

[Mr. Bleakley]

tegration to affect this House. The one thing which can carry us through is unity. We may have disagreements on matters of detail and on tactics, but there is fundamental agreement, here and throughout the Province, that only by pulling together will we get by. In no circumstances can any of us welcome the possibility of the partnership arrangement being put in danger. I assure the members of the Executive that I speak for a very considerable section of the community — and I have no political axe to grind — when I say that we welcome what has been done by the Executive in terms of political comradeship.

Mr. McConnell: Hear, hear.

Mr. Bleakley: The period since 1969 has been one of communal madness. The one real ray of hope is that Protestants and Catholics — let it be put bluntly — are now co-operating. With partnership everything is ultimately possible; without it the future for the people of this island, North and South, will be ever more grave. I make my call for industrial workers to behave with discipline for the good of our community. Notwithstanding the difficulties, I hope it will be possible for members of the Executive to stick it out together. If they do we will all stick it out with them.

2.53 p.m.

Mr. Hume (Department of Commerce): I apologise to Mr. McConnell for being absent when he started to speak. However, I heard most of his remarks. This is another opportunity to consider the present very serious plight of Northern Ireland industry, which Mr. Bleakley has just underlined, and its effect on ordinary people. It is an opportunity to re-emphasise to the community at large the dire consequences which could flow from the present action to the many thousands of people who, directly or indirectly, depend upon industry for their livelihood.

The present situation is that industrial activity everywhere has ceased or is seriously curtailed. Production is lost, orders are being missed, and we must expect customer confidence in Northern Ireland suppliers to be eroded seriously. During the past five years local industry, in spite of all its difficulties, succeeded in persuading the world that it remained active and could be relied upon to deliver the goods. This has been of the greatest importance in keeping up employment.

Most of our industries are essentially dependent on markets outside Northern Ireland, and can keep going only so long as customers in Great Britain and elsewhere have confidence that their orders will be met. Today it is abundantly clear that many of those orders will not be met, and the loss which industry will suffer will be measured not only in terms of present lost production but in the increasing difficulty which, with each day's news of disruption, Northern Ireland firms will have in obtaining the future work on which employment depends.

This is the position in which existing industry finds itself. The success of many of our future plans for Northern Ireland depends on our continued ability to attract new industry and to encourage existing industry to expand. In this respect I remind those associated with the present stoppage to consider that the favourable economic climate in which we have recently been making encouraging progress on the industrial development front cannot be expected to last. Prospects for future growth of the United Kingdom economy, which is the key to our prospects, are already reduced by the consequences of the power crisis.

Accordingly there must not be a misconception that any leeway in the new industry drive can be made up by hard work. Unless there is a speedy return to work we will find ourselves saddled with a suspect record of reliability and in competition for limited new investment with areas not so impeded.

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The question is in certain respects symptomatic of these times, and perhaps of the mentality which has contributed to our present difficulty; I mean the widespread assumption that whatever happens, however irresponsible people may be in their actions, there is a safety net suspended beneath them which will preserve them from the consequences of those actions. This concept is inherently dangerous, and especially so in present circumstances, because in the end it is not necessarily true. I must tell Members frankly — I hope that the message will be widely reported — that at the present time I am aware of no arrangements for compensating industry for the massive losses which are being thrust upon it.

It gives me no pleasure to speak in these terms, but it is time that all those associated with the disruption of industry appreciate the extent of the damage which they are inflicting, not least on their own interests, and are disabused immediately of the idea that the consequences can easily be set aside. If the present state of affairs continues I wonder how much industry will be left to justify a similar question to that which the hon Members raised today.

2.57 p.m.

Mr. Morrell (Department of Agriculture): I am well aware of the con-

siderable financial and other losses currently being incurred by the whole of the agricultural industry. Clearly I am not in a position to make any firm statement at the moment on the question of compensation. Our present objective is to ensure basic food production and distribution but we have very much in mind the burden which the agricultural industry, from farm through factory to the distributing trade, is being asked to bear.

I should like to take this opportunity to record my appreciation of the efforts of those on all fronts in the industry, particularly the leaders of the Ulster Farmers' Union and of the Milk and Pigs Marketing Boards, to cope with the greatest crisis it has ever been called upon to meet. There is no shortage of food in the country and it is imperative that the essential service of feeding animals and the processing, manufacturing and distribution of farm produce is allowed to continue unimpeded. If agriculture is not permitted this freedom then it is not just losses for which they can be compensated which face Northern Ireland farmers but complete bankruptcy and the destruction of our most important single industry.

Question put and negatived.