

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 13 December 1996

The meeting was called to order at 10.04 am (Mr J R Gorman in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

The Chairman: This is the last meeting of the Forum in 1996. At the close of business today we shall adjourn for the Christmas and New Year period, and we will reconvene on 10 January 1997. May I take this opportunity to wish all Members and their families a happy Christmas and a peaceful New Year.

FORUM: BUSINESS

The Chairman: The business before us today is outlined on the Order Paper. You will note that the Business Committee, at its meeting yesterday, decided unanimously that the time set aside for a special Adjournment debate be devoted to a motion on the public expenditure cuts announced by the Secretary of State last Tuesday. In view of time constraints, I propose that speeches be limited to five minutes. Is that acceptable?

It was so decided.

The Chairman: I intend to close that debate at noon so that preparations can be made for the reception at 1.30 pm.

FORUM: REPORT ON BUSINESS BOYCOTTS

The Chairman: Last week Mr Cedric Wilson, Chairman of Standing Committee A, referred to the inaccuracy of a report in the media which attributed remarks about the Committee's review of the boycotting of businesses to a member of the Women's Coalition. I wrote to Ms McWilliams on this matter and had a meeting with the Women's Coalition this morning. Ms McWilliams and her colleagues have assured me that the view expressed in the newspaper as to why the debate had been postponed did not come from them. In addition, the newspaper concerned published on Saturday evening the correct version of events. In these circumstances I am content to let the matter rest.

On behalf of the Forum I wish to express sympathy to Mr Malachi Curran. I was told that he was very ill, but I have been in touch with the family, and it seems that he is not quite

as bad as we feared. Indeed, he is now home from hospital. I am sure that all Members will join me in wishing him a speedy return to good health.

Members: Hear, Hear.

BUSINESS BOYCOTTS

Mr Cedric Wilson: I beg to move:

That the Forum adopts the interim report on the review of boycott of businesses prepared by Standing Committee A (Public Order Issues).

In view of the goodwill that has been so apparent among all parties that participated, and bearing in mind the comments made to me by Members who have read the document, I have little doubt that this report will be adopted by the Forum. Then you, Mr Chairman, will have to come to a view as to whether the report would command cross-community support. Unfortunately, several very worthwhile resolutions that united all the parties participating in the Forum, have had to be negated on the ground that, in your view, they would not command cross-community support. That is a regrettable feature of the Forum. However, Mr Chairman, I do not believe that you will face such a difficulty at the end of this debate. Any reasonable and sane person in Northern Ireland who is aware of the problems faced by traders in relation to the matter of boycotts would have no difficulty in fully endorsing the report's contents, including the recommendations.

As I have indicated, the Committee had a great degree of work to get through. We took evidence from a wide range of bodies. I apologize once again for the delay in presenting the report. It was indeed an exercise in democracy to take part in the Committee's deliberations and to work with all the parties that participated. Regrettably, Committee A, like other Committees and, indeed, the Forum itself, suffered from the action of those who decided to boycott it. Tribute is due to the Vice-Chairman, Mr Jeffrey Donaldson, to the Clerk, Ms Gail McKibbin, and to all others who took part in the exercise.

Unlike the Committees that have produced reports on educational, agricultural and economic matters, Standing Committee A deals with issues that are potentially difficult politically. We did not attempt to duck the issues, though there may be a temptation in the Forum and its Committees, during this period when we are trying to get the body rooted, to produce reports on the basis of the lowest common denominator with a view to securing the endorsement of all parties. While we will always attempt to achieve a broad consensus, to bring as many people as possible with us, it will always be difficult to deliver all the parties all the time. However, the atmosphere and the working relationship that we developed will stand the Forum and its Committee in good stead in the future.

There were differences of opinion, particularly when it came to putting the report together. Sometimes we found ourselves discussing whether a particular word was appropriate. Only at the very last minute did the Women's Coalition say that they were not happy with the report. They made no attempt to change anything until we reached the last chapter.

I have no doubt that anyone considering the report in a dispassionate and fair manner, will find nothing objectionable in it. It is just a statement of facts.

I pay tribute to all those bodies that took the time to come and give evidence — the Association of Small Businesses, the Federation of Small Businesses, the chambers of trade and commerce, the RUC, community relations bodies and Business and Professional People for the Union. Their evidence was striking, and their views are reflected in the report.

This is not a one-sided or lob-sided report. It looks at all the issues. In some cases drawing conclusions would have been very difficult. We received conflicting evidence as to the degree of the boycott and how it continues to affect traders, particularly in the border counties. On one hand the Federation of Small Businesses believed that there was an improvement amongst the members they had canvassed. On the other hand, the Business and Professional people for the Union, which I commend for working very closely with traders in the border counties — it was they who initially drew attention to the difficulties those people were facing — reported that traders, particularly in Castlederg, continue to suffer. Maybe information was coming from people who were experiencing different results.

Thus it would have been improper for us to conclude that boycotting is still widespread. Instead, we have presented both views in the report and leave it to Members, who have experience in their own areas, to develop the matter. We suggest that monitoring of the situation continue, in the hope that in the New Year we shall be able to inform the Forum that this nasty piece of sectarian evil is beginning to abate.

10.15 am

I want to deal briefly with the contents of the report. Members have had at least a week to read it, and I look forward to hearing their contributions. The section on the effects of boycotting describe the practice as a social evil. Great support for this view was expressed by all those who made submissions.

The first conclusion is that the campaign was indeed orchestrated by the Nationalist or Republican movement in the border counties as part of an ongoing war of attrition against the Protestant communities there. That was the view not just of myself and many other members of the Committee but also of the RUC, the community relations people, the Federation of Small Businesses and all the others, and anyone who says otherwise is misinforming people.

In our first recommendation we ask those who are engaged in this campaign to stop immediately. Secondly, we say that the Committee should continue to monitor the situation. Thirdly, we recommend that Government bodies and agencies be lobbied about what they can do for the traders. Fourthly, the Committee recommends that law and order continue to be enforced in these areas. Our fifth recommendation is that political leadership be provided and that those in positions of influence in their areas ask people to go back to shopping with Protestant traders.

The final recommendation concerns the media. Some people express concern that the media may cause further problems for traders by hyping up the situation. I want to pay a

special tribute to the 'News Letter', and to Donna Carton in particular, for the series on communities in conflict. That was reasonable, responsible and good journalism, laying out the facts, and not a case of burying one's head in the sand. People here may tell us that we should not discuss this matter. Well, the last thing that the traders who are feeling the effects want is to be ignored.

Looking forward to 1997, I hope that the message going out to the traders still feeling the effects of boycotting will be that they have the support, understanding and sympathy of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue. We look forward to next year, believing that the only answer to the problems that surround us will take account of the fact that the cancer of terrorism must be removed before the healing process can begin. And the healing process can best be nurtured, enabling the community to grow together and bridge the divide, if all people are equal under the law and equally subject to the law.

Mr Carrick: May I first express the wish to be associated with the remarks of the Committee Chairman, Mr Wilson, in acknowledging the work done by Committee members and staff and pay tribute to the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman for their efficient and orderly conduct of business.

Boycotting is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, it dates back to the nineteenth century. It is used as an economic weapon to impose a political agenda foreign to the wishes of the targeted party, group or community, usually on the basis of class, creed or culture. Responsibility for this latest social evil and for the disastrous downward spiral in community relations in the affected areas is without doubt to be laid at the door of Sinn Fein/IRA. Sinn Fein/IRA's hand-wringing and ritual denial of responsibility for orchestrating the boycott of Protestant businesses, as recorded in paragraph 2.7 of the report, rings hollow when one remembers their defence of this social evil as a legitimate form of protest. Sanctimonious statements from Republicans are as lacking in credibility as the notion of camels skating on frozen desert sands.

Those who have experienced the callous and cruel methods of Sinn Fein/IRA barbarity have no illusions about the Republican intent of the current boycott. The whole thrust of the evil campaign is to drive Protestants out of certain areas by economic deprivation. While some Members may have difficulty in recognizing that this is just a further tactic in the war of attrition against the Protestant community, the hard-pressed victims and their families have no hesitation in testifying to the blatantly sectarian weapon that is being wielded against them.

There can be no fudging or watering down of the irrefutable evidence gathered from reputable individuals, responsible organizations and the RUC. Those who seek to skirt round the issue or fail to face up to the reality of Republican sectarian boycotting do a disservice to the entire community. While there was some limited evidence of attempts in Protestant areas to boycott Roman Catholic businesses, these were not sustained by the Protestant community as a whole. They had no support and thus petered out.

If there is any difficulty in accepting this report, I refer those who are in doubt to the victims at the coal-face of boycotting. Those people and their families know all about the smile that gives way to the stab in the back, the handshake that gives way to putting the boot

in and honeyed words that give way to actions of war. We have heard some prevarication, but there can be no ambivalence on this matter. There is no ambiguity. The issues are clear. This is an attack upon the Protestant community.

The Chairman: One more minute, Mr Carrick.

Mr Carrick: The promoters and organizers of boycotting must be ostracized by all who reject this antisocial and pernicious weapon.

I commend the report to Members, and I trust that the Women's Coalition Members, who have had some doubts and reservations, will stand back and reflect. I appeal to them to speak to the grannies, mothers and daughters of those who have been intimidated. Let them face up to the real issue and stand for what they believe in — civil and religious liberty, not only for the Nationalist community but also for the Protestant community.

Let there be no whingeing and no carping about this issue. Let us face up to it.

The Chairman: I was a bit unfair to you, Mr Carrick, in that I cut you off a minute too soon. My apologies. The next time you speak you will have six minutes.

Sir Oliver Napier: I support the report. I should like, first, to get some definition of boycotting. We all have a right to prefer one shop over another because, for example, its prices are lower or its staff more pleasant. If I am stopped at an illegal barricade on the Queen's highway and recognize there my butcher, baker or greengrocer, I am quite entitled to say "I will never darken your door again." The evidence available to the Committee indicated that there was an organized boycott against Protestant traders in some areas. On the basis of the evidence that I heard and read I can come to no conclusion but that it was carefully orchestrated and, in some cases, apparently enforced by intimidation. That is morally wrong. It cannot be justified, and I deplore it on behalf of my party.

Such activity is incredibly bad for community relations. It divides communities. The evidence I am talking about came from bodies like the Federation of Small Businesses, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which have no axe to grind. Evidence was given by people on the ground. I am sorry that the RUC did not feel free to allow us to attach its evidence to our report. It would have helped.

I read in the press that there was some imbalance. Fortunately, that report has now been corrected. I deplore politicians saying "I condemn this, but you must see what the other side has been doing." That is not balance. Where something is wrong, people should come out and say that it is wrong, rather than say "On the other hand, look at what they were doing to us." If something is wrong, let people condemn it. This was wrong, and I condemn it.

If I were to pick out one of the recommendations that my party goes along with, it would be the one contained in paragraph 6.5, where the Committee says that it recognizes the need for clear leadership by those in positions of authority and responsibility in the community. The Committee says that such people should stand up against this kind of thing. That means the people in this Forum. It means elected representatives throughout the country

from all parties. We must all stand up against this and other evils. We must stand shoulder to shoulder with people who are experiencing injustice.

I think that a recent survey by the Federation of Small Businesses puts boycotting into perspective. I hope that it is correct. That body got a 7% response when it asked its members if there was active boycotting of businesses. None said that it was severe; 5% said that it was moderate; 2% said that it was light; and 6% said that they thought that business was returning to normal. I hope that the situation is indeed returning to normal. The sooner that happens, the better for this province.

The Chairman: I am sure that those words about a return to normal will be echoed right across the province.

I have Mr Hugh Smyth next on my list. I treated him so roughly last week that he has decided not to come today. Is he going to come later?

A Member: He is boycotting!

The Chairman: I will not accept that at all. My friend Hugh is not a boycotter, whatever else he is!

Mr McMichael: I am not a member of the Committee which produced this report. However, Mr Joe English represents us on it, and I would like to thank him for his contribution.

I want to thank also the Chairman, other members and staff of the Committee for working so hard in examining what is a very difficult and divisive issue. It is clear that there are divisions even among Committee members.

10.30 am

Ultimately, as Sir Oliver Napier has said, individuals have a right to choose where to shop or where not to shop. At the same time those businesses that are directly affected by boycotts have a right to exist. They are entitled to trade normally, without having commercial sectarianism directed against them. And sectarianism is essentially what this is. It is no more or less deplorable that the sectarianism of denying people the right to march on certain routes or to go to their places of worship, and it is no less deplorable than acts of vandalism against churches.

This type of division, sectarianism and intolerance has been re-emerging in the province over the last couple of years, despite our hopes for the evolution of new circumstances in which it would diminish. Indeed, it is actually starting to escalate. It is unfortunate that we have to focus on issues such as this, but we have a responsibility to give leadership to people whose rights are affected. Unfortunately, the more we do so, the higher becomes the profile of these issues, and the greater their momentum. That is a serious dilemma.

We must provide intelligent leadership, not just in dealing with this issue but to ensure that sectarianism generally is diminished and ultimately eradicated. We encourage people to realize that this is not the sensible way forward. The public representatives in this Forum, as well as those who by their own choice are not here, should take the lead. There is no point in trying to hype up the situation. That will only cause it to flare again.

While I am glad that the evidence appears to suggest that the level of boycotting is diminishing, that is not much consolation to anyone — even if only one person — losing business. I therefore support the adoption of this report, in the hope that the situation can be resolved in an intelligent fashion.

Mr Robert John White: With reference to comments made by the Committee Chairman, Mr Wilson, you, Mr Chairman, will not have any difficulty in respect of the outcome of this debate. You will no doubt deem it to be acceptable. As the Committee Chairman has said, there is no bias. The report is an attempt to present the facts as we found them. There is no fudging, though the language is softened in a number of places in an effort to make the report acceptable to everybody. The use of language is excellent, and we must commend Ms McKibbin for that. We have described the situation as we found it. I hope that the problem is subsiding.

I want to highlight a particular incident. A former colleague of mine was delivering some medicines in a white plastic bag to an old people's home. On the way he found himself in front of a blockade. The participants seemed friendly, and he handed the plastic bag over for delivery. As a result of this little contretemps he was accused of bringing food to the people manning the blockade. That, of course, was not his intent at all. Such situations are probably replicated over the province.

Mr Stringer's updated report, dated 22 November 1996, says

"So far as an update of the situation is concerned I should advise we had a meeting of all Chambers in our network only two weeks ago. The general tone was that boycotting was reducing now that it was disappearing from the headlines. I am confident that there is a good chance that that pattern of reduction will continue."

I hope that that is true. Indeed, I believe that it is.

Mr McKee: I am pleased to support this report and to recommend it to all Members. I would like to pay tribute to the Chairman for the role that he played. He deserves credit for his fairness and for the courteous way he dealt with those who came to give evidence. I also commend all the witnesses, whose contribution we appreciate. The Secretariat too deserve our thanks for the way they serviced the Committee. Certainly they went to a lot of bother.

After listening to much of the evidence, I was left with the clear opinion that Sinn Fein/IRA were behind this campaign. The Unionist and Protestant people having, after 25 years of murder and mayhem, refused to submit, the terrorists opted for a new tactic — to drive them out by denying them the right to make a living in their own areas. All this happened in loyal Ulster, and I was shocked at the lack of outcry and disappointed in the Roman Catholic Church, from the Cardinal down, for its failure to condemn. These people certainly put their opposition on record, but there was no real force or drive behind their

attitude to the boycott. The SDLP did not give a lead when it should have been directing the Roman Catholic and Nationalist community away from this sectarian campaign.

What would have happened if the shoe had been on the other foot? What would have happened if there had been a massive boycott across the province against the Nationalist community? We would have heard an outcry throughout Ulster and across America — across the world, indeed — about the poor, down-trodden people being under the jackboot again. As it was the Unionist and Protestant community who were affected, the condemnation was muted.

I was disappointed at the Women's Coalition's attempt to water down the report. But it did not work. The evidence of the unfortunate businessmen and others enduring the campaign was taken on board, and members refused to knuckle down to the suggestions of the Women's Coalition. I pay tribute to the Committee for that.

Indeed, I pay tribute to all the parties that took part in compiling the report. I commend the UDP for its role. Mr Joe English played a very valuable part and put forward some very good points, which we were able to take on board. I am very disappointed, however, in the PUP. Mr Hugh Smyth was going to speak in this debate. How could he have the cheek when his representative walked out of the Committee because the Chairman was alleged to have made a press statement that would offend the Nationalist community? His position had become untenable, and he could not sit under such a Chairman. What about the rights and sensitivities of the poor Protestant community? Have they no rights?

I am surprised that Mr Ervine left the meeting, that he could not come to make a case for the Protestant and Unionist people who are being boycotted and driven out of their homes and businesses. No wonder Mr Smyth has not turned up today, though it is a duty of every public representative to speak out against this evil in our midst. We have got to speak out against Sinn Féin/IRA and brand them for what they are — murderers and thugs now embarked on a campaign against the Protestant business community. But I believe that the campaign will fail. The people are made of stronger stuff, and they will see it through.

I am happy that the Committee undertook this project. Members tackled it well and delivered the goods. People in Ulster and across the world now know that there is intimidation, that there are boycotts and injustice. And the target is the majority in this province. Let the Women's Coalition search their conscience and say that Protestants and Unionists do matter and must be supported if they are being driven out of their businesses and their homes, as is happening in border areas. Let the Women's Coalition fight for the rights of those people just as they would fight for the rights of the Nationalist community. When I hear that message loud and clear I will be able to say that there is a spark of compassion. But I very much doubt it.

Ms Sagar: The Women's Coalition opposes the motion as it cannot agree with the report presented by Standing Committee A. Let me state our reasons. We believe that the form and tenor of the report are contrary to the duty of the Forum to promote dialogue, understanding and consensus. The report's conclusions are not based on evidence. Perceptions, assumptions and hearsay are given weight over logic and evidence. While perceptions are important, they are no substitute for investigation of the facts. We believe

that Standing Committee A was unable to decide whether it was investigating the matter of boycotting and presenting reliable evidence or was merely passing on stories and the opinions of others.

I would like to turn to the evidence that was presented to the Committee. One lot of evidence related to overviews by representative business organizations. First, the Federation of Small Businesses gave evidence from a survey of some 120 organizations, representing 9% of its membership of 1,400. Evidence showed that 93% had experienced no boycotting, 2% light boycotting, 5% moderate boycotting, and none severe boycotting and 99% indicated a return to normal.

Secondly, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry carried out two telephone surveys of its extensive membership. In the first — a survey of 31 member chambers (a typical chamber, by the way, has a membership of 150 to 200) — seven made reference to significant boycotting, four indicated a lower level of boycotting, and five indicated only rumours. In the second survey, and at a meeting of all the chambers in November, it was found that boycotting was reducing now that it was disappearing from the headlines.

The RUC and these organizations, as well as others with no political axe to grind, share the view that boycotts do exist but are not widespread. Stories covered in the media have the effect of multiplying the situation, and responsible reporting would improve it. The extent of boycotting is diminishing. All these organizations want the politicians and other leaders to act responsibly to help defuse the situation.

10.45 am

Views were also presented to the Committee by small numbers of traders from Castlederg, Pomeroy, Lisnaskea, Bryansford and Portglenone. These offered a useful insight into perceptions and experiences. The traders believe that the boycotts are orchestrated. They are experiencing a downturn in business, and there is intimidation. Their views were supported by Business and Professional People for the Union. This organization gave no indication of its size. It has been described as a pressure group. We believe that it should be noted that the Chairman of Standing Committee A is associated prominently and publicly with it. While this should not debar him from participation in the Standing Committee, a conflict of interests should be noted.

It is unfortunate that the Committee received so few submissions. This is a matter of concern. We believe that it may be indicative of how the Forum is perceived by the wider community. We are not surprised, as it seems to us that the form and tenor of the report simply add to the divisions in society. Unsubstantiated allegations and political point-scoring do nothing to build parity of esteem, counteract myths and misunderstandings across the community, or improve community relations. It is unfortunate and, we believe, potentially harmful that the Standing Committee's report should elevate hearsay to the status of evidence and then use it to attack the SDLP, Sinn Féin and the Nationalist community in general.

We would like to pick up a point made by the Federation of Small Businesses, which recognizes and respects the right of each individual in our democratic society to purchase goods and services where and from whom he chooses and acknowledges that many wish to

exercise their right as a legitimate form of peaceful protest. There are many examples across the world of people using boycotts as a peaceful and moral expression of opposition. For example, many people joined the boycott campaign against South African goods because they objected to apartheid. It is therefore untenable for the report to claim that such action is inconsistent with the wish to be regarded as being committed to exclusively democratic means. People have every right to choose, on an individual basis, to boycott. However, there is no place in a democratic society for a boycott which is enforced by threat or intimidation. In the divided society which is Northern Ireland, boycotts in themselves are regrettable and add to division. After the divisive events of this year we need to rebuild community relations.

I would like to return to the objective of the Forum — to promote dialogue, understanding and consensus. We believe that Standing Committee A's report is contrary to that. Hearsay is used to attack others. This brings us all into disrepute. We have little confidence in the way Standing Committee A produced its report, which we believe does a disservice to community relations, to the economy and to those who have been boycotted. The report has the potential to do further damage, and we believe that it should be withdrawn.

We are also extremely concerned that the Committee is now turning to the issue of parades. We hope that it will consider this matter in an even-handed, careful and balanced way, that it will not just take hearsay but actually investigate evidence, as it should have done in this case.

Yesterday we asked the Business Committee if we might produce an official minority report. Our request was refused. We have therefore produced an unofficial report drawing attention to the points that I have been making. This report is available to all Members who wish to read it. We have taken this course because we wish to protect the objectives of the Forum. We oppose the Committee's report in the form in which it appears. The Chairman of the Committee said the Women's Coalition had made its objections known, through its representative, Barbara McCabe, only at the last minute. In fact, we objected as soon as we had our first copy of the draft. Our objection was stated repeatedly but ignored.

We ask you, Mr Chairman, to indicate, under Rule 13.1, that in your opinion Standing Committee A's report could not reasonably be deemed to command support across the various traditions in Northern Ireland.

The Chairman: There are four more Members who would like to speak, including Mr Hugh Smyth, who has returned.

Do you want to speak, Mr Smyth?

Mr Hugh Smyth: Not on this subject, Mr Chairman. I have already made my views known.

I understand, however, that someone criticized Mr Ervine for leaving the Committee. Mr Ervine made clear to Standing Committee A and to the Business Committee why —

The Chairman: Yes, but —

Mr Hugh Smyth: You called me to speak, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: You said you did not want to speak.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I changed my mind.

The Chairman: We are a little pushed for time.

Mr Hugh Smyth: That is why I am going to be very brief. The Committee Chairman was aware that there were difficulties as to how Mr Ervine saw the Chair. I am not going to get involved in that matter. As a Committee Chairman, I know how difficult it is. Anyway, it is unfair to criticize Mr Ervine without looking into his reasons for leaving the Committee.

Only last week the Committee Chairman criticized the Women's Collation for breaking confidentiality. Mr Ervine's reasons for pulling out may not be quite the same, but the Chairman went on radio to give interviews before the Committee was set up. There are many wrongs on both sides, and I dare say that at some time Mr Ervine will explain his actions.

In any case, I appreciate the hard work that the Committee has put into this report, and it has my full support.

Mr Cedric Wilson: Members of the press and of the public have once again been subjected to an allegation against me in my position as Chairman. The Forum accepted that I had no control over the BBC in its introduction of me as the Chairman of the Public Order Committee. I took part in that programme as a member of the United Kingdom Unionist Party.

The Chairman: You have made that quite clear.

Mr Cedric Wilson: But I would like to have it logged. I feel I have a right to defend my position whenever this is raised. I did not speak on behalf of the Committee on that occasion.

The Chairman: Now let us get on, because we have to deal with the very serious matter of £140 million being taken away from the province.

Mrs I Robinson: In commending this report to the Forum, I wish to add my voice to the congratulations that have been expressed to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman for the excellent way they conducted the meetings of Standing Committee A. They did so in a fair, impartial and level-headed way.

Boycotting is a social evil. It is like a tap that can be turned off and on, depending on the political climate. There is no doubt in my mind that we are witnessing an orchestrated campaign. It was initiated by Sinn Fein/IRA, but unfortunately it appears to be filtering down to ordinary Catholics — people who would in no way support Sinn Fein/IRA but,

because of fear and intimidation, are now frightened to be seen using certain Protestant-owned businesses. If there is ever to be normality in our province, public representatives must do their best to guard against using language that could be interpreted as encouraging this social evil. It is my prayer that the Protestants most seriously affected by boycotting will be supported by all right-thinking folk and that hard-pressed business people will get help from Government agencies.

Is Ms Sagar seriously saying that Mr Laverty and others who, because of fear for their lives and their families' well-being, could not come forward are a figment of our imagination? The more I hear from the Women's Collation the more I believe that they are another arm of the pan-Nationalist front. They are doing their best to destroy anything that smacks of Unionism or Protestantism. I can come here today and accept the wrongs of Harryville, but they cannot accept the wrongs perpetrated by Nationalists against Protestants. That is a shame. It is a sad position to be in. Thank God only 7,000 idiots voted for these women. I hope that those 7,000 will have their eyes opened and will vote differently next time.

Ms McWilliams: Will the Member give way?

Mrs I Robinson: No. They say they are a cross-community party, but I have yet to see the Unionist part surface.

Ms McWilliams: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. When a Member is attacked in the way that Ms Sagar has been attacked —

Mr Peter Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. This is not a point of order from Ms McWilliams. If a person has been attacked, is it right for somebody else to demand the right to defend that person?

Ms McWilliams: I represent the Coalition, on whose behalf Ms Sagar was speaking. Mrs Robinson would not give way for an alternative viewpoint.

The Chairman: Let us get on. We have a very important subject to discuss after this debate.

Mr Hussey: Like others in this Chamber who realize what is going on in the country, I welcome this report. The situation started with the Nationalist blockade of the Garvaghy Road. Contrary to what other Members have said, in small communities where support for businesses has worked both ways it is not a figment of their imagination that some people are suffering as a result of the initial blockade of the Garvaghy Road.

Businessmen have found themselves in a dilemma: should they make the situation known, or should they keep quiet and hope that it will go away? I am glad that this report has indeed highlighted their plight. Contrary to what someone said today, the boycott is not unsubstantiated. I live in Castlederg and do business with traders there. I know that people are no longer in those shops, despite what others try to tell us. This is not unsubstantiated; it is not a figment of the imagination. It may not be as big a matter as the media sometimes say it is, but in the areas affected its localized nature increases its effect.

I praise the report for highlighting the fact that those who have been affected are to the fore in opposing any reciprocal boycott. They are to be commended for that attitude. And I know from personal experience that they are totally supported by their elected representatives.

One area of the business world which could have been touched on in the report but is not — perhaps because of fear about coming out in a situation of this type — concerns those people who have to go into the community to make deliveries. I know that in my area such people have been affected tremendously. Intimidation on the streets has prevented the purchase of coal, milk and other commodities from them. Perhaps the Committee could take that matter on board.

Rev William McCrea: Does the Member agree that the businessmen of Castlederg, Pomeroy and other parts of Mid Ulster will find the statement of Ms Sagar very annoying and insulting but also that their wives are affected? If certain people were aware of the facts maybe they would not make such stupid remarks.

Is it not a fact that remarks such as we have heard are hurtful to wives and children?

An elderly Roman Catholic gentleman who defied the intimidation by going into a Protestant shop was viciously attacked when we went to a public house. He suffered a broken arm and had to withdraw his allegation.

11.00 am

Ms McWilliams rose.

Mr Hussey: I will not give way.

The Chairman: You have very little time left, Mr Hussey.

Mr Hussey: I thank Mr McCrea for his information.

Another factor in the area I come from is that business withdrawn from Protestants has not gone to local Catholics. It is evidence of intimidation, of which these people want no part, that they are going out of the community. That has a knock-on effect. Cash is being taken out of the local community. People are scared, so they go to the bigger towns, where they can be more anonymous.

Apart from the great annoyance and the great fear, it is very hurtful that a pattern of trade in many small communities has been broken. A new pattern has been established. Unfortunately, this is becoming institutionalized. Worried traders wonder how they are to get back to the way things were. And these people were not involved in any of the incidents through the summer.

The Chairman: Mr Donaldson, will you please wind up as quickly as you can.

Mr Donaldson: As Vice-Chairman of the Committee I should like to add to the expressions of thanks to the Chairman and the other members, but especially to the Secretariat, and in particular Ms Gail McKibben, who has been of tremendous assistance.

I cannot avoid referring to the comments of the Women's Coalition, whose unofficial minority report I have read. I want to touch on a few aspects of that report. Some things need to be brought out as they were not mentioned in Ms Sagar's comments. In the background section of their report the Coalition say that the boycotts are a result and should be set in the context of the events over the summer. Once again the stand-off at Garvaghy Road is being blamed for all the social ills and evils in Northern Ireland.

The report lists a number of things that have happened — the boycotting of businesses, the picketing of churches, the burning of schools and churches — but there is no mention of the illegal activities designed to prevent lawful procession or of the burning of Orange halls. Why? Because the people and places concerned are Protestant. Like other Members, I ask the Women's Coalition when they are going to start criticizing those who attack Protestants. When are they going to stop being sectarian? I have to say that they are perceived as a sectarian organization. Why doesn't their report mention the burning of Orange halls or the attacks on legal demonstrations? Why do they have to refer specifically to activities that they perceive to be directed against the Catholic community?

Ms McWilliams: Will the Member give way?

Mr Donaldson: I will not. The Lady had ample opportunity to speak.

The Women's Coalition say that the Committee's report attacks the Nationalist community and that no submissions were received from that community. Why? Because the SDLP are themselves boycotting the Forum. The Nationalist community refuse to engage in the Forum because it is an elected democratic body representing the political entity that is Northern Ireland. When are the Women's Coalition going to condemn those parties that refuse to participate fully in the political process here?

But the most worrying and damning aspect of the minority report is its allegation of factual inaccuracies in the evidence. It suggests that the traders giving evidence were somehow involved in this and that cases need to be carefully checked. That is a slur on the integrity of the witnesses from border areas who are facing boycotts. I ask the Women's Coalition to withdraw the allegation that there are factual inaccuracies. Nowhere in their report do they say what the inaccuracies are. If they are accusing people of lies and falsehoods let them say so. Where are the factual inaccuracies?

A Member: Get to your feet now.

Ms Sagar: If the Member gives way I will answer that. *[Interruption]*

The Chairman: We can do without these comments.

Mr Donaldson: If Ms Sagar is prepared to indicate —

Ms Sagar *rose*.

The Chairman: I cannot allow you to speak except with the permission of the Member on his feet.

Ms Sagar: That is why I asked.

The Chairman: Has he agreed?

Mr Donaldson: If the Member is going to specify the factual inaccuracies in the evidence provided by the traders, I will give way.

Ms Sagar: We have already said that it was hearsay, unsubstantiated evidence. I can tell people anything I choose. How they perceive it is up to them. Everything that is said should be investigated if there is to be a complete report.

Mr Cedric Wilson: Will Mr Donaldson give way?

The Chairman: You are taking up Mr Donaldson's time.

Mr Cedric Wilson: It is an important point. The RUC are conducting investigations and intend to prosecute up to 11 people for intimidation.

The Chairman: I think we all agreed that there would be no mention of the RUC's evidence. Please bear that in mind.

Mr Cedric Wilson: This Lady has said that those who gave evidence — including the RUC, by implication — were fabricating. This is not fabrication; it is fact.

The Chairman: Let us be very careful. If a body like the RUC ask us, as they are entitled to do, that evidence given by them be treated as confidential, we must be scrupulous to avoid not just direct but also indirect reference to it. I am sure everybody here agrees.

Ms McWilliams: May I take it, Mr Chairman, that you ask Mr Robinson to withdraw his earlier remark?

The Chairman: I have already done that.

Mr Donaldson: Ms Sagar's comments are astounding. To suggest that these men, many of whom are known personally to Forum Members, would come here and tell lies about the impact of boycotts on their businesses is an astounding accusation, and I regret that the Women's Coalition are not prepared to withdraw it.

This report has much to commend it. With regard to the comments in the 'Belfast Telegraph' last week, the Women's Coalition have attempted to undermine the evidence by making the spurious point that Business and Professional People for the Union is a one-sided, sectarian organization and that we gave undue weight to its evidence. I refute that on behalf of the Committee. We gave due weight to all the evidence. The manifesto of Business and

Professional People for the Union states that it is a non-sectarian body. The fact that it happens to be in favour of the Union probably makes it sectarian in the eyes of the Women's Coalition.

I commend this report to the Forum. Despite the Scrooge attitude of the Women's Coalition, let us hope and pray that at this Christmas time good will prevail and that the men and women who are suffering today as a result of these boycotts will be given some relief. Let us hope that this social evil will be eradicated. I repudiate the assertion that boycotting is a legitimate forum of democratic action. The Women's Coalition say in their so-called report that it is not inconsistent with democratic methods to engage in an orchestrated boycott. Well, I say that such action is inconsistent with democratic methods. And that is not just my opinion: it is also the opinion of many of those who gave evidence to the Committee.

Let us hope that in the spirit of this season we will see a return to normality in Northern Ireland. The traders who are suffering and their families should have the support of local communities. I urge the people to support those who are in need, and I hope that all parties in the Forum will support this report.

The Chairman: Do Members want to take a vote?

Ms McWilliams: Yes, we do.

The Chairman: Would a show of hands be sufficient?

Ms McWilliams: It would be sufficient if it were recorded.

Several Members: No.

The Chairman: I addressed the question to Ms McWilliams. Would a show of hands be sufficient?

Ms McWilliams: As on every other occasion, we would be perfectly happy with a show of hands.

Several Members: A recorded vote.

The Chairman: In which case the name of those disagreeing would be recorded.

Several Members: Yes.

The Chairman: But that could be done by a show of hands.

Several Members: No.

The Chairman: So you want an interval of three minutes?

Several Members: Yes.

Ms McWilliams: We are in agreement with the procedure adopted previously — a show of hands. I ask that opposition, in terms of parties or indeed numbers, be recorded. That has been agreed in the past. However, we do not object to a three-minute interval followed by a recorded vote.

The Chairman: I am afraid that Members have that right.

Question put.

The Forum divided: Ayes 55; Noes 2.

Ayes: Antony Alcock, Lord Alderdice, May Beattie, Eileen Bell, Thomas Benson, Robert Bolton, David Browne, Cecil Calvert, David Campbell, Gregory Campbell, Mervin Carrick, James Clarke, Wilson Clyde, Robert Coulter, Jeffrey Donaldson, Sam Foster, Sam Gardiner, Joseph Gaston, Oliver Gibson, John Hunter, Derek Hussey, John Junkin, Peter King, Trevor Kirkland, St Clair McAlister, Steve McBride, Kieran McCarthy, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Jack McKee, Gary McMichael, Ken Maginnis, Oliver Napier, Sean Neeson, Dermot Nesbitt, Ian R K Paisley, Ian Paisley Jnr, Joan Parkes, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Peter Robinson, Thomas Robinson, James Shannon, Eric Smyth, Hugh Smyth, James Speers, May Steele, Des Stewart, Robert Stoker, John Taylor, Peter Weir, John White, Robert John White, Cedric Wilson.

Noes: Monica McWilliams, Pearl Sagar.

The Chairman: The Ayes have a majority far in excess of 66%.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Forum adopts the interim report on the review of boycott of businesses prepared by Standing Committee A (Public Order Issues).

Ms McWilliams: Mr Chairman, may we have your ruling under Rule 13.1?

The Chairman: I was just about to do that.

I have read the report carefully and have listened carefully to the matters that have been discussed, which could, subject to the resolution, have the potential not to command support across the various traditions of Northern Ireland. I have listened carefully to the points for and against the report. It is my view that, despite the inevitable difficulty in getting reliable information about this matter, the Committee has produced a report that is as objective and even-handed as possible. Although it is difficult to be certain, I conclude that there is nothing in report that gives me cause to regard it as not capable of commanding the support required under Rule 13.1.