system that is in place.

Other consequences could flow from this. We are in danger of losing the voluntary exit scheme for civil servants. Just before I came down to the Chamber, I opened a piece of correspondence that was in my ministerial folder and was struck by a letter from a Member from Sinn Féin. I will not embarrass the Member, but the letter asked what assurance I could give to someone who contacted them about their ability to exit under the voluntary exit scheme. I asked, "Are you serious? Are you having a laugh? Do you not realise the reason why there is uncertainty with the voluntary exit scheme is because of the failure to progress the Stormont House Agreement?" It is absolutely staggering that people are not joining up the dots and making those types of connections.

Corporation tax is already disappearing off into the distance. That was going to transform the economy of Northern Ireland and create many, many new jobs. For sure, there would have been some very difficult decisions about how we would resource it to invest in the other

drivers, but we are nowhere close to even having those types of discussions, and being able to get to those points is slipping further and further into the future, if ever. Frankly, if our budgets unravel any further, the notion of the devolution of corporation tax will not be tenable. That is another consequence that we are facing up to.

Perhaps most bizarrely of all, given the nature of the parties that signed the petition of concern — again, that is a further example of its abuse — is the potential unravelling of these political institutions. To be very clear, once we hit the Budget figures that we are contemplating or once we are in a situation that the Civil Service begins to put in place a Budget over the head of politicians, devolution itself will be in crisis. I cannot predict how different parties will react to that situation. Similarly, we could see a situation in which some powers of the Assembly on the administration of welfare are taken back to Westminster as it essentially imposes welfare reform over our heads. So, for the first time, we will see a reversal of devolution. That will be against the grain of what is happening elsewhere in the UK, which is a desire to see more devolution. In Northern Ireland, devolution could go into reverse. That will begin to have implications for the institutions, and if the institutions become unsustainable, that will call into question the Good Friday Agreement itself.

A remark was made about the different arrangements that were put in place for the devolution of policing and justice. Those were very discrete interventions that were necessary to ensure that there was community confidence in the devolution of policing and justice, which built on the Good Friday Agreement. What we are talking about here is a fundamental challenge that undermines the Good Friday Agreement and rips the heart out of it. If there is no functioning Executive and Assembly, there is no Good Friday Agreement. That is where people are intent on taking us based on the logic of what they are doing. I cannot get my head around the fact that parties that claim to be pro-agreement are intent on taking that particular direction of travel. I just cannot understand it at all. When the petition of concern was lodged on Friday, it was the seventeenth anniversary of the referendum in which 71% of the people of Northern Ireland put their faith in a different future. That future is now having its heart ripped out.

There are fundamental points. I made the point about why we are in danger of breaching the Good Friday Agreement, and I referenced the principle of consent and how people are

somehow pretending that what that means in practice somehow does not pertain when it comes to welfare reform.

The other aspect relates to power-sharing itself. We have a coalition Government, which is a mandatory coalition. Some of us want to change it and have a voluntary coalition and an opposition, which is a shout-out to Mr McCallister in case he raises the point later. That is an ambition for change which is, again, consistent with the agreement. However, for power-sharing to work in any society, whether it is in Northern Ireland or anywhere else in the world, we have to see willingness on the part of parties to accommodate one another, to have a sense of give and take, a willingness to compromise and a willingness to act in a rational manner. At present, we are in danger of parties not being willing to govern Northern Ireland. They are simply setting their face against any sense of responsible decision-making. We are not here to have a discussion about the nature of any compromise that we would fashion; it is about whether we ever have a compromise at all. People seem to be determined not to have that.

5.45 pm

That brings me to the issue of negotiations, picking up on Dr McDonnell's point that certain parties have acted honourably on the issue of talks. I will not go into the concept of the Assembly acting in an honest manner; I will let that one hang for now. The approach that has been taken to negotiations by the SDLP and Sinn Féin has been anything but honourable. We have had endless negotiation around welfare reform for the best part of three years, and today we hear that people are being bounced on the issue, that it is far too soon, that negotiations have not really started or that we can do it so much better. The latest one from the SDLP is that it is committed to having mature and — wait for it — responsible discussions around these issues. That ship sailed a long time ago. It closed, essentially, with the Stormont Castle Agreement and the Stormont House Agreement, which five parties signed up to. I was there, and five parties signed up to the Stormont Castle Agreement. Let us be very clear about that: there were no ifs, buts or conditionality in the room when the five parties, by themselves, made the Stormont Castle Agreement. All five parties were very clear about what they were signing up to do. The fact is that parties have wretched on the agreement that was made and they have gone back, for various political calculations, and changed their mind, leaving us in major

difficulties. That applies as much to the SDLP as to Sinn Féin, although they breached their commitments to the Stormont Castle Agreement at different paces.

When I refer to Stormont Castle, I am referring to the deal on welfare. Parties had different approaches to the Stormont House Agreement, and people nuanced how they responded to that agreement in different ways. Some were more fulsome in their support, notably Sinn Féin, and some, including the SDLP, were more conditional, to be fair to them in that regard. However, there was no conditionality around the Stormont Castle Agreement: everyone was very clear about what they were doing because the finances were at the heart of that agreement. The headroom for finances was central to having confidence among the five parties to move on. The notion that someone could say that they were signing up to it in principle does not wash one bit. I was there. I saw what happened, and that is a rewriting of history.

It may well be fine for the SDLP to make the argument that it was seeking to propose amendments to improve the Stormont Castle Agreement. Again, however, any amendments it tabled that sought to change it ran contrary to what it had agreed to as a political party. Indeed, the only parties with any legitimacy in proposing amendments at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage were the parties outside the Executive. The amendments may have been ill thought out and may have been folly in many respects, but they had a perfect entitlement, as parties, to put them forward and have them tested. The SDLP, frankly, was trying to have it both ways, proposing amendments after it had signed up to the agreement that the Minister was trying to put through the Assembly at that time.

Even if we grant the SDLP grace today and say that it had the scope to table those amendments, it tried to do so and failed. They were blocked by a petition of concern, which, ironically, is what they are using today to block the Bill's Final Stage. They cannot really complain about the use of the petition of concern back then given that they are using it today to frustrate any progress. Even if those amendments were unsuccessful, all five parties in the Executive, as parties to the Stormont Castle Agreement, should be giving their assent to the Bill's Final Stage today. That is what they committed to doing, and that is where their duty lies in this respect.

It gets worse in terms of the bad faith around negotiations. Last week, there were productive

discussions around the table in Stormont House between the five parties. I do not know what is going on in the SDLP — people are speculating — but Alasdair McDonnell and Fearghal McKinney were at the table, seeking to negotiate in good faith. That is certainly how I picked it up. Other people were concerned that the rest of the party was not there; the other 20 wings of the party were not at the table, giving their view at that time, which should have given us a certain health warning. As recently as Friday morning, I left the room with the impression that the SDLP was still wishing to discuss the issue, even at the eleventh hour, when negotiations should have long since closed. I cannot get my head around how, within a matter of hours, they were proclaiming that they had signed a petition of concern and that, essentially, negotiations were over. Something happened behind closed doors in that intervening period. I believe that Dr McDonnell was, at that time, sincere about trying to find an agreement, but, within a matter of hours, he seemed to have been overruled by the rest of his party, which I thought was in favour of the Good Friday Agreement.

Dr McDonnell: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Yes.

Dr McDonnell: Does the Member accept that no concessions or improvements were available on anything that we were negotiating for in good faith? We put issues, including a prosperity process and other things, to you and others, but there was no progress or comeback on any of them. Neither was there any comfort on the advances that we sought on the Bill. Frankly, it is a bit mischievous of you to make the suggestions that you make. We negotiated in good faith. We put our needs on the table, but they were not met.

Dr Farry: Let me be very clear to the Member in setting this out: my party acknowledged that there was a point to be made about what the Member terms the "prosperity process". We recognised that we needed to have a further discussion about what economic interventions we can make to build on our existing economic strategy, Programme for Government and economic pact, particularly looking ahead to corporation tax and changes in the nature of devolution across these islands. To be perfectly frank and brutal about it, beyond a slogan, we did not hear in those discussions any substance from the SDLP as to what its prosperity pact actually meant. If anything, it was me, David Ford and a few others, including Arlene Foster and Peter Robinson, who actually

put meat on the bones of what the Member was talking about.

Furthermore, it is a matter of fact that, on Friday, discussions were happening between the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Civil Service about putting together a proposal in relation to a prosperity panel for Northern Ireland. The notion that, somehow, no one was listening to the SDLP is far from reality. They were being listened to. People were working with them, and people were being generous to them in trying to find some degree of coherence to what was being said to the other parties. Papers were being put together to put to the party at the selfsame time as its members were behind closed doors, fighting amongst themselves and deciding to put a dagger through devolution and put the institutions in jeopardy. That is what the record shows.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Yes.

Mr Wilson: Does the Member accept that, in what was the speech by one of the main SDLP members on the issue not so long ago, the prosperity pact was not mentioned? All that was mentioned was the party's total opposition to the Bill. Even then, no suggestions were put forward as to how the Bill could be made. They are now trying to throw a smokescreen up that, somehow or other, a prosperity pact would have got the SDLP on board. That clearly is not true.

Dr Farry: In some senses, that neatly brings me to my closing point. We —

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Dr Farry: Yes.

We have heard a lot about needing more time for negotiations and how negotiations have not really started. I am afraid that, for a lot of us, this comes across as being an excuse to avoid taking a difficult decision. Any excuse is rattled out, the latest one being that we now have the Scottish nationalists in an even stronger position in Westminster and they will be negotiating for something and maybe we should hang on to see what comes from that. That may be all well and good, and, frankly, we should be part of those discussions, but that need not happen to the mutual exclusion of us passing the Final Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill this evening.

We have a duty to progress this legislation because the consequences of us not doing so are so dramatic. I am stunned that people do not appreciate the gravity of what is about to unfold if this legislation does not go through. We can pass it tonight and progress welfare reform and still continue with the discussions to explore what else happens. The welfare reform that we are about to pass in Northern Ireland is a better deal than already applies in Scotland. They do not even have welfare powers. That is something that is up for discussion, and, indeed, there may be a certain reticence about devolving those types of powers, given the implications of people going off on solo runs on these issues. Let us have that discussion with Scotland, but let us not wait for that to do our duty on welfare reform.

Our duty as a Government and an Assembly is to act for the common good of all the people of Northern Ireland and to protect them, including the most vulnerable, from the fate that awaits them either through full-blown Tory cuts, which three parties are committed to voting for tonight — they are actively for Tory cuts — or through deeper cuts in public spending, which will see services cut even further. We already have difficulties with our public spending. People are already suffering. We well know the effect of the cuts. Indeed, the Members who are actually voting for more cuts tonight are the ones who often complain the loudest about the impact of those cuts.

We are going to see even steeper cuts. Those cuts will bite very much on those who are most vulnerable. They are the people who depend on the health service. Whenever operations are postponed or never happen and whenever we cut public health, we see that that has the biggest impact on those who are living in deprivation and who do not get the support, for example, to change their lifestyle to make them more sustainable. Cuts are going to be made to early years education when we are trying to break through intergenerational educational disadvantage, which again is about giving people opportunities. When I end up having to have an impact through job schemes, employment programmes and places at further education colleges and in higher education, that is about giving people a chance to move out of poverty and to have a stake in society. If we look at what David Ford does in Justice, we see that people are dependent on legal aid and on the police being around to give them protection when they are vulnerable. All those things are going to be in jeopardy if we end up pursuing this agenda of more and more cuts. All those cuts will bite on people.

It is not just about cuts. It is about the lost opportunity costs of transforming the economy. If we want to go back to talking about the prosperity process, we find that it involves investing resources in economic drivers. It means spending more money on skills. It means investing in our infrastructure. It means building more office space. It means mobilising all the levers that are there to transform our economy. If we have less money, there is less money to spend on those levers. Job opportunities will be compromised as well. The cost is there and clear to everyone. When we vote tonight, people should be in no doubt about the consequences politically, financially and directly for people.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: Last week, the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee had the chief executive and chairman of Invest Northern Ireland giving evidence. They talked about the 18,000 new jobs for Northern Ireland, the huge investment that there has been in getting companies to come here, the wealth that has been created because of that employment, and the importance of setting the rate, date and time for corporation tax. All that is vital to the Northern Ireland economy.

I listened to the leader of the SDLP talk about jobs being created by the two Governments, although I do not know why the Irish Government would have anything to do with job creation here anyway. Those people also said that, when they go away internationally, they know that political stability is absolutely vital to creating jobs in Northern Ireland. The Member already articulated that serious people were to be coming here this week and that that has been jeopardised by the political inertia here. The message that will go out to Northern Ireland plc and offshore will totally undermine all the good work that is being done by Invest Northern Ireland and Tourism Ireland internationally to try to sell this place as a serious place to invest.

Dr Farry: I agree very much with what the Member said. The stark reality is that political stability is fundamental to creating a good investment location, so the point makes itself. With that, I will conclude.

Mr O'Dowd: When I last spoke on welfare, which was, I think, at Consideration Stage of the welfare Bill, I said that, following the Stormont House Agreement and the agreement

that we made there, we had an opportunity to move forward on a stable platform, both politically and financially. At that time, I outlined that, seven or eight years ago, when the Executive were reformed and the agreements were in place after St Andrews and the Good Friday Agreement, no one would have guessed that the issue that would bring the Executive and the Assembly to the brink would be an issue like welfare. We may have speculated that it might be an armed group of some type; it might be distrust between the political parties; or it might be a breakdown in civic society over issues from flags to whatever. No one would have speculated at that time that the issue that would bring the Executive and the Assembly to the brink would be welfare.

6.00 pm

Following the Stormont House Agreement and those negotiations, I had hoped that we had reached an agreement that would have been a significant compromise on everyone's behalf but would have given us the stability to deliver change and continued change and stability to our society. So why are we here today? Why are we once again perhaps on the brink of the political collapse of these institutions and budgetary uncertainty? Why are we here today? I emphasise "today", because, despite claims that we have to pass this legislation today, I will argue the opposite. We do not have to pass this legislation today. Nothing in statute states that the process to allow the Finance Minister to prepare her papers for the final Budget Bill for the end of July has to start today. There is nothing to stop it starting tomorrow, the next day or, indeed, next week. So why did parties or, in this case, the DUP decide to bring this to a head? There have been three years of at times frustrating negotiations on welfare, there has been stalemate and dispute, and there have been heated arguments, even around the Executive table, but, over those three years, we made progress.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will let you in in a minute. We made progress to the point at which the five political parties were able to reach agreement in the Stormont Castle agreement. That goes to show that where there is a will, there is a way to solve problems. If the sponsoring Minister continues with the Bill to a vote, options will be closed down and eroded, and we will be left in the scenario that some have painted today on future political stability and our financial position. I will give way to Mr Wilson.

Mr Wilson: Does the Member accept that, first, there are financial implications with not proceeding with welfare reform, and, secondly, the Finance Minister has to bring the final part of this year's Budget to the Assembly in June so that it is approved by the end of July for Departments to have money to spend? To suggest, therefore, that she and the Minister for Social Development could have sat back on their hands and done nothing is simply ludicrous. She could not have a Budget and know for certain what money she had in the Budget unless welfare reform had been resolved and all the consequences of that, including the additional money from the Stormont House Agreement, were in place.

Mr O'Dowd: I certainly would not suggest for one moment that any of our Ministers, including me, should be sitting on their hands doing nothing. At a macro and micro level, I accept that there are implications for not moving forward a welfare Bill, but I think that there is greater opportunity in moving forward on an agreed welfare Bill than on a welfare Bill that is doomed to failure.

The Finance Minister does have time. In your tenure in office, you proved that, because I understand that, in June 2012, you moved the Budget Bill through accelerated passage.

Mr Wilson: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr O'Dowd: I think that you are agreeing with me. That proves the point. I ask the question again: why are we here today? Why was the decision taken to end negotiations on the way forward? I think that it was around 9 or 10 March that Sinn Féin publicly indicated that it could not support the Welfare Reform Bill because of the schemes of management that had been presented to us. A number of weeks before that, we had been open and frank in our discussions with the DUP that, in our opinion, the schemes that were being presented to us did not honour the letter and the principle of the Stormont House Agreement. So, we did not have to reach 9 or 10 March, which is when we publicly came out against the Bill. However, in the six to eight weeks following that, we had an opportunity for serious negotiations. I accept that, for political parties, a general election takes up significant time. You are never sure which Government will be returned, but why, after the Tories were returned, was there not more energy and enthusiasm from some quarters to resolve this issue? Are we witnessing a choreographed plan? Has the DUP, or elements in the DUP — we have heard about such elements in other political parties —

decided to hand back welfare to the Westminster Government? That is a huge mistake, both for the administration of government here and for the protection of — this is a well-used term — "the most vulnerable in our society". It is a huge mistake.

Let us go back to the start of this journey. In 2011, it was mooted that there was to be a radical "reform", which was the term used, of welfare, but this is not driven by reform. All processes and procedures should and can be reformed over time. This was driven by a £4 billion cut to the welfare budget. That is what drove the Welfare Reform Bill. It was not about ensuring that, through universal credit, many more households would be better off or about it making more sense to have one computer system to deliver benefits to citizens, which does make sense. It was driven by £4 billion of cuts. When the Bill was presented to the Executive, we made it quite clear that, as presented, it was completely and utterly unacceptable to us. Every time I think about these debates, the term that rings in my mind is "parity". We were told, time and again, that we could not move away from parity; that parity between here and Britain could not be broken; and that, if welfare reform was being delivered in Britain in this manner, we had to deliver it here in the same manner. We said, "No, we will not do it". We accepted the principle of universal credit as a credible way forward for the delivery of benefits to citizens, but, even within that, there had to be changes.

A phrase that I have used in the Chamber before is that success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan. We are now told that the changes to the Welfare Reform Bill, negotiated with the London Government, were due solely to the negotiating skills of the DUP. Why did those negotiations start? In 2011, we were told at the Executive table that there had to be parity; that the Bill presented to Westminster had to be the Bill presented to the Assembly; and that it had to be delivered in exactly the same way. So, why did negotiations between the Executive parties and the Westminster Government start? I will tell you: we said that we would not deliver welfare reform.

I do not mind who claims that they won concessions, mitigations or the better delivery of services, but let us be honest about why they were delivered. I have to say that I enjoy watching Mr Wilson delivering speeches in the Chamber. He is very animated and passionate, and he does so with some gusto. When the subcommittee of the Executive to discuss welfare reform was formed, I sat on it, along with several other members. When we raised

the issues of the social fund, rates, the bedroom tax, fortnightly and split payments, Mr Wilson displayed his usual gusto, enthusiasm and, at times, brashness in telling us that we were economically illiterate and could not govern because we could not take hard decisions. He told Sinn Féin that it could not break parity. Yet, today, Mr Wilson stood in front of us all with his usual gusto and told us that he delivered the social fund, rate relief, bedroom tax reform, and fortnightly and split payments. I am sorry, but history says differently. He led the opposition to those measures. In fairness to him, at least he comes out and is honest about this — he supports welfare reform.

He supports the intent of the policy and has no difficulty — perhaps he has some difficulty — with its outworkings. There are others who hide behind this statement: we have to do it. We have to make the hard choices. We do have to make hard choices, but politics is always about options. You always have an option in politics, and it is up to individual Members and parties to make decisions about where they want to go. If there are people hiding behind that statement who really support welfare reform, I think that they have a duty to come out front and centre and support it.

I listened to Paula Bradley's contribution — she was one of the earliest contributors to the debate — in which she said everything except "Get on your bike and find a job". Everything but. She referred to some of the research that she had apparently carried out on television programmes about benefits claimants. My advice to anybody watching any of those programmes is to turn them off. They are a load of nonsense. If you want to know what life is like for benefits claimants, as political and elected representatives you should already know: they are your constituents. They make up quite a significant proportion of many of our constituencies, and not just various nationalist and republican areas, as has been suggested at times.

Welfare covers many aspects of our lives, both for the working poor and for those who are not working for a variety of reasons. Let me make it clear that I firmly believe that it is the duty of every citizen who can work, and who can find work, to work. The fact of the matter, however, is that it is not as simple as that, because there are high levels of both physical and mental disability in our society. There are high levels of unemployment because there are many areas in which there are no jobs. Perhaps we should follow Ms Bradley's message — she did not say it, but she did not fall far short of saying

it — of "Get on your bike, and you will find it". However, there is another responsibility in that equation, and it is the responsibility of government to create an environment in which meaningful, well-paid employment flourishes. That is our duty. It is our job, and it is what we are about, and we have had some success. The previous contributor outlined the role of Invest NI and others in doing that, but we need to do more of it. We need to create job opportunities for people and encourage people who can work to work.

Let us throw out the idea, which is in the ether of the debate, that the majority of welfare claimants are doing it simply because that is what they do. That is not my experience. Perhaps I live in a different world, and those who come into my constituency office are different from those who go into other constituency offices. I am proud to say that I have never watched 'Benefits Street' or some of the other rubbish that is broadcast, but I have seen enough commentary on it to know that it is there for a purpose: to downgrade those people who claim benefits.

Let us look at what benefits are and what the welfare system involves. Working family tax credit, although I accept that it is out of our control, is a benefit. Child benefit falls under welfare. Are we saying that we should cut that? Because the Tories are coming after it. Pensions fall under benefits and, although the Tories have said that they will not cut them, if they are looking for £12 billion of savings in the welfare system, they may well have to go after pensions. Another area is housing benefit, including for those who are working. You can be in a job, go out and be productive, delivering services and changes for our society — indeed, many of our public-sector workers fall into that category — and still be entitled to housing benefit. Let us be very careful in our mindset about the way in which we categorise people who are claiming benefits, because there is a wide-ranging group of citizens who claim them.

6.15 pm

The claim that you are not fit for government unless you are prepared to make hard decisions is always used in the context of how you cut services to the working poor, the poor, the disabled and those without a voice. You never hear it being used in the context of, "We had to make a hard decision; we had to introduce a mansion tax". You never hear it being used in the context of, "We had to make the hard decision: we had to tax the bankers more". You never hear it in the context of, "We had to make that hard decision: we had to

increase the level of taxes paid by the highest earners in society". You only hear it in the context of debates like this, when it is about welfare or some other element that affects ordinary citizens. Well, you have to make hard decisions if you are in government.

I know about making hard decisions in government. I have had to rationalise the schools estate. Each and every decision to close, rationalise or amalgamate a school has been very hard, and some have been opposed by many in the Chamber. So, do not tell me that being in government is about making hard decisions. I know about making hard decisions, and I am prepared to continue to make those hard decisions.

Do not paint us into a corner by saying, "You are not really suitable for government unless you are prepared to further cut and restrict the quality of life of somebody who is on benefits, whether it is the working poor, disabled children or adults or the long-term sick". That is not making hard decisions in government. To me, that is an easy decision for some. They are quite willing to make those sorts of decisions moving forward. Let us cut out the nonsense about us not being willing to make hard decisions.

People say that we are economically illiterate. Those who ran the economy for generations and who claimed to be the economic masters caused the economic crash. Those who now sit back and benefit from the economic crash in terms of tens of billions of pounds of government interventions are the ones who caused the economic crash. No one on benefits, whether they be working poor or not working, caused the economic crash. None of them were sitting round the board tables making the decisions around the further greed that led to the economic downfall. You have to decide why you are in government, why you are an elected representative and what you want to achieve.

We have heard much over the last few days and months — and the figure goes up and down — about how much the Conservative Government are fining the Executive. We are being told that it is £2 million a week at this stage. Let us look at what we are spending that £2 million a week on. The British Government are using the theory that we are spending £2 million a week more on benefits than we should be spending, and so they are going to take that off our block grant. People are saying that that money is lost and that there should be hip operations, more social housing, more schools and more teachers. Let us not blame people on

benefits for the lack of hip operations, the lack of schools and us having less social housing. That is not their fault. The decision on austerity has been taken elsewhere.

Let us look at the £2 million that is going out to benefit recipients, who are your constituents and the people who rely on you to represent them. It is not going on extravagant lifestyles; it is going on food, heating, rent and clothes. It is being spent in the shops in your area. It is being spent in the local economy. It is not being wasted. You may disagree with how it is being spent, but it is not being wasted. So, let us not continue with the myth that £2 million is being wasted. The £2 million is going into the purses and wallets of citizens out there. Carers, people with disabilities and the long-term sick are receiving that money and are using it to survive.

They are the people who are at the centre of the debate.

I listened carefully to Mr Nesbitt's contribution, and he quoted Charles Dickens:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times".

It brought back to me a comment made by a group of senior economists in Britain after George Osborne's October Budget. They said that, if he delivers the cuts, which he has indicated that he will, we will go back to levels of poverty not seen since Dickensian times. Mr Nesbitt did not use that quote, but that is what was quoted. Such was the level of concern at that time that even George Osborne, the champion of austerity and the champion of withdrawing the state from citizens, had to rethink his plans, temporarily anyhow. Ahead of the elections, he announced that they are going to further cut public spending by £25 billion, which may bring us even further into Dickensian levels of poverty.

Mr Nesbitt went on to make another comment. He talked about maps, and he said that, if you outline the map of where the conflict raged and overlap it with a map of where most citizens have mental health and well-being problems, they match. There is a third map that you can lie over the top of that, and that is the map of social deprivation. There were those, such as Mr Farry, who expressed concerns about the future of the Good Friday Agreement. The Good Friday Agreement was about delivering change for everyone, and certainly it was about delivering change and hope to those communities that had suffered worst as a result of the conflict. The conflict, by and large, was

not fought in the leafy suburbs; it was fought out in areas of high social deprivation. Those are the same areas that, if we were foolish enough to pass the current Welfare Reform Bill, the current guidance and other materials that go with it, will be affected by welfare reform cuts. I am an avid supporter of the Good Friday Agreement, but it has to deliver for those who suffered the most from the conflict: those citizens who lived in the areas of deprivation. That is where we have to make the changes.

We are debating welfare reform, but it is only a chapter in the book. The book is called 'Austerity', and they are about to throw the book at us. The Conservative Government are about to throw that book at us with all the muster that they can gather. We will see further cuts not only to benefits for the working poor and the disabled but to education, health, road services, Minister Farry's Department etc coming at us because that is the strategy ahead.

What can we do about it? Here we are, for want of a better term, a regional Assembly. The Westminster Government have been elected. I respect their mandate. They were duly elected and they have a mandate, but do they have a mandate to ignore the will of the devolved institutions? Scotland proves that they do not. Scotland has rejected the Conservative Government and the Conservative-lite alternative of Labour, and they have said, "No, we are not going down the austerity route. We are sending back MPs who are totally opposed to that". The Welsh Administration, too, have registered their opposition to it, and Mr Attwood outlined some of the measures they have taken.

Every one of the parties, as far as I am aware, who stood in the general election, apart from the Conservatives, went knocking on doors and said, "We are here to represent you. We are opposed to further cuts. We want to stand up for you. In fact, we are going to go back to Westminster's power brokers and we are going to help to form the next Government because we will stop them doing what they are going to do".

The first opportunity they have of standing up to them, they do the opposite. At a very crucial stage in the development of George Osborne's 8 July statement and at the very crucial stage of the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Executive's opposition to further Tory austerity, you are actually sending out a signal to them saying, "We are OK with this. We will deliver that for you. You won't have any trouble from us". Now is the time for us to be standing together. Here am I, an Irish republican,

looking to Scotland and Wales for inspiration. Where does the Ulster-Scot unionist stand on that? Where does the Ulster-Scot unionist, who prides themselves on their resolute stubbornness to stand up for what they believe in, stand on that? Let us be clear about this: the rebellious Scots have achieved more in the last six months from the British Government than ye have achieved over this last 50 years being loyal to them. So let us learn a lesson from the rebellious Scots; let us learn a lesson from them and stand with them and the Welsh to ensure that George Osborne, David Cameron and others get a very clear message that, while we respect their mandate, they have no mandate to deliver what they are proposing to do to our public services, to our government and to our people.

People refer to that and say that you will go back and hand out the begging bowl. I find that very, very demeaning, because the truth of the matter is this: we all pay taxes in one shape or another — some more, some less, some whatever it may be. Perhaps there are few out there who should be paying a lot more. We all pay taxes, and I am talking about the general public — people in this room. We send money to the Treasury; we do not go with a begging bowl looking for investment back. We want investment in our society; we want investment to deliver the changes that we need to build a stable society moving forward. People who refer to that as a begging-bowl mentality are doing a great disservice to everyone going forward.

Folks, I think that there is still an opportunity for another option here. I call on the Minister not to move the debate to a vote, because if you move the debate to a vote, you are cutting out numerous options available to the Assembly, the Executive and this society. Be under no illusions — I doubt that you are under any illusions — that the Bill will fall. If your plan is for the Bill to fall and to hand it over to the Conservatives, I also think that that is a mistake. Let us take the time, whether it is hours, days or weeks — whatever we have — to get an agreed welfare Bill moving forward and to work along with the other Administrations in these islands to secure a better and more prosperous future for us all.

Mr Allister: At the outset, I join in the common accord of wishing the First Minister a speedy recovery and of expressing to the Robinson family our thoughts at this distressing time.

What we are witnessing here today is the fact that the chickens are coming home to roost in the failure of mandatory coalition. For years, it

has been promised to us as the panacea of good government and that it is the essential and only workable system of government. Yet today, it stands utterly exposed as that which reeks of failure. It is a collective failure of all the parties that support and sustain that unworkable system of government. Of course, as a diversion from that, the blame game has been in full swing today. One side blames the other. I suppose that, in moving the Bill today, the DUP wants to stop the music while the blame parcel rests on the lap of Sinn Féin, and so, largely, it does. One side wants simply to blame the other, instead of anyone in the House facing up to the reality that it is the system of government that has failed. The system that they continue to sustain is failing before our very eyes.

6.30 pm

It is the attempt to avoid that reality that has given rise to much of the rhetoric of today. Instead of this House facing up to the fact that a system that has been available and in operation for 17 years is fast coming to the inevitable point of implosion, they want to blame everything but the system and blame the parties within the system. It is the system that guarantees the logjam, and it is the system that guarantees the mutual vetoes, which have brought us to this point. Therefore, the inescapable conclusion is that this is a colossal, seismic and defining failure of the system. That is the point, and unless and until this House grasps it, we will continue to lurch from crisis to crisis.

Of course, this has come against a backdrop of great deception. The deception, for example, that all this was sorted after long nights and long days. Mr Attwood was talking to us about, I think, the 40 days and 40 nights that were looming ahead of us. It was something like that, maybe more, that led to that great moment and great breakthrough of the Stormont House Agreement. The new dawn had arrived. The threat that was crippling the Executive over welfare reform had been removed. All had been resolved, and the first party out of the traps to endorse the Stormont House Agreement was Sinn Féin. Indeed, Mr Martin McGuinness told us it was a "remarkable achievement" and a "fresh start". He said:

"And it is a fresh start we need to seize with both hands".

The same hands, on top of everything else that they are responsible for, that since have torn to shreds the Stormont House Agreement. That

same party came to this House at the Consideration Stage of this same Bill and repudiated the consistent — one has to concede it is consistent — opposition of the SDLP and joined the DUP and others to sustain this very Bill that, tonight, they are going to kill.

They had attained a remarkable achievement. They had made a fresh start. The fresh start did not last very long, because now they tell us that it was a false start. How they get themselves to that position is beyond the comprehension of most of us. Maybe it was the financial illiteracy that seems to plague them from time to time. Maybe they did think that £564 million was really the same as £1.5 billion, but they said that they had got a fresh start and made a remarkable achievement and that no one, now or in the future, was going to be less well off despite having a fraction of what it would take to ensure that. But, it was a fresh start. It was a remarkable achievement, whether or not, as I said, it was its notorious financial illiteracy at work.

Finally, the penny dropped, whether it was that or it was the old Sinn Féin trick in negotiations of extracting what you can at any given point, you pocket what you have got, and you then come back for more. Has that not been the story of the last 20 years of what is called the peace process? Of course it has, and maybe it was encouraged in that view by some of the things that Mr O'Dowd talked about. It had forced the DUP from a parity position into negotiating for a lavish £564 million uplift by raiding the block grant to sustain welfare. Maybe it was encouraged to believe that, with a little more push, pocketing what it had got and bringing it back to the edge, it would get more. Maybe, this time, it has just pushed too far. We will see.

Maybe it is just Sinn Féin advancing the political agenda that lies at the heart of everything that it does, because this party of Sinn Féin is not in government in Northern Ireland to give us good government and to make Northern Ireland work. This is a party that is quite happy to bankrupt Northern Ireland and to be self-fulfilling in its affirmation that Northern Ireland is a failure. How better to do it financially than to bankrupt it? That may well be the guiding principle that brings it to this point, but, whatever it is, we are at a point of reality check. It is a reality check that shows the welfare reform project in free fall and now hurtling towards irredeemable budgetary crisis.

It is quite clear that, within days and weeks, the budgetary arrangements necessary to govern in this part of the United Kingdom will not be

possible as a consequence of the killing of this Bill tonight. The free fall of welfare reform and the inevitable budgetary failure that is coming at us very fast raises fundamental questions about the sustainability and even the desirability of these institutions. What is a devolved Assembly and institution about if it is not about settling the budgetary issues in a manner where the people whom it governs can be governed effectively and efficiently? It is the very core of what devolution is about, and, if, as the Finance Minister has warned, we are hurtling towards the unattainability of a balanced Budget and that tonight will hasten that day, what is the purpose and the point of this institution if we cannot even settle a Budget? If you cannot settle a Budget, you cannot govern. It is as simple and as elementary as that.

What should happen? Yes, the intransigence of those who have brought us to this point should lead to the natural corollary of the repatriation of welfare powers back to Westminster. That should be an elementary consequential step of killing this Bill. More than that, if, in the killing of this Bill, we kill a Budget for this House, what is left?

Why would you not then repatriate all the executive powers of a neutered Executive — neutered of finance and incapable of governing?

Some might hold up their hands and say, "Oh, but that would be the end of devolution". It does not have to be. There is more to devolution than executive power. The devolution that we have has three essential component and active parts: legislative devolution, such as we are exercising now in this debate on a Bill; the scrutiny powers of the Committees; and the executive functions — or malfunctions — that the Executive are largely failing to exercise adequately. If you lose one, do you have to lose all three? It is time we thought laterally and discovered that you do not. Major critic though I am of these institutions, I concede that in its legislative functions the Assembly has performed reasonably adequately and in its scrutiny functions it has performed quite adequately and done some good work. The one area where it fails and where "failure" is writ large is in its exercise of executive functions.

If the worst comes to the worst and we hurtle to the point where the Executive are functionless and pointless, it does not have to mean the end of all aspects of the institutions. Why could you not still have legislative and scrutiny powers as the default position? If and when the politicians in the House wake up to the reality that

mandatory coalition has not worked and will never work and that there therefore has to be a better way, such as a coalition of the willing and an opposition, they can repatriate executive functions. Until they do, are we really going to say to the people of Northern Ireland, "All we can offer you is the perpetual dysfunction and perpetual failure of this Stormont Executive"? Better by far to say, "We will give you the scrutiny that a legislative assembly affords. We will give you the legislative functions of a legislative assembly". That will always be the default position in the devolution settlement. Unless and until we can learn from the processes and are ready to embrace the form of executive devolution that would work, namely voluntary coalition and an opposition, it is legislative devolution and the scrutiny powers. You have failed in the delivery of the rest.

Who in the House could stand on their feet to say that the Executive have done anything but fail in the delivery of their executive functions? Tonight, that is indisputably written on the walls of the House — failure on welfare reform, hurtling us to budgetary failure. There is a choice coming, and it is a reassessment and a recognition that it is the system of executive devolution that has failed. The reassessment requires a recognition and a grasping of the fact that we need not cling to a failed form of executive devolution when there is an attainable form. Those who are willing to agree on issues and command the requisite majority govern, whoever they are. Those who cannot and will not form the opposition. You get a Government that works, and, if it collapses, you go back to the default of legislative and scrutiny devolution. When the Executive finally implode, that may well look like a more attractive option than some ever want to contemplate. The sooner those who cling to the coat-tails of the failure of the Executive waken up to the fact that it is not working and is not going to work, the better for us all.

6.45 pm

Mr Agnew: It is my first opportunity to wish Mr Peter Robinson well and hope for his full recovery. It is important at times like this that we separate the politics from the person. I have seen unkind comments about Mr Robinson on social media, and I say to those making them — some of whom, I know, are supporters of my party — that the time to knock a politician is when they are on their feet making political speeches and debates and standing as a politician. Mr Robinson is no different from any of us: he is vulnerable to illness, and, at this difficult time, we recognise

the man as a person and pass sympathy to him and his family.

My persistent stance throughout the welfare reform debate has been that the figures do not add up. I first made the point when Sinn Féin claimed that, under the deal agreed at Stormont House, no one would be worse off. I made the point that that could not be the case, because, whatever figure we used, whether it was NICVA's figure of £250 million or the previous Social Development Minister's figure of £120 million, that was the scale of the cuts, and the mitigation was £90 million. Those sums can never be made to work. Nothing has changed in the mitigation measures since March, when the Final Stage of the Bill was first to come to the Assembly, which is why the Green Party is still opposed to the Bill and the proposals put forward around it. We have had some information from the Social Development Minister on who will not be worse off under the proposed mitigation measures that have been agreed. However, I cannot even have confidence in those, in that, whilst I appreciate the detail that has been given about the who, what has not been made public is how much each of those categories will receive.

I know that the Minister's predecessor was very dismissive of the NICVA report, which was produced on their behalf by the University of Sheffield. It laid out the figures and laid out by how much each benefit would be cut and the direct impact on Northern Ireland. It did not just give the blanket £250 million; it gave its component parts. We have yet to see a refutation of those figures. I often quote the two figures of £120 million and £250 million because I cannot say which is accurate, but I have yet to see from the Department, the Minister or an official source of the Northern Ireland Executive the breakdown of their £120 million calculation. I have certainly not seen any evidence that £90 million per year would be sufficient to mitigate the cuts that are being made. If we accept that, if we went forward on the current proposals, there would be a shortfall in the mitigation — I can see no other conclusion that can be drawn — we have not seen the detail of who will be worse off.

We have seen who, it is proposed, will be protected, but we have not been given the detail of who is to be worse off. How can we judge today whether that is an acceptable consequence if we do not have that detail?

The Green Party has sought to be constructive throughout this process. At Consideration Stage, we brought forward more amendments than any other party. We made clear the areas

of the Bill that we would like to see improved. None of those amendments were passed. Indeed, they were blocked by the DUP and voted against by Sinn Féin, which, as it has been pointed out, at that point, was putting forward welfare reform and saying that the deal that had been reached at Stormont House should receive the Assembly's support.

Last week, when it was clear that this Bill was coming before the House again, the Green Party laid out key areas where we still wanted to see improvements. If we were to have this deadline today — others have debated whether it was a necessary or unnecessary deadline — and accepting that this Bill was coming forward again, we made clear where we needed to see movement: on increased funds for mitigation measures; no bedroom tax; protection of child disability payments and additions; and sanctions.

On increased funds, we have heard some who say that this is not realistic, possible or affordable. We have to bear in mind that the same parties have signed up to corporation tax reduction, which would see £300 million a year come out of the block grant. The same people who say that we cannot afford the so-called penalties, which, as I pointed out consistently, are not penalties but money going into the pockets of the poorest and most vulnerable in society and those who are on the lowest incomes, are saying that we cannot afford those cuts from the block grant. Indeed, the Alliance Party leader, David Ford, when attacking my party in his conference speech, said that we cannot afford his guesstimate of the figure of £200 million of cuts to public services, but, in the same speech, he said that we must progress the corporation tax cut, which would see a £300 million tax relief for big businesses. He says that we cannot afford £200 million — if we take his figure; £250 million if we take NICVA's figure; or £120 million if we take the DSD figure — to protect the sick, the poor and the most vulnerable in society. I made it clear then and will do so again that where my party's priorities lie is in protecting the most vulnerable and ensuring that the first duty of Government is to make sure that people are not driven into poverty, destitution, further hardship or to food banks, which we have seen an increasing need for under the Tory Government.

We hear boasts about the levels of foreign direct investment etc that have been brought into Northern Ireland under this Executive. As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I hear it time and time again. Well, in the lifetime of this Executive, the income gap between Northern Ireland and other

regions of the UK has increased. Yes, we have had limited growth, but so has everywhere else: it was called the financial recovery and it was global. In terms of what this Executive have delivered, the income gap between Northern Ireland and Great Britain has increased under this Executive. The great boon of foreign direct investment that was supposed to lift us out of poverty has certainly not achieved that in the term of this Executive, and I do not believe that it would be achieved if we reduced corporation tax and took a further £300 million a year out of the block grant voluntarily.

We can talk about cuts being imposed by the Tory Government. I certainly sympathise with anyone who challenges the Tory Government's austerity agenda, but the proposal to cut £300 million from our own block grant voluntarily is this Northern Ireland Executive, which I stand in opposition to, making their own austerity cuts voluntarily. They can blame no one and, indeed, asked for the consent of the Tory Government to do so.

In its five-point plan, the DUP made it very clear that the one issue that it was going to Westminster on was no bedroom tax. Yet, again, the Social Development Minister has confirmed, and we have seen it; the legislation brings in the powers for the implementation of the bedroom tax. Whilst the mitigation measures would protect some from its implementation, the Social Development Minister said today:

"I should develop a scheme that protects existing and future tenants from any reduction in housing benefits for their tenancies unless there is a significant change in their personal circumstances or they are offered suitable alternative accommodation."

In other words, as I have said during previous stages, he has made it clear today that, where alternative housing exists and where personal circumstances change, the bedroom tax will be implemented and people will be worse off under this legislation. I do not know how that is reconciled with the DUP's strong stance against the bedroom tax in the Westminster election. I certainly cannot reconcile it. Indeed, I cannot reconcile it with my meeting with the First Minister, who told me that there would be no bedroom tax. Again, the Minister has put it on public record today that, in certain circumstances, the bedroom tax will be applied and people will be worse off because of it.

Another issue that my party has consistently raised and sought amendments on at previous stages is the sanctions regime, which is

perhaps one of the most odious parts of the welfare cuts in GB and, indeed, here in Northern Ireland. It is worth remembering that we are debating the legislation today. It is not the Stormont House Agreement, the deals around it or the proposed mitigation measures. None of those are in the legislation, which remains virtually unchanged from the day that it came to the Assembly in October 2012. The legislation that we are debating would allow for an 18-month suspension of benefits as a penalty to claimants. For some, that would mean 18 months with no income whatsoever. We have talked about food banks, and that would mean people subsisting purely on the handouts of food banks with no protection from the state for 18 months. If you are unemployed or on disability benefits, you would see those benefits cut for 18 months. That will drive people to destitution and despair, and we have seen examples in Great Britain where it has driven people to their deaths. That is not something that my party can vote for. That is not something that my party could stand over.

We have seen some reassurance in the Social Development Minister's paper as to where mitigation measures would kick in for the disability additions for children. However, again, the figures to match that are absent, so we are left to trust in whether there will be full or partial mitigation. Indeed, we also do not know where we will be after three years.

As I said, a number of things have been debated. Some have touched on the legislation. We have also discussed the Stormont House Agreement and, indeed, the Stormont Castle agreement, which I was not party to and in which my party was not involved, the Budget and maybe something that has not been talked about so much but that is tied into all of this: the Programme for Government.

7.00 pm

It is clear that the Stormont House Agreement, the Budget and, to some extent, the Programme for Government are inseparable. These are agreements between the Executive parties as to how to move forward. You certainly cannot separate the Budget from the Stormont House Agreement, because it was predicated on what was agreed. I cannot explain why some people appeared to sign up to the Stormont House Agreement, and certainly signed up to the Budget, and then seemed to step back. I can say that the Green Party has been consistent in its opposition to the Stormont House Agreement.

Let us be clear; there was almost a sort of gratitude that the UK Government would let us introduce our own mitigation measures. I fail to understand that, because, first, welfare is devolved and, secondly, there was no extra money in our block grant out of which the mitigation fund was going to be taken. That was a decision that could have been taken by the Executive without including it in any Stormont House Agreement, tying it to corporation tax or to public sector redundancies: it was completely separate.

For that reason, I fail to understand those who say that if we do not pass the Bill today the Tory Government will implement the cuts and we will not have any mitigation measures. That is a decision for you in the Executive to make, because it is your Budget and block grant, for which you will seek agreement on how it should be spent. The Tories cannot say that you cannot put in those mitigation measures.

As was pointed out, in fact, the Scottish Government, which currently does not have power over welfare reform, still implemented their own mitigation when it came to the bedroom tax, to make sure that no one would be worse off. We still have those powers and it would still be our decision. Those who say that there will be no mitigation if welfare is taken over by the Government —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: I will give way in one second.

They say that because that is the course they intend to go down rather than the one they have to go down.

Mr Storey: I have listened to Members talking today about Nicola Sturgeon and what is going on in Scotland. Let us remind ourselves of the reality in Scotland. Back in 2014, when Nicola Sturgeon was the deputy leader of the Scottish National Party she said:

"There is no doubt that people in Scotland are paying a heavy price for Westminster decisions. But these figures show that by working closely with our Local Authority partners we have been able to provide support ... we will continue to do all we can to help. However, only an independent Scottish Parliament will give us the powers we need to scrap the bedroom tax."

Is it not time for Members in the House to realise what the real agenda is here and put the facts about what happens in Scotland rather

than create a smokescreen over the real situation?

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for his intervention, but it does not take away from my point that what we do with our Budget will be in our power. If we want to put in mitigation measures, whether they are for welfare cuts implemented here or implemented by the Tory Government, we can decide how we spend our block grant. How much that will be is decided by Westminster, but how we allocate it, and whether we choose to protect our most vulnerable, are decisions that will be made by the Executive, and the Budget has to be passed by the Assembly.

We are here today to debate the legislation. The first draft of the Bill came to us in October 2012, and my party sought to make amendments, as did the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists, to improve it. Little changes were made. This is, effectively, still a replica of the Bill that went through GB. It will still increase hardship for the most vulnerable in our society and it is still a Bill that seeks to punish the poor for the excesses of the rich. This is a Bill that neither I nor my party can support.

Mr McNarry: If this Sinn Féin/SDLP blockade is about parties that are privy to official sets of figures adding up differently, will someone, for goodness' sake, tell them to do their sums again? There cannot be more than one reliable set of facts and figures to add up and count. Someone, therefore, cannot count, or someone does not want the calculation to add up. Unless, that is, the figures do stack up and everyone knows it, but it is the incidentals to be added on that tell us the true facts — the areas called "passports into benefits", which do count and can overload figures officially compiled beyond the simple DLA conversion that we have been working to.

I suggest that we pay attention, because this is more than stalemate. It is about more than a petition of concern. It is beyond adding and subtraction. If you ask the public what they voted for nearly three weeks ago, they will tell you that it was not for a crash at Stormont. Watching the circling of well-worn and well worn-out party wagons collapsing in a pile-up, people out there are demanding to know just what is going on at the House on the hill. At the end of today, will anyone know whether it is a win, a loss or a draw? Are we up for business next week or next month? If the shutters come down for the summer recess, will they be pulled up again for business in September?

Frankly, it is an unacceptable position for parties that willingly formed a mandatory coalition to be unable to voluntarily sustain their duties in government. That is reprehensible and irresponsible. Keeping this cowboy coalition honest and accountable is fast becoming a waste of time. On days like today, and in the realisation that a day like today will probably happen again, it is painfully obvious that this Executive are proving themselves to be a failed entity. Is there a plan on the table today, or tomorrow? Even a majority plan will do, or do majorities, like everything else in this place, count for nothing?

Are we in the territory of the unknown, as described by the Chair of the Social Development Committee earlier? Is it not the case that the only plan that is causing posturing and prevarication — the reform of welfare benefits, sent down for us to adopt — is one outside our creation and beyond our scope of authority? Is it not the case that those reforms are universal across the whole of the United Kingdom? Irrespective of the genuine opposition shown here and elsewhere, they have been adopted and are being implemented in every region throughout the United Kingdom except here. The people out there would like to know what sets us so apart from others. Are our benefit-seekers any different from those in England, Scotland and Wales? Are the reforms not the same for everyone? Is it not the case that, by resisting the reforms in a dishonourable manner, we find ourselves in a House that continues to punish the very people each of us wants to protect?

There is no engagement in trench warfare with the sovereign Government that is going to successfully pull people out of the deep hole that they have dug for themselves by promising that pie in the sky guarantee that no one, either now or in perpetuity, will ever be affected by cuts. Is that the plan? Is that it: make a promise that you could never keep and convince yourself that it is now all a matter of principle? Well, principle, my eye. Smartness and smugness all of a sudden looked daft and embarrassing on 8 May, when Sinn Féin's master tactic fell into its own hole and the Tories formed a single majority Government.

I read that the great strategist, the deputy First Minister, now wants to form a rebel Celtic coalition to fight austerity. He is forgetting, of course, that the nationalists in Scotland and Wales have already adopted the nation's welfare reforms and are working through the previous Government's austerity sanctions. Is he now telling us that he is in negotiations with Nicola Sturgeon and Leanne Wood to join with

Sinn Féin? Is he bringing with him the lame-duck SDLP as his co-opted bag carriers? According to him today, we are beyond this Bill. He wants to scupper the July Budget without knowing what it contains. If so, it is going to be a long, hot summer waiting for the autumn, when on the basis of today, the talking has stopped and Sinn Féin, with the SDLP, have isolated themselves from this place. That is an important and pertinent question to ask, and it proffers another enquiry.

In the aftermath of seeing his intransigent stance and negotiating demands rejected, I ask this: what are the deputy First Minister's prospects and intentions? His plan was not just rejected but booted out in no uncertain terms when he was told by the Prime Minister that this part of the United Kingdom will be treated no differently on welfare reforms than any other part of the United Kingdom. I ask this, therefore: can anyone having been so seriously rebuffed in such a dismissive manner remain in office? How can anyone who thought that they were getting it so right be proved so wrong? Can the deputy First Minister stay on when his strategy has collapsed leaving vulnerable people on benefits facing the consequences of his failure alone to deliver the promises that he made to them that their benefits would not now or ever be reduced? Those promises failed to materialise. How could the Scots or the Welsh do business with a man who makes promises that he cannot keep and has used the most vulnerable in a despicable manner in this failed tactic?

Up until 8 May, he had one plan and one strategy: stick it out until Labour wins or, at worst, Labour and the SNP come together in a hung Parliament. It burst, they burst and he is bust with yet another plan decimated and torn up into pieces. Are people not entitled to ask why the deputy First Minister is not out of office three weeks after watching his pie in the sky promises wrecked by five more years of Tories in Government, this time in on their own terms? Did he not choose to use austerity as the stick to beat the Brits with, and has he not now fallen on his own sword?

7.15 pm

I know of no Member who welcomes austerity or who does not or will not stand up for the seriously vulnerable. No single party can claim to speak for the vulnerable, who will be hit the hardest by these benefit reforms, but only one party made irresponsible promises. Only one party misled the public. Whatever the outcome resulting from today, be it direct rule, mounting Treasury fines or calling in administrators to do

the work that the Executive cannot hack out together, let alone attempt to put a Budget through until next year, we should fast-track to next month, when the Chancellor will outline the details of further austerity measures and billions more reductions in cuts for everyone from the welfare budget. What then for Northern Ireland? Where is the plan? Where is there even talk of a plan to make adjustments in our financial management for the future, when we cannot agree today to proceed with the Bill?

What state will patient care in our health service be in by then? What will be the continued extent of turmoil in our schools? Tell the people who sent us to do a job, not me, what promises are going to be made that anyone is going to deliver on.

There can be no satisfactory outcome from today's proceedings. We cannot fault the people who think that this place, with its division, is not worth paying for any more. That truly would be a failure that we would be unlikely to recover from, yet we have hamstrung ourselves with overzealous regulations based on mistrust, rather than consensus cooperation. We have not grown up within the experiment that was designed to actually share power, and now we put at risk the very things we want to pass on as our legacy: peace; order; better government and democracy through the union; and devolution. Bust it now, and it will be a long time before that offer is renewed.

Today we have seen recriminations spill over. We see that we are governed not by consensus policies or by a majority within a coalition but by the sharp instrument of the veto and the blunt tactic of petitions of concern. Are we really saying, "Theresa Villiers, it's all yours. Do your best"? Are we so far apart that today we have joined the Crazy Gang?

As I said, I was not privy to an agreement that, at first, called the Prime Minister and a Taoiseach to rush over to Stormont House to seal a deal. I remember it. Nor was I involved in what transpired to be the Stormont Castle agreement. So, I am unable to comment on the common sense of either, but I do see the common sense of what is presented in the House today. Therefore, it is regrettable that we reach this stage of vetoes and rejection, having been unable to have either of those agreements debated in the House with amendments tabled and the petition of concern weapon decommissioned.

In such circumstances, in those talks and given the opportunity, then my suggestion on behalf of UKIP — having not been invited to so-called

all-party talks — is to call Westminster's bluff on what we can use without offloading the funding onto our block grant stream. Could we, I asked, and would we, now that evidence has been shown to dispense with parity, look at the role of lifelong carers in the light of these benefit reduction measures and, given the significant evidence that most — granted, not all — benefit receivers who are categorised as seriously vulnerable are looked after at home and cared for on a 24/7 basis by a lifelong carer, do two things for the family and for the person on benefits at the same time? We could increase the lifelong carer's allowance by an extra £500 per year and, in doing so, not get into the benefits argument. They will take their own course, but the family would at least suffer less by increasing the carer's allowance in circumstances where the benefit receiver would be hit the hardest.

I have heard it said before: help the unsung heroes who save this country a fortune, by giving them more to help the people they care for. Why not? For the same type of family, with a lifelong carer in place as previously described, we could also give the household a small but effective rates reduction. I ask you to look at it this way and face the facts. In basic economic terms, we do not have an extended credit line. We lack financial credibility to borrow and, moreover, to be trusted to pay back. We are already overcommitted to large loans, and the attitude of some Members today does little to foster confidence in our abilities to talk any economic sense. So why not talk to the Prime Minister and his Chancellor? Why not put the proposition of increasing the allowance for long-term carers and reducing their household rates free from knock-backs on funding? After all, they might be interested, one day, to call on the 11 votes which three of the parties represented in this place have at Westminster.

I am in no position to negotiate but I am clear that, if those who are in such a position have any sense, they will realise that they are clinging by a fragile thread in finding the attention of the Prime Minister waiting on their next move. The figures I offer are not about me or anyone else determining the vulnerability level of a person on welfare benefits. I simply do not know the categorisation of welfare benefits and how they are defined and equated so that someone is termed more vulnerable than someone else, but that that is how it works. I think that these figures relate only to a lifelong carer looking after a vulnerable person on benefits. My suggestion is to take the next three years. Why three years, you may ask? If

we believe George Osborne, that is around the time that, he reckons, austerity will be ending.

Take 10,000 carers at an extra £500 per year on their allowance and that is £5 million; take 20,000 at £500 per year and that is £10 million. Take 10,000 carers with a rates reduction of £50 per year and that is £500,000; take 20,000 with a rates reduction of £70 per year, and that is £1.4 million. So take somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 vulnerable people, served and looked after by carers; strike a cap and go for it; and, in showing that we care more about people's benefits than party political benefits, can we not find a way out of this? Can we find between £5.5 million and £11 million to ease a vulnerable person's family situation and, at the same time, deal with and ease the pressure on our forthcoming Budget?

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

It has been a long day, and, as we come to the conclusion of it, if we show how much we in the House care about people, be they on benefits or not, that will go a long way to proving that this place can and should work for everyone. I am not asking people to save this place unless they truly believe that it can be made to work better and to improve on its value. I am, however, asking that we do not let down the people who believe in us, people who have come out to vote for the Assembly in sufficient numbers and trusted us to work for all, not least the most vulnerable in our society. If that cannot be done, and if that is the consequence of today, we should not waste any more time or waste the people's time — this Executive must admit to their failure, fold up and walk away. If that is how we are being asked to leave the House, and this is my last day in the Assembly, shame on the Assembly and shame on those who would put the House in this position.

People may talk about recriminations, and, of course, there will be plenty afterwards. I heard Minister O'Dowd talk about hours or days to put this right, yet I heard Mr Agnew tell the House that we began this in 2012, and here we have a Minister of Education — a failed Minister of Education — telling us that we should devote a few more hours or days.

The conclusion has been made that there is no more time. I compliment the Minister on having the courage to put the Bill before the House today and not waste any more time. If that is the conclusion of the business of the Assembly in which we have all been proud to serve, then thanks, Minister, for ensuring that we do not waste any more time.

Mr B McCrea: First, I extend my best wishes to the First Minister and wish him a speedy return.

I have to admit that, when I saw Mr McNarry stand up to speak with what looked to me like an inch of papers, my heart sank. I asked myself —

Mr McNarry: Is that because it was not two inches? *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: Mr McNarry, you finished your contribution talking about a little more time and a few more hours, and I have to say to you, "Please, anything but that". We have talked and talked and talked today, and it is irrelevant. I have watched people around here, and I have never seen so many phones studied with such interest and so many hands to foreheads. This is Groundhog Day. It reminds me of a triple period of Latin: just going over and over the issue. I despair. Not only is the debate irrelevant but it almost says that this place is ungovernable. We cannot get any form of agreement.

7.30 pm

I voted the last time. Mr Humphrey had to go and have a lie down afterwards because he saw me in the Lobby so often. I voted for the Welfare Reform Bill on the basis that it was a five-party agreement. I said to people, "I do not necessarily agree with everything, but the only way that you can deal with these issues is to get everybody together". There is something that I really struggle to understand. There were notable speeches today from Mr Maskey and Mr O'Dowd. I remember the welfare reform debate of 10 February, when Mr Maskey said:

"That deal allows an awful lot more money to be retained by the people who we represent, and that would not otherwise have been available except for the hard work that was carried out." — [Official Report, Vol 101, No 8, p17, col 2].

Mr O'Dowd said:

"What we have agreed to in a five-party agreement, which we have all been open about, is that we have ensured that the most vulnerable in our society will be protected. What we have agreed to is that we have a different welfare Bill from that passed at Westminster two or three years ago. As I said in my opening comments, the Stormont House Agreement was about political parties agreeing to work with each other in deed and word."

He went on to chastise the SDLP because he seemed to think that it had done anything but live up to the agreement:

"they have ignored the facts that brought us to those negotiations. Party politics have their place, but, when it comes to destabilising the institutions, you have gone too far." — [Official Report, Vol 101, No 8, p58, col 2].

Shame on you, SDLP. How dare you oppose the welfare Bill. Yet we now seem to have petitions of concern. I really do not understand how, over one weekend, it changed from anybody who dares say anything against the Bill is somehow disloyal to democracy and to the people of Northern Ireland to "We need to oppose this". I am sorry, but, as someone who is sitting on the edge of these discussions, I do not understand what has gone so badly wrong. There is something fundamentally amiss with our political processes if we cannot, after months of discussion and debate, come up with some form of agreed position.

I listened to the debates and heard people from Sinn Féin talk repeatedly about their mandate. They said that the Conservatives did not have a mandate here and that Sinn Féin would go and argue for its mandate. I will point out to them that mandates are all very well, but, if you do not have any money, you have to talk to people in a particular way. The issue is that, if Northern Ireland was self-financing, we could do what we liked and spend our money in whatever way we wanted, but, as we do not have money and we get a subvention of £10 billion out of £20 billion that we spend, you have to talk to people in the correct way.

When we talk about £20 billion or £10 billion, people quite often do not really have any idea whether that is a lot of money. They ask, "Does £10 billion here and there count?". Let me give you some reasons why, in my opinion, it is not the case that the Tory Government have suddenly ganged up and said, "Let us see if we can really annoy the Scots, the Northern Irish and the Welsh". Let me give you some facts that I picked up, and I am happy to be corrected on them. Against our subvention of £10 billion a year, the deficit in UK terms in 2013-14 was £148 billion. That is the difference between what we raise in tax and what we spend. The Chancellor talks about bringing down the deficit, but he is not bringing down the debt. The debt is increasing and will peak in 2015-16 at 80% of our GDP. In fact, if you were to take in the pension liabilities, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies thinks we should, it could be at 240%.

I know that the economists amongst us will argue about whether it really matters, given that interest rates are so low, and we can borrow effectively anyway and just carry on. The problem is that it makes us vulnerable to what foreign investors think of the UK, not of Northern Ireland. Our problem is that we simply do not have enough money to pay the bills that we have. If you put the sums of money that are being reduced into perspective, the benefits budget in the whole of the UK last year fell from £215 billion to £213 billion. There was a saving of £2 billion, so that gives you a sense of scale. The left tried to advance the bigger issue, which is that it is unfair that the huge deficit was caused not by the people but by the banking crisis and why should the people have to pay that burden. You could make that argument properly and discuss it with people. It is amazing that, given the amount of contraction that we have seen in social welfare, we have not had more riots throughout Europe. Look at what has happened in Greece — I heard Gregory Campbell talk about it — if you tell people that you are taking their pension off them or reducing it drastically and the reply is that they did not borrow all the money, I can understand why there are problems.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member recognise that the deficit levels were growing out of control under the Labour Government before the crisis struck?

Mr B McCrea: In 2010-11, there was a deficit of £196 billion; the next year, it was reduced to £185 billion; the year after that, it was £178 billion; and now we are down to £148 billion. However, the point, Mr Beggs, is that we are still in deficit. We still spend more than we raise in taxation. Unless you change that —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member not think that the Tories would be better thought of if they were to go after the companies and individuals who engaged in massive tax avoidance rather than picking on the people at the bottom end of the scale?

Mr Speaker: I am struggling to make the connection with the welfare reform debate that we are supposed to be dealing with. We do not

have that responsibility. The overview was interesting, but, in my view, the point may have already been made. We should return to the subject matter.

Mr B McCrea: I will be guided by you, Mr Speaker, but the point that I am trying to establish is that the reason why we have to implement welfare reform is that we simply cannot afford to do anything else. It is not because people take an ideological position; it is a fiscal reality. People need to take cognisance of that point of view.

If parties here wish to go to the Government and explain that Northern Ireland requires special dispensation or special measures to mitigate the worst outcomes of welfare reform because we are still a society in transition from a troubled past, that is an acceptable way to go. That argument should be made, but you will not be able to do so if you do not go collectively. Our fundamental problem now with welfare reform is that there are arguments that could be made, but, at the moment, we look like a laughing stock. It looks like we are incapable of making any decision. It is not just the Government of the United Kingdom who think that we are a laughing stock. The people of Northern Ireland are saying, "Whatever you like. It does not matter whether the Assembly stays up or goes down, whether there is direct rule or not or whether we turn up tomorrow or not". Nobody gives two hoots about what we do because we are ineffective at doing anything. I will take issue with Mr Allister. In fact, if I had long enough, I could probably take issue with everybody, but he tried to say to me that he thought that this place was doing quite well with legislation and some oversight issues. I am sorry, but I do not see it. What I see and hear in the country is people wishing that we would get our act together and do something. I give way to Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: To clarify, I was making the point that, as a process, we can generally handle legislation — today is not a good example of that — but we scrutinise legislation in the House and in Committees, and that is relatively successful as an experiment in legislative devolution. The scrutiny Committees do a relatively good job. The point that I was making was that the area where devolution is falling down is within the Executive. That is the big problem area.

Mr B McCrea: I have a lot of time for the points that Mr Allister makes. I do not always agree with them, of course, but he makes good points. However, he stretches credibility to believe that

the processes are working. I do not see the processes working here. It may just be that Mr Allister is more generous than I am, or maybe he is in a different place, but I think that we need to do much, much better.

When I last spoke on this matter — it was a late hour, around 11.30 pm — the First Minister told me that I had made a really good point.

[Laughter.] The only thing that was more shocking than that was when our new Minister of Finance and Personnel said last week, "I never thought that I would say this, but you made a good speech". I have gone off and checked with whomever, and I need to rewrite things.

Here is the issue; here is the nub of the problem: in health, which is what I talked to the First Minister about, demand is growing at 6% per annum. That is a good thing, and it is because our people are living longer and we can do more for them. But our income goes up by 1%, and it is not possible politically to go and close hospitals or other buildings. I heard the Minister of Health say that we should not be wedded to buildings, which I take as code for saying that we will have to make some decisions. It is not possible to take decisions like that unless you have all-party support. We all know that it is far too easy for people to stand up and pick holes, grandstand and take advantage of people when they take tough decisions. Everybody says, "Take a tough decision": the minute you take a tough decision, you get your head in your hands. You cannot work like this. This is what is so disappointing about the Welfare Reform Bill. There must be proper discussions, negotiations and some form of agreed position. You have to do something. Either you renegotiate with Westminster or you accept what you have got or whatever, but you have to do it together.

I will bring my remarks to a close by saying to people here that we really need to be careful that, when we argue from party political positions, try to make a few points and try to score some points on our opposition, we do not destroy that which is most important to us. It is a really good thing that we have a devolved Government here. It is right that the people of Northern Ireland should decide the fate of the people of Northern Ireland. We should take all these powers in our hands, and we should try to do it properly. If we look incompetent, incoherent and incapable, nobody will give us anything.

When it comes to the end of the debate, I will stick to my original decision, because the argument was made at that time that this is

what we have to do. No contrary argument has come back in time to convince me to do otherwise. I realise that, by the nature of the debate, there is probably some other process in play. As we get to this stage of the night, the steam has gone out of the argument. All that that tells me as a politician is that there is a deal already agreed with somebody about something that is going to go in a different way. That is the only thing that I can assume. Otherwise, I would see a lot more energy in this place. We do not want this place to fail. We do not want it to stop, because the last time that happened, it took years — in fact, decades — to get it back again.

So, to those of you who will negotiate long and hard in the next couple of weeks, I wish you well. Remember, the fate of Northern Ireland depends on it.

7.45 pm

Mrs Foster: Obviously, we miss the presence of our party leader and First Minister, and I know that everyone wishes him well. Hopefully, he will make a speedy recovery and come back to this place. I have no doubt that he will read the Hansard report of the debate at a later date, when, unfortunately, he will find that the quality of debate across the way has not changed and that nothing new has been added today from that side of the House. The debate must focus on the legislation, but, in that context, and as Finance Minister, it is, I think, incumbent upon me to set out the financial ramifications for Northern Ireland should the Bill fall at Final Stage today, as it appears it will.

First, I will look at the background. It has been well rehearsed that the deputy First Minister agreed the terms of a welfare deal with the First Minister some years ago. Then, Martin McGuinness was prevented from delivering on that agreement by others in the background of Sinn Féin. Last year, the First Minister indicated that we could not continue in the fashion that we were, so the Stormont House talks were convened towards the end of last year. Many issues were discussed at the talks, including flags and identity, parading, the past, dealing fairly and justly with the victims and survivors of violence, the need to have corporation tax devolved so that we could effect a step change in the Northern Ireland economy by lowering the rate, a voluntary exit scheme for the public sector, including civil servants, and, of course, dealing with welfare reform.

The agreement, when it came, was comprehensive and dealt with structural and

financial issues. The first step was to agree a balanced Budget for 2015-16, which was achieved in the new year by the former Finance Minister through the Budget (No. 1) Bill. Secondly, a comprehensive public-sector reform and restructuring strategy was to be set in place, and this, too, was actioned. Indeed, over 7,200 civil servants applied to exit the service through the voluntary exit scheme. Thirdly, the Corporation Tax (Northern Ireland) Bill was passed in the House of Commons and achieved Royal Assent on 17 March this year. So, the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement was moving along.

The fourth element of the agreement was to bring to the Assembly legislation to give effect to welfare changes. My colleague the Minister for Social Development duly brought the Bill to the House, where various stages were passed. It was only after Sinn Féin had been to its ard-fheis in Londonderry that things started to fall apart. After that meeting in the north-west, we were told that Sinn Féin would block the Final Stage.

So, let us go through what happened. The first fact that I want to talk about is that, last December at Stormont Castle, all five Executive parties agreed on how to deal with welfare reform. The Bill and the Minister's proposals for its implementation are entirely consistent with that five-party agreement. The five parties discussed it in detail, and they asked the head of the Civil Service and the head of the Social Security Agency to document their agreement. Before reaching agreement, they read and studied the text that officials had presented. The five party leaders then took that agreement to the Secretary of State and recommended it as the resolution to welfare reform. Indeed, without the welfare deal, there would certainly not have been the Stormont House Agreement. The Stormont House Agreement was signed by all five Executive parties and yet two of them — Sinn Féin and the SDLP — have felt unable to keep their side of the agreement.

Our Government kept their pledge by pushing forward on the corporation tax legislation; in the new year, the former Finance Minister put forward a balanced Budget based on the Stormont House Agreement commitments; and the Minister for Social Development faithfully introduced welfare legislation and, all the while, worked on top-ups for Northern Ireland claimants.

Whatever happened in Londonderry, Sinn Féin has reverted to type and walked away from the implementation of an agreement that it had signed up to. That begs the question: did it not

understand what it signed on 23 December 2014? What possible explanation is there for signing up to a deal — a comprehensive deal — and then walking away from it a couple of months later? That is what it has done, and it has now brought its fellow travellers in the SDLP along with it. It speaks volumes about the attitude to responsible government in Northern Ireland, and I totally understand the frustration expressed by my ministerial colleague Stephen Farry earlier after his engagement with the SDLP. Some talked of economic prosperity pacts, while others never mentioned it when they got up to speak today, and that includes someone who spoke for an hour and 14 minutes.

Fact two is that today we are debating the Bill produced as a result of a five-party agreement. When it was presented to the Northern Ireland Executive, Sinn Féin supported it; when it was brought to the Committee for Social Development, Sinn Féin supported it; when it was submitted to the Speaker for its pre-introduction scrutiny, Sinn Féin supported it; when it came to the House for its legislative First Stage, Sinn Féin supported it; when it came to the Stormont House leaders' committee, Sinn Féin supported it; when it was subjected to a full debate at Second Stage, Sinn Féin supported it; when it faced its lengthy Committee Stage and others sought to amend it, Sinn Féin supported it. Throughout this process, until it came to its Final Stage, Sinn Féin supported this Welfare Reform Bill. The principles and narrative of the Bill have not changed; there is not one schedule or clause, not one sentence or word in this Bill that Sinn Féin has not repeatedly supported. Until, that is, at the very last moment of a gruelling and lengthy process, its Dublin bosses cracked the whip and the Sinn Féin Assembly team flipped.

Fact three is that this is an enabling piece of legislation; it creates no change in the level of any benefit. It provides legal authority for the Assembly to improve benefit payments and leaves all the decisions about claimants' benefits levels subject to subsequent regulations. The Executive have already agreed that those regulations can only be introduced by cross-community agreement. The Bill can be passed today, and nothing is lost to those who oppose the Minister for Social Development's proposals. His proposals will be dealt with through regulations. Killing the Bill, when that happens, does not impact on any payment levels. That really does show how contrived and artificial the argument has been today. Because it is an enabling Bill, its defeat would remove the power from the Assembly to improve welfare benefits for at least, I would

say, two years. Dump this Bill, as is proposed today by the petition of concern, and welfare recipients will be worse off. That is a fact.

Let me spell out to those outside the Chamber what Sinn Féin and the SDLP are doing: they are removing the only mechanism that the Assembly has to improve welfare payments. You will receive less money not as a result of this Bill being passed but if Sinn Féin and the SDLP kill this Bill. The Minister for Social Development and his staff have been working on transitional protection or top-ups for claimants in Northern Ireland. The detail on all this is not in the Bill, as it is an enabling Bill, but was set out in the DSD paper of last week to Executive colleagues.

Let me spell out the consequences of the Bill not proceeding today for all those who would have received transitional support and top-ups. After today, if this Bill fails, their top-ups disappear as there will be no legislative cover to bring these issues into reality. Instead of having the opportunity of the most generous system of welfare reform in the United Kingdom, we will end up having the same as everyone else. Indeed, all those vulnerable people whom Sinn Féin says it is protecting will get the full implementation of GB welfare reform. I wonder whether Sinn Féin has explained that to its electorate. We have heard much about its mandate today, and I wonder whether it has explained that to its electorate.

Over the next three years, under our proposals, 102,000 existing benefit claimants in Northern Ireland will be better off, and no existing claimant will be worse off. This transitional scheme will collapse if the Bill is defeated. Future benefit claimants can top up their benefits by applying to a sizeable discretionary fund to assist them with any hardship, and this fund will not be available if the Bill is not passed.

Welfare reform has happened in England, Scotland and Wales, which makes a complete and utter nonsense of the claim that we should all go to Westminster together. What utter nonsense I have heard in this House today — "We should all go and see the Government." Welfare reform is already implemented in England, Scotland and Wales. They do not even have welfare powers in Scotland and Wales.

We have heard much about going along with Nicola Sturgeon this morning, but Nicola Sturgeon is talking about the wider economic picture. She is certainly not talking about welfare reform issues. So there has been a

smokescreen thrown up by the parties opposite about going to London with Nicola Sturgeon and Carwyn Jones and making great play of the wider economic issues, when we are not dealing with the reality of what is right in front of us in this House tonight.

Because this House has chosen not to deal, and is choosing not to deal, with this issue, we are now facing fines of £9.5 million per month. Nine and a half million pounds buys an awful lot of hip operations and knee replacements. In fact, I think it buys 1,800 hip operations. If the Welfare Reform Bill had been passed before now, the penalties would have been coming to an end once Royal Assent had been granted. If the Bill falls today, those penalties will continue and increase year on year.

We have heard much about austerity this afternoon and this evening and about what is coming down the line. Whatever happens in the future, what happens now should concern this Assembly. If this Bill does not pass — I have said it many times over this past week — £604 million of cuts will have to be made to vital front-line public services, the services that the most vulnerable in our community need and rely upon. That is the size of the hole in our finances at present. There has been a lot of talk about what is coming down the line and what might be happening, but that is the reality of where we stand tonight. I prefer to deal with what is happening in front of me right now.

Let me be clear: my party will not support such severe cuts. Public services would be decimated. Public safety would be endangered. I wonder whether there is anyone in this House who would support £600 million of cuts to health, to education, to victims, to justice services and to job promotion. I am looking round the House, and I do not see anybody putting their hand up for that sort of cut. The only way to avoid having to deal with that issue is to pass this Bill. There is no money tree out the back of Stormont. I have searched; it is not there.

The next thing I wanted to come to was the absolutely ludicrous suggestion that the timing of this debate is in some way artificial. I have heard it from a number of people across the Floor. The statutory requirements compel me as Minister of Finance to action the Budget process by Friday of this week. Today is the Assembly's last sitting day before that deadline and, without the funding that the passage of the Bill would bring, a balanced Budget that the Assembly would support cannot be crafted. That is why the Bill had to be completed this week. There is nothing contrived, artificial or

politically motivated about the timing. It is the only legal option open to us to produce a balanced Budget.

Some Members have tried to excuse the U-turn that they have very skilfully managed today on this Bill by claiming that the Social Development Minister's proposals on how the Stormont Castle agreement would be implemented caused them to withdraw their support. Last Wednesday the First Minister called their bluff on this issue. He publicly and privately challenged those who claimed that they were going to oppose the Bill because the Social Development Minister had produced a scheme that was not what they believed they were signing up to last December. The First Minister announced that, if it would lead to them reaffirming their support for the Bill, he would accept any amendment consistent with the five-party Stormont agreement, providing it was within the agreed spending limit, legally competent and operationally feasible. Not one amendment was brought forward by any of the parties opposite, or, indeed, any other party. I think that speaks volumes about the debate that we have had here today.

8.00 pm

The inability to set a Budget because of the fall of this Bill would lead —

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I will indeed.

Mr Storey: Just to clarify, so that Members are clear on the point, it was suggested by the SDLP, in its contribution to the debate in the succeeding days from Wednesday through to the end of the week, that we look at the issue of sanctions, which we have debated in the House on numerous occasions, and that we set up an all-party Committee of the House to deal with the issue of welfare. That was the sum and substance of the amendments that it brought to the table.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Minister for clarifying that.

The inability to set a Budget because of the fall of this Bill would have severe ramifications and would lead to the permanent secretary in the Department of Finance and Personnel imposing even greater cuts. So great would those cuts be that the head of the Civil Service would be forced to inform Whitehall that the Northern Ireland control totals would be breached, and,

in those circumstances, the United Kingdom Government would be forced to intervene.

The final fact that I want to leave with the House tonight — because we have heard a lot of conjecture today — is that our proposals on welfare are the best offer in the whole of the United Kingdom. Defeat of the Bill will reduce the level of payments to tens of thousands of people in Northern Ireland. Members have a clear but stark choice to make tonight. They can pass the Bill — it does not appear that we are going to do that — and protect those who need support from benefits, giving them the best deal in the UK, or — this appears to be the road that we are going down — we can consign welfare recipients to a harsher regime with lower payments, and for what? In the end, Sinn Féin and the SDLP will be punishing those for whom they claim to be fighting. It is just cheap, self-serving, party political posturing that goes on across the way — and, frankly, it is pathetic — just to look like tough guys to the rest of the electorate in Northern Ireland, and, indeed, to the electorate in the Republic of Ireland.

This is a test for the House today as to whether it will pick —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: I will give way.

Mr Allister: Just before the Minister finishes, if I sense that she is finishing, I have two questions about the knock-on budgetary effects if the Bill is killed tonight. Presumably the 2015-16 Bill, as you said, is premised and balanced on the basis of the Stormont House Agreement, so if the Stormont House Agreement falls then that is not a mechanism to balance the Budget, and, I take it, that is where the £600 million of cuts come from. The Minister said that no Minister in her party will implement that. If matters then pass to the permanent secretary — this is the second point that I want clarification on — does the permanent secretary have the power to dispense the accrual resources — in other words, the matters that arise giving rise to single farm payments etc? Is that within the gift of the permanent secretary, and, if not, what are the consequences?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that point. Just to be clear, yes, the Budget that we talked about last week and the hole that is presently there in relation to £604 million of debt arises because of the non-implementation of the Stormont House Agreement, and we will not put our hands to supporting such a Budget, even though I will probably have to bring the figures

forward to the Executive this week for discussion. If that is not doable then it falls to the permanent secretary to deal with the issue. I have taken legal advice in relation to the use of accruals and have been told that, whilst the accruals will come in to Northern Ireland, they cannot be paid out, because to do that we would need legal authority under the Budget (No. 2) Bill. Without the Budget (No. 2) Bill there is no legal authority to pay the money out, so, whilst the money will come to Northern Ireland, there is no authority to pay out the accruals that come.

There is where the rather large figure of £2.7 billion occurs. It is a very distressing place to be.

As I have said, this is a test for the House of whether it will pick fantasy politics over responsible government. I fear that Sinn Féin and the SDLP have made the wrong choice on this occasion and are playing fantasy politics whilst the rest of us are concerned about public services in Northern Ireland. I support the Bill.

Ms Sugden: Like others, I wish the First Minister well in his recovery. My thoughts are with him and his family.

I have been a MLA for just over a year. I must admit that I am really frustrated and disappointed that the past year has been characterised by several events that have threatened to bring this institution down. In the Assembly, we often get criticised for not doing anything. This past year, I have done a lot. I could work 24/7 if I wanted to, not only on constituency concerns but on the Assembly business that we do here. I think that, to an extent, we do something up here. What frustrates me is that so much work has been done on all the legislation that will pass through the House in the next year, the last year of the mandate, and we have an opportunity to shape legislation that will affect people's lives on a day-to-day basis, but that will all be threatened and undermined because of where we find ourselves this evening. It has led me to believe that the Assembly is no more than theatre, and, to be honest, theatre is only as good as the message that it gives out and how it makes the audience feel. Tonight, the message of the Northern Ireland Assembly is that we are failing. The audience — the people of Northern Ireland — are heckling us. In fact, they are not heckling us; they have actually just left the auditorium. They do not care any more because they are so frustrated with us. That is not a good sign. That is where we are with this Bill: we are no further forward with welfare reform tonight than

we were when we heard the First Reading of the Bill. That is not good enough.

I do not feel that we have an option here other than to back the Bill, and I do not like the Bill. In any other circumstances or on any other journey that would have brought us to where we are tonight, I would have voted against the Bill. However, I do not think that we have an option. For me, as a MLA whose work is predominantly constituency work, it is difficult to explain to a woman why she is not sick enough to receive certain benefits. It frustrates me that my constituents are pushed to their physical and mental limits to satisfy box ticking on an application form. It breaks my heart that I have to give a mother directions to a food bank because she cannot feed her child. Those are the shortcomings of welfare, and I have grave concerns about what welfare reform will bring. Equally, I have concerns about the budget cuts that we have, because that same mother was also talking to me about her community transport trips, which may be reduced from five to three. I have had to explain to an elderly lady why she cannot go and meet the only person she will see that week because her community transport has been cut. I have had to comfort a lady who has shed tears because Early Years has been pulled from beneath her.

The cuts are not unique to one party; they go right across the board. Everyone will have felt it. Right now, we do not have any option but to pass welfare reform. It is a shame that we are not even going to have that opportunity tonight. It does not best serve the people of Northern Ireland, but, sometimes, we have to just strive for what we can get. The reality is that the Conservative Government are at the beginning of a five-year mandate. Welfare reform is coming to Northern Ireland with or without the rule of the Assembly. If without, it will be in its crudest form, without the concessions that we have negotiated until this point. Suggesting that we try to move forward and try to negotiate more is irresponsible. The most vulnerable, whom I have heard many of us from all sides of the Chamber talk about, will suffer.

Where is the rationale? I hate to be one to say this, but I think that Sinn Féin's rationale is nothing to do with the vulnerable. It was not before the ard-fheis in Derry, and it certainly was not after it. Like every party in the House — I see it — Sinn Féin is deeply split, although, to be fair to them, they are always the best at hiding it. To be honest, it is not even within the Assembly grouping that they are split; it is North/South. Let us face it: Sinn Féin's direction has not come from Martin McGuinness, the deputy First Minister; it has come from Dublin. I

think we are all quite aware of that. I know that they do not recognise the border. Do you know what? That is fine. That is entirely fine, and I will respect that, but Members of this House do not have jurisdiction anywhere else but Northern Ireland, so it is their responsibility to put Northern Ireland first.

On Thursday, I had great faith in the SDLP. I thought that, for the first time in the past year, they would actually show leadership and realise that they should not put their names to a petition of concern. To be fair to them, they did not; they created their own. I sincerely hope that that was not a mistake and that they knew what they were doing when they signed a petition of concern that would be added to Sinn Féin's petition of concern and would render the Welfare Reform Bill invalid. By the sounds of it, that means that the party to my right are either stupid or desperate. At this stage, I feel they are both. Mr Attwood summed it up for me earlier: he said that, because things change, we should be open to taking risks. Number one: if we are going to wait for people to change things in Northern Ireland, we will not get very far. Number two: I will not risk the outcomes of the people of Northern Ireland, and I do not think that any other Member of the House should do so either.

I do not think that this is a case of it being the eleventh hour and that someone has to come and save us. That window of opportunity has passed. Crude as it might sound, Northern Ireland had a window of opportunity following the conflict, but that is closing, and I certainly think that, on welfare reform, that window has closed.

I will not keep you any more than I have done, because the Bill is doomed. I will support the Final Stage of the Bill if only to send out the message that there are some Members of the House who have faced the reality of where we have found ourselves and are starting to try to work with that rather than trying to dream up something that is not possible.

Mr McCallister: Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, said:

"I understand that government should live within its means, value the money it holds in trust from you the taxpayer, avoid waste and, above all else, observe the first maxim of good government: namely, do no avoidable harm."

The Northern Ireland Executive would do well to live up to even some of those basic principles. For example, on the point of living within our

means, we get about £9.6 billion of a subvention from the Treasury with no charges, no efficiencies, and we do not have to worry about collecting any revenues. We get sent that from Treasury. That is our cut from the Barnett consequentials, our block grant and a benefit from being in the Union.

You hear all this other talk from Sinn Féin. I agree with many of the Members who have spoken, including Ms Sugden, that, with Sinn Féin, it has much more to do with Dublin and the politics there, with a Dáil election due within the year. It is to do with all those things.

As to the point about valuing the money held in trust, the mantra and the only policy I hear from Sinn Féin and the SDLP is that the Brits should give us more cash. If they gave us more money, we would do even less with it. We would reform nothing. We would not do public sector reform, and we would not do Transforming Your Care or anything else. We certainly would not do welfare reform. Look at the litany of examples of waste. Look at Transforming Your Care, a decade for local government reform and a decade for very limited educational reform. There is also the £700 million that we are borrowing for a voluntary exit scheme. Had we put a recruitment freeze on the Civil Service four years ago at the start of the mandate, we could have avoided that. There are 64,000 empty school places and £2 million a week in fines for not doing welfare reform. We have 21 special advisers, which is more than the total number in Scotland and Wales, at a cost of £2 million a year. I will put that in perspective: the education fund is set at £2 million a year. That is stuff that would make a difference to the lives of our citizens and help to break the cycle of poverty.

8.15 pm

Being in government has to be about much more than the car and the photo opportunity. Minister Foster, who spoke a few minutes ago, has the privilege of having a dedicated website, 'Arlene Foster holding things'. Being a Minister has to be much more than that. It should bring with it an enormous opportunity to change things and improve the lives of our citizens, but it must also carry a huge weight of responsibility of being in government and having to make tough and unpopular decisions at times. It requires a Programme for Government that means something. It requires that, if, after negotiations at Stormont House or Stormont Castle, you reach an agreement, you stick to it. Yet, what I have heard from a list of contributors, predominantly from the SDLP, is

that we should have more negotiations. We have been negotiating for over 20 years: is it not time that we realised that the peace process is over and we should get on with the role of government?

I am one of the few unionists left in the Building who openly admits that he voted yes to the 1998 agreement. I am one of the few who acknowledges that, 17 years on, we have not delivered on the promise of that agreement. We need to change fundamentally how we do our business here. We have had endless negotiations. Over the last two Christmases, we had the Haass talks, which ran for a number of months, and then, last Christmas, we had 11 or 12 weeks of negotiations ending with the Stormont House Agreement. One of the big successes of that seemed to be that, down at the castle, the Executive had all agreed and gone to negotiate with the Secretary of State.

Given the warnings from the Finance Minister, I should probably have declared an interest at the start of the debate that I am the recipient of a single farm payment, in case I do not get that. We should probably all declare an interest in case we are all on welfare by Friday. I also receive child benefit, if that counts.

We have to face up to our responsibilities and the way that we conduct our government. Everyone in the House will know that I am a believer in having a proper opposition here. I would like the Government and the opposition to be two distinct bodies and not all in one place. That is the problem with us at the moment. The Government and the opposition — the five parties — are all in the one place. For Sinn Féin and the DUP, there is no great risk in this place collapsing or there being an election, because there is no credible, alternative Government sitting in waiting. The only opposition at the moment is provided by the six Members on these Benches. I am proud of that and of the opposition that that provides, but you need to get to a different point. In a normal process and in normal government in London or Dublin a Government who could not get their business through, such as this Welfare Reform Bill and a Budget, would collapse. That is what would happen.

Mr Kennedy: We want an election.

Mr McCallister: If an election would sort it out — I hear Mr Kennedy saying from a sedentary position that he wants one — I would welcome it. The problem is that, because there is no alternative Administration here, we would change a few faces, perhaps, but that is all that would happen. We would come back to face

the same set of problems. That is why an election would not solve anything.

I was here for Mr Kennedy's contribution. He painted a fairly gloomy picture of the state of things in DRD, with lights going out and roads not being repaired. I was also here for Mr Nesbitt's contribution. I hope that I detected some signs that they were thinking of leaving the Executive and moving into a position of opposition.

Mr Kennedy: To join you?

Mr McCallister: To join me.

Mr Nesbitt: Leader, leader.

Mr McCallister: I would welcome them with open arms. *[Laughter.]* I am sure —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCallister: — that Ms Sugden and Mr Allister would make some room for them.

Mr Speaker: Order. I suggest that we have had enough of an exposition of your preferences for an opposition. We should return to the discussion on the Welfare Reform Bill.

Mr McCallister: I am more than happy to do so, Mr Speaker.

When I spoke in the last debate on welfare, I explained why I dislike not only the Bill but a lot of the mitigation measures; they do not get to where you need to be to help people. All the evidence points to early intervention in dealing with welfare and economic inactivity. Minister Farry has launched an Enabling Success strategy with no money. In all the welfare issues that we have to deal with, early intervention is the key. We have to deal with mental health, economic inactivity and educational underachievement, but we are not doing so. We will not help educational underachievement. Mr O'Dowd is back in the Chamber. We were to have committed £564 million over the next six years to mitigate welfare while we cut £2 million from the community and voluntary sector in early years education. That is wrong. That is the wrong priority in the wrong place. All Members will have been to events in here and listened to groups in their constituencies talking about early intervention.

During the last debate, Mr Attwood challenged me to come to west Belfast and speak to people. I could not get Mr Attwood tied down to a date, but I went to the Colin area of west Belfast, which has a similarly sized population to cities like Newry and towns like Coleraine. The impact of early intervention in literacy and numeracy is remarkable. In schools in my constituency, they talk about the difference in early intervention. When you go to the like of neighbourhood renewal events in Downpatrick and look at some of the figures, they were able, for very modest amounts of money, to lift the reading ages of children by up to two years. That is what the Assembly and the Executive should be focused on. Instead, we were about to get an agreement from Sinn Féin that said that it had saved everybody from the evil Tories and that that was just great; it saved them with £564 million of Northern Ireland public money going into it. Meanwhile, we are gutting all the early intervention stuff. So you have groups like NICVA. Who is going to —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: In a second.

Who will be hardest hit by the cuts? The first five are children and young people, local communities, education, health and social care and disability and mental health. I heard Mr Nesbitt speaking about mental health.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for giving way. I acknowledge that cuts to the early years fund are having a detrimental impact on the community and voluntary sector. When I presented my budget to the Education Committee, I said that we are now among the sacred cows because year-on-year cuts are having a detrimental impact on services. However, it is completely incorrect to say that we are now removing all early interventions. The Department of Education is spending somewhere in the region of £260 million per annum on early years education — £260 million — so it is not correct to say that we are cutting all early interventions.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister. Perhaps, then, he will come down with me to Kilkeel and explain to the parents and the children in Kilkeel why their nursery, their early intervention and their early years provision is being cut. That is the reality. That is the difference that it will make to young lives, and that is where I think that we are so fundamentally wrong.

On the scope of this Bill, I do not particularly like the Bill or some of the mitigation measures. As I spoke about in the last debate, I do not think that breaching things like the welfare cap is a good use of public money. Only about two Members — me and Mr Allister maybe — mentioned that in the last debate. However, your petition of concern has forced me, like Ms Sugden, to vote with the Minister. Bringing down this Bill is sheer irresponsibility. It would be bad enough if you were doing that from a position of being in opposition. It would be bad enough if you just let it go to a straight Assembly vote, but to do it with a petition of concern, whereby you know that the Bill is dead even though a majority of members, I suspect, will vote for it, is disgraceful. The most bizarre part of it is that, even if welfare reform started off as coalition policy and you had nothing to do with it, you had "Northern Irelandised" it by the time that you added £564 million to it. We have two parties in this Executive torpedoing their own Executive Government policy, and we somehow turn round and think that this is what passes as normal politics.

The outworkings of today, such as the cuts in early intervention, might not be felt for many years, but a Budget crisis will be very much a crisis made in Belfast. It will not be made in Westminster or anywhere else. We have walked ourselves into this by putting off welfare reform with the only suggestions being more negotiations — why would anyone believe you if you agreed to anything? — or the formation of a Committee. That has always worked well for us. From when this Bill was introduced in October 2012, we have had a Committee to look at the human rights aspect of it, which was set up in late 2012 or early 2013. We had delay and then talks and agreement, all of which was going very nicely up to the ard-fheis, when suddenly there was a change. That has to change.

Look at all the things on welfare that I warned about before. I said that two parties that are so opposed to welfare reform now are up for corporation tax. How very bizarre that they are still up for that. If you want to know why I said to them at the debate that corporation tax will have a long way to trickle down to the people in West Belfast, I will give you one example. An answer from the Minister of Education on the number of people doing ICT for A level by constituency indicated that West Belfast has an average of 17. Just to give you a comparison, South Down has the third highest number with 106, and the constituency with the highest number is Upper Bann at 148. That is the difference. West Belfast is at 17. Young people in West Belfast will not feel the effects of

corporation tax cuts. That is not going to trickle down to them.

I have to say to Sinn Féin and the SDLP: you have been in charge of West Belfast from 1966.

It has had four or five different MPs since 1966. It is a disgrace that there are still such levels of deprivation and poverty in that constituency. You are supporting a welfare system that you think is not fit for purpose, but it is the one you want to keep. Somehow you are going to go over and fight a Tory Government. I have some upsetting news — I know you have heard this before — but the Tories actually won the general election a few weeks ago. They are in with a majority for a five-year term. Sadly, we are stuck with the parties here: one that does not even turn up at Westminster and another that firmly nailed itself to the "EdStone". I am not quite sure what has happened to the "EdStone", but it does not look like it is coming back.

8.30 pm

We have to ask ourselves this: if the Assembly had any levels of responsibility, what would it do if one of our councils, for example, pursued an agenda of reckless spending? We know what happened when the South Eastern Education and Library Board got into difficulties. Commissioners were appointed. What would we do? What would Minister Durkan, who was here a short while ago, be recommending if a council got into such a reckless rate of spending and could not balance its books? Would someone have to step in? Would the Assembly or the Minister step in? I ask that because, at the minute, we are almost waiting for somebody to ride in to the rescue to sort this out, whether that is the permanent secretary at DFP or the Secretary of State with more money. That is an appalling place for us to be.

The main Executive economic strategy of cutting corporation tax is all about attracting inward investment, but one of the key things in attracting that inward investment is good governance. We are not going to be portraying good governance when you see that we are actually crushing our institutions, that we will run out of money and that we have one party that will not do welfare reform and another lead party in government that refuses to bring a Budget with what probably would be completely eye-watering cuts. Cuts of £600 million will mean that Minister Hamilton will be taking somewhere around £280 million out of Health. That is going to be a big help to the vulnerable and the sick. It is going to really hurt them.

Minister O'Dowd's Department will take the next biggest hit. The only things that saved us in the last Parliament were that Health was protected, Education got a level of protection and we got the Barnett consequential of that. This is no way to run a joined-up government.

It is easier, I suppose, for some of the smaller parties in government to vote against the Budget as long as the bigger two agree. Today we heard from probably half a dozen government Ministers, so at least half the Executive have spoken in the debate, including Martin McGuinness, the joint head of the Administration. The joint head of the Administration is now torpedoing his own Administration's policy on welfare reform, and we somehow think that it is all right to do that. We somehow think that we should carry on. There is an attitude of, "Well, we can buy another few weeks. We can drift along with welfare reform." We are fortunate that we are not a sovereign government because we would be in the care of the IMF if we were. We could not and cannot continue with that.

There is no doubt in my mind that this is all to do with next year's Dáil election. Clearly, the message to voters in the Republic of Ireland is that they should be very wary of who they elect into government. Will they face up to the responsibilities that parties in government need to face up to and deal with them in a serious manner?

Right across the board, we have failures to make decisions. Too much focus has been on all the good things that people want announced but none of the difficult decisions. Nobody wants to talk about water charging or tuition fees, but we want cuts in corporation tax and air passenger duty. We would like VAT on tourism cut to 9%. We want all those things, but we have no concept of how we are going to pay for them. At least £500 million will be spent on welfare reform and possibly another £200 million on top of that, since we worked out that the £500 million will not be enough. Such is the economic illiteracy that at least two of the parties in the Assembly are stuck on. That is a very unfortunate place. It would not be as bad a thing if you were not in government and did not have the ability to sign a petition of concern.

That is why I will vote with the Minister on this Bill. It is hugely regrettable that the renewal and rebooting of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's relationship after the Stormont House Agreement has all been lost. The momentum gained in January and February, by passing the Budget and moving on this issue,

has all been lost, and we are going nowhere, to the point where we are about to hit the buffers.

I will leave it at that. I will vote with the Minister tonight.

Mr Storey: First, I thank those Members who joined in numerous comments in relation to the health of the First Minister. I thank them for their best wishes, and we are glad that we have a First Minister who has given us such time and effort, as I said earlier, in regard even to the issues that we are discussing. We thank Members who expressed their best wishes, one and all.

That is where the goodwill seemed to end. It gives me no joy, as Minister for Social Development, to realise that there are two parties that, despite all that has been said and done, and all the progress made, are prepared, by what they have already done with the petition of concern, to consign the Welfare Reform Bill to the bin. My colleague the Finance Minister set the debate in its factual context. Let us be under no illusion, and let it be said on the Floor of the House tonight, that there has been no contrived crisis; there has been no choreography to bring about a situation that we hoped would not really transpire. We are facing the reality of the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

So, all the talking has been done for tonight. All the comments have been made, and it is now up to the Members of this House to determine whether they want to have a Bill that has in it mitigations and measures to help alleviate and support those families and communities — we have all been told about them tonight — that we have concern for, or whether they are prepared to allow others to bring about a situation that will introduce another Bill, because welfare reform will come to Northern Ireland, but it will not be this Bill that will introduce it. I want to mention something that was touched on by the Finance Minister. There seems to be a misunderstanding, either deliberate or inadvertent, of what this Bill is about. It is a piece of enabling legislation, and all the parties have been well aware of the schemes, plans and regulations that would be brought in over time to bring into existence the welfare changes. It seems that that is all to be lost because two parties have decided, tonight, that they want to bring it to an end.

I do not intend to rehearse all that has been said by others, you will be glad to know, but I want to make a few comments as I conclude. Let me turn to comments made by Mr Maskey and by the Agriculture Minister. Earlier, they

referred to the financial losses that different claimant groups would incur as a consequence of the changes to the welfare system. They quoted figures from my Department for families with children, adults and children with disabilities, and ESA customers. They suggested that all those claimants would be financially impacted and that we in the Assembly needed to think about the impact that that would have on those groups. Let me say this: the supplementary payments scheme would have provided full protection for all current claimants in each of those groups. It is recorded in Hansard; it is on the Floor of the House; it is a fact. No individual would have suffered any financial loss as a result of the Bill that the two parties opposite are going to vote against. That protection would have initially lasted for three years, and future claimants in each of the groups would also have been able to access financial support when they were facing a financial crisis in their lives. What I proposed in the Bill was real and affordable support that would have ensured that current claimants would not have suffered any financial loss during the lifetime of the scheme, and that financial support would have been available to future claimants who had not suffered any real loss.

Members can look at their phones and try to be dismissive, but that is what you are rejecting tonight. I do not want to hear, tomorrow, all these claims about protecting the vulnerable and defending the poor when, in this House tonight, it would seem that there are Members who are quite happy to vote against a Bill that was intended to do that very thing.

Mr Maskey also referred to the need for political leadership and, while he was commending the work of the officials, he suggested that it is not officials who make the policy. He is absolutely correct. He said that it is important to point out that senior civil servants have a key responsibility to provide Ministers with objective and impartial advice to enable politicians to make informed policy decisions. Let me make this very clear: the advice provided on the supplementary payments scheme rightly pointed out the significant financial consequences, the legal impediments and the operational difficulties of making the types of payments that Sinn Féin proposed for future claimants.

If the party opposite thought that I, as Minister, was going to do something that had significant financial consequences, legal impediments and operational difficulties, it is not living in the real world. The party opposite knows well, as does the SDLP, that my officials and I have

endeavoured, in good faith, to do the very best that we could in extremely difficult circumstances.

8.45 pm

Let me refer to the bedroom tax. Some cloud of mist seems to have now descended on the SDLP in that it somehow was not aware of the bedroom tax and its implementation or non-implementation, its place in the Bill and how all that would transpire. The SDLP endorsed the Executive paper on 22 January that set out how the Executive would ensure that the bedroom tax would not be introduced in Northern Ireland. Let me say that again: it endorsed the Executive paper on 22 January. The paper provided that current and future claimants would be protected from the financial consequences of the bedroom tax. The paper also clearly set out that existing and future tenants would be protected from any reduction in their housing benefit. All that was endorsed by the SDLP, so let us not have any of this, "But it wasn't us, Jack; it was somebody else".

Mrs D Kelly: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. It is my understanding that, at the Executive, our Minister put on record our party's right to amend. We are under no illusion that the bedroom tax is in the Bill. Mr Agnew and others have stated that there are some protections for some years but not for ever in relation to those who might be subject to the bedroom tax. We tabled amendments and a petition of concern in relation to the bedroom tax a year and a half ago and asked others to sign it. It remains unsigned. Will the Minister at least acknowledge that as fact?

Mr Storey: What we will acknowledge is that, tonight, the SDLP will join Sinn Féin and bring to an end any measures, mitigations and benefit that would come to the people of Northern Ireland, whose champions they claim to be.

Members, we have come to the end of the debate today. It is now up to Members to decide how they will protect the people whom they claim they represent. The decision is now over to you.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the vote on the Bill will be on a cross-community basis.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 58; Noes 39.

AYES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

OTHER:

Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr F McCann and Mr McGlone.

Total Votes 97 Total Ayes 58 [59.8%]

Nationalist Votes 39 Nationalist Ayes 0 [0.0%]

Unionist Votes 50 Unionist Ayes 50 [100.0%]

Other Votes 8 Other Ayes 8 [100.0%]

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Adjourned at 9.01 pm.

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