



Official Report (Hansard)

Thursday 8 August 2024
Volume 162, No 5

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 8 August 2024

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

New Assembly Members: Michelle Guy, Colin Crawford, Timothy Gaston and Peter Martin

Mr Speaker: Members will be aware that, following a general election in July 2024, Jim Allister, Alex Easton, Sorcha Eastwood and Robin Swann were elected as Members of Parliament. As a result, they have ceased to be Members of the Assembly. On behalf of us all, I wish them well in their roles as Members of Parliament and thank them for their service to the Assembly.

I subsequently notified the Chief Electoral Officer of all vacancies, in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Michelle Guy has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the Lagan Valley constituency; Colin Crawford and Timothy Gaston have been returned as Members of the Assembly for the North Antrim constituency; and Peter Martin has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the North Down constituency. They have all now signed the undertaking and Roll of Membership, entered a designation and taken their seats. I welcome each of the new Members to the Assembly, congratulate them and wish them every success.

Private Members' Business

Opposition to Racism

Mrs Long: I beg to move

That this Assembly condemns the criminal damage and targeting of businesses in recent days; rejects all forms of Islamophobia, xenophobia and racism; endorses the work of voluntary sector organisations combating racism and supporting those impacted by it; recognises the work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other public-sector bodies protecting our communities during the recent unrest; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to finalise the draft refugee integration strategy and associated thematic delivery plan and present it to the Executive; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring forward the renewed race relations order, and set out the process of replacing the racial equality strategy 2015-2025 by the end of 2024.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. An amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List, so the Business Committee has agreed that 15 minutes will be added to the total time for debate.

Before the debate begins, I will make a few brief remarks. I understand that Members will wish to express their feelings on recent events. I remind them, however, to avoid making comments about individuals so far charged with criminal acts. I know that all Members will be mindful of the events of the past week and will want to conduct the debate respectfully and constructively so that the tone, language and behaviour do justice to the serious issues involved. One final issue: in the event that any of our new Members is called to speak, their contribution will not count as a maiden speech,

given that we have been recalled for the purpose of discussing a specific matter of urgent public importance.

Mrs Long: I propose the motion in the wake of events over recent weeks, and particularly over the weekend and recent days. We do so to condemn them and to offer our solidarity to all those who have been impacted on by that racism and violence. We also want to look forward to determine what we need to do to tackle the underlying issues that have surfaced.

I will speak mainly in my capacity as an MLA and leader of the Alliance Party, but I will finish by making some comments as the Minister of Justice.

I begin by condemning absolutely and unequivocally the reprehensible events of the past number of weeks in Antrim and, more acutely, over the weekend in Belfast and further afield. The actions of a small and violent minority are motivated by a desire to foment hate and division, and it should be highlighted for what it is: fearmongering and intimidation at the highest level.

Let me say clearly that there is no place in our society for the hate, xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia that we have seen on the streets over recent weeks and days. My thoughts are with all of those who have been impacted on by the targeted violence and intimidation. Specifically to all those who are feeling fearful and anxious as a result of what they have seen and experienced over recent days, I say that we stand with you. That violent minority does not represent the people of Northern Ireland. We in the Chamber do, and we speak for you as well as for them.

I also thank the police officers who have had to respond to the violence, and I give my best wishes for a speedy recovery to those who have been injured in the line of duty. I will return to the issue of policing later in my remarks.

The most recent unrest that we have seen in towns and cities across the UK was, on the face of it, in retaliation to an abhorrent knife attack in Southport. I speak for all my colleagues, and I think those from other parties, when I say that my thoughts are with all those children who were attacked and their families, and my deepest condolences go out to the families of the three little girls who were murdered: Elsie Dot Stancombe, Alice Dasilva Aguiar and Bebe King. Their families' loss is unspeakable. In the hours following that attack, false media claims about the perpetrator were amplified on social media. 'The Guardian' reported that there were

at least 27 million impressions of posts on Twitter alone that stated or speculated that the suspected attacker was Muslim, a migrant, a refugee or a foreigner.

Despite the pleas of the families of those girls for the unrest to stop, their anguish and pain is being exploited by those who are behind the riots. What we are witnessing is a form of radicalisation of people online through disinformation and outright lies propagated by far right and white supremacist elements, both domestic and international, and it is incredibly dangerous. Although people have a right to an opinion when it comes to issues such as immigration, as with any issue, it needs to be an informed opinion.

There have been suggestions from some that the violence is a result of people with genuine concerns about immigration seeking to protest legitimately. Those demonstrations, as they were advertised, were never intended to be either legitimate or lawful. From the outset, they were intended to intimidate and threaten, to break the law on public processions and to block roads, and I believe that they were intended to create violence and unrest. The call for women and children to stand at the front was, in my view, a clear attempt to use them as human shields when violence started. They were not, in my view, ever intended to be legitimate. They are hate marches.

I want, however, to speak beyond them. I want to speak to those people who are genuinely confused, frightened or even angry about immigration and to those who believe that immigrants and asylum seekers are the cause of their own hardship. They are not. Your anger is misdirected. Lack of investment by the previous Government in public services and housing is the cause, and, by taking out your frustrations on others because of their ethnicity, religion or skin colour, more scarce resources are being wasted. You are being manipulated by far right groups and social media fakery.

As political leaders, it is our role to counter, not amplify, division and disinformation. If you have genuine concerns about our community, raise it with us as your local MLAs. We must also collectively be clear, however, that there is no excuse ever for taking to the streets to intimidate others and create havoc in our community. Some of the people who have been the target of violence in Belfast are only here because they have experienced hardship and abuse in their home country that most of us can barely imagine. They are here to build a better life and to contribute constructively to society. They are here seeking safety, and they deserve

to live in peace. Others, however, are long-standing members of our community, many second- and third-generation, who have built businesses, created employment opportunities and provided services to our community for longer than some of the rioters have been alive. We need to ask ourselves honestly as a society: how long before someone is accepted as being part of our community? How many generations need to have passed before they are fully accepted and welcomed? If they continue to be othered because of the colour of their skin, their religion or their ethnicity, then let us be clear that that is racism, it is xenophobia, and it is Islamophobia. That is not and can never be legitimate, and we need to work collectively, as political leaders, to combat it.

I now want to make some remarks as the Justice Minister. Obviously, I was horrified to hear media reports of a man who was attacked in the street on Monday, and who is now in a serious condition in hospital after his attackers stamped on his head. I send my very best wishes to that man for a speedy recovery. The police say that they are treating that incident as a hate crime.

Just before recess, I spoke to the Assembly about my determination to expedite progress on updating our hate crime legislation and strengthening the protections that we offer to victims of hate crime. The recommendations from Judge Marrinan's independent review of hate crime legislation in 2020 have provided the impetus for that work. The implementation of those recommendations will make a real and tangible difference for victims of racist hate crimes. The loss of two years of Assembly business and the constraints on resources in the Department and the wider justice system have restricted the range of legislative reforms that are possible in the remainder of this mandate. Despite those challenges, however, I am determined that foundational new hate crime legislation provisions will be in place by the end of the mandate. I hope that I can rely on the support of colleagues here today in progressing those reforms, which, I believe, will offer significant assurance and shift the dial on our hate crime response and, indeed, the conversations in this space. I intend to make a statement in the Assembly setting out the details of my intentions following the summer recess.

The PSNI has had a very difficult task in policing the complex and rapidly evolving events of the past few days. I know that work is ongoing to bring those involved to justice and that they will face the full force of the law. There have already been 16 arrests and 11 people

have been charged, and that number is due to rise in the coming days. I have also been made aware of work that is being done with an Garda Síochána to identify those who crossed the border to engage in riots in Belfast at the weekend. I thank Minister McEntee for engaging with me on those issues earlier this week.

I visited the Belfast Islamic Centre yesterday to hear from some of those who have been affected by this situation. I heard very clearly that people have lost confidence in the police, and that concerns me. When I say that lessons will have to be learned, one of those is how to restore that trust and confidence. I pay tribute to the Chief Constable and his officers for the work that they are already doing to address those concerns. As I have said many times, policing and justice have not been this stretched since devolution in 2010. Though the total Northern Ireland block grant has increased by 53% in the past 13 years, the DOJ has seen just under 13% growth in its budget allocation. Policing makes up around 65% of our budget, and so it has endured the same sustained and profound squeeze. I say that in order to demonstrate that there are consequences of past decisions, some of which were made when the Northern Ireland block grant was in a much better state than it is today.

We know that, despite comparative investment, the health service and the education system are still not in a good place. Whilst, in my view, structural changes are required that partially can deal with this, it is clear that the effects on policing and justice of being actively starved of investment have never really received the same public attention. My colleagues and I have fought for years to highlight the risk in underfunding public services and justice, although, sadly, that has brought little to the table. No one, however, can claim to be surprised that there is a backlog in our courts, that our prisons are full and that our Police Service is at its lowest ever number of officers. The effect of those numbers in policing, amongst other things, is a lack of resilience. Services get scaled back, particularly in relation to work in neighbourhood policing. When there is a crisis such as unrest on the scale that we have witnessed over the past week, it is incredibly hard to manage. I therefore met the Secretary of State on Monday evening and again yesterday morning, and I was clear that policing needs access to the additional resources and support that is available to England and Wales during the current unrest and beyond. I also welcome and thank the Finance Minister, who has been clear in highlighting the need for further investment in

public services across Northern Ireland and continues to fight on behalf of the Executive for the proper funding of our public services. I continue to support those efforts on behalf of policing and justice.

12.15 pm

In closing, I will make two appeals. First, to anyone with information about either those who are involved or about other planned disturbances, I ask that you please bring that forward to the police and support us in bringing those who are responsible to justice. My second appeal is for calm. I appeal to people to step back and to all those who have influence to continue to seek to calm tensions and show support for and solidarity with those who are suffering most directly and are impacted on most profoundly by the violence and hatred. That is not who we are, and we cannot allow it to be.

Mr Kingston: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert:

"believes the right to peaceful protest is a fundamental pillar of any democracy and must be protected; stresses in equal measure that those who resort to violence and orchestrate public disorder on our streets should face the full rigour of the law; condemns the criminal damage and targeting of businesses in recent days; rejects all forms of Islamophobia, xenophobia and racism; endorses the work of voluntary sector organisations combating racism and supporting those impacted by it; recognises the work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other public-sector bodies protecting our communities during the recent unrest; urges the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, working closely with the Executive, to provide additional resources to the Chief Constable in order to maintain an agile and effective police response; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to finalise the draft refugee integration strategy and associated thematic delivery plan and present it to the Executive; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring forward the renewed race relations order, and set out the process of replacing the racial equality strategy 2015-2025 by the end of 2024."

Mr Speaker: You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes to speak.

Mr Kingston: The Democratic Unionist Party unequivocally condemns the violence and wanton destruction that has been witnessed on the streets of Belfast and elsewhere in recent days. Our message to those who are responsible for organising, taking part in or inciting that disorder is simple: stop, and stop now. Our thoughts and prayers are with all those who have been impacted on personally by that unacceptable wave of criminality: every business person whose premises have been destroyed or damaged, with their livelihood uprooted; every innocent person who has been assaulted or injured or feels fearful; and every police officer who has put themselves in harm's way to hold the line against rioters.

No one should have to live in fear because of where they were born, the colour of their skin or their religious beliefs. The targeting of homes, businesses and places of worship, including our mosques, is and always has been absolutely wrong. Let us be clear from the outset: anyone who perpetuates such attacks while citing love of Crown and country is deeply misguided. Civil and religious liberty is and always has been a cornerstone of our United Kingdom. Every July, as unionists, we celebrate and commemorate the defence of that principle in times past. It is something that our ancestors fought and died for, yet those who resort to racist and sectarian acts of violence serve only to besmirch their memory.

Northern Ireland has a proud history of welcoming those who seek better lives for themselves and their families and who have enriched our communities socially and economically. That will not change. It is abhorrent that some of our most dedicated health professionals have felt compelled to consider leaving Northern Ireland as a result of recent events. It is no exaggeration to say that, without their contribution, our health service and other essential provisions would collapse.

Yesterday, at the end of a day of meetings and interviews, I met three care assistants from the Philippines who live in the Woodvale and Ballygomartin area and work in a north Belfast care home. They have been here for some years, and they get on well with their neighbours, but they are now concerned for their safety after recent events. I assured them that I believe that there is no threat to their safety, and I left them my mobile number. It is appalling that they, along with many others who contribute to our society, suddenly feel unsafe in a way that they did not before.

I also listen to the concerns that residents raise every day, including on recent evenings, when I

have been on the streets. They have concerns about difficulty in accessing housing, particularly social housing; concerns about the level of private-sector rents; and concerns about antisocial behaviour and so on. People will have different views on the extent to which migration to Northern Ireland, regular and irregular, has led to the pressures that we face. There are other factors at play, of course, not least the chronic underfunding of our public services. However, if we want to get to the root of the problem, all need to recognise that individuals have the right to lawfully express those concerns, including through engaging in peaceful protest. However, it is clear to me that some people are pushing those issues to direct anger specifically at foreign nationals who are living in our community. That is disgraceful. It is depressing to see that anger and hate, which are causing fear for many people, particularly foreign nationals who live and work in our community, including in our care homes, health service, local businesses and services. I appeal to people not to be exploited by those with a racist agenda. Unfortunately, you see a lot of incitement on social media. People should be wise to that.

Mrs Little-Pengelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that today is the opportunity for us to send the strong and collective message that violence is wrong, disorder is unacceptable and that we utterly reject racism? The challenges in our communities are real, but that is a responsibility for all of us to tackle, including through access to affordable housing. We will listen to communities — we must listen to communities — and get our policies right. Does he agree that those who are burning, destroying and rioting, and who are attacking our police officers, are doing nothing but destroying their own communities and that, today, we stand absolutely united against that?

Mr Kingston: I thank the Member for her contribution. She is absolutely right: we must stand against violence and intimidation, and we must address the issues in local communities that people wish to raise — we will do that on an ongoing basis — but those issues should never be used as justification for violence or attacks.

We also recognise that the majority of those who participated in protests last weekend did so without malicious intent and took part in no criminality. Many of those protests did not make the news. We are disappointed that some parties have labelled all participants as racists or fascists. However, we also fully accept that with fundamental freedoms comes

responsibility. I implore anyone who is thinking of joining a public demonstration in the coming days to think carefully about whether their attendance could give succour to the criminal elements who wish to undermine the rule of law. That includes those who wish to abuse protests, create mayhem and exploit young people from the shadows. In the same way that wrecking your own community is entirely counterproductive to securing investment in it, political leaders who ignore genuinely held concerns of protesters take us further away from a solution, not closer to it.

The DUP wants to see meaningful dialogue with communities throughout Belfast and, indeed, our Province, and that is what we are engaged in day and daily. Violence is never justified, nor should it be an excuse for public bodies or politicians to run away from the problems and do nothing. We commend the professionalism of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, whose officers stood in the gap to confront the thugs who were intent on wreaking havoc and to protect businesses and premises that were under threat of attack. This remains a very fast-moving situation, and it is to the credit of every officer that the service was able to respond effectively and that officers were visible on the streets of our capital city. The police investigation of the disorder and arrests should be evidence-led, wherever that leads. As police forces in England and Wales receive offers of additional specialist support, the PSNI is working minor miracles to uphold the law with dwindling resources and record low numbers of police officers. We cannot reverse overnight the neglect of policing budgets under the watch of successive Justice Ministers. However, it is vital that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, working closely with Executive Ministers, urgently examine what additional support can be provided to the Chief Constable and his officers in the coming days.

We cannot ignore the fact that events on the streets of Belfast were part of a spate of violence seen nationally across the UK. There has also been societal unrest in Dublin and other parts of the Republic of Ireland. If we are to stop this happening again, it will require a collective response from the UK Government and the devolved Administrations to forge policies that sustainably address concerns, including around the control of our borders. There also needs to be a serious conversation about how we can do more to crack down on the anonymous social media accounts of malicious individuals who are instrumental in sowing the seeds of violence of this kind, often through misinformation. The authorities should not be left to pick up the pieces because of a

failure to crack down on social media platforms that are not doing enough to tackle hate online.

As Members will have seen, our amendment takes nothing away from the wording of the motion but adds that the right to peaceful protest, including for those who protested outside Parliament Buildings this morning, is a fundamental pillar of any democracy and must be protected and that those who resort to violence and orchestrate public disorder on our streets should face the full rigour of the law. Our amendment:

"urges the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, working closely with the Executive, to provide additional resources to the Chief Constable in order to maintain an agile and effective police response".

We urge the House to accept the amendment.

Miss Hargey: I absolutely condemn and abhor the vile Islamophobic and racist attacks that have occurred in my constituency of South Belfast and other parts of Belfast over the past number of days. First, let me be clear that Belfast is a progressive, forward-looking and inclusive city. It is a place that I am proud to call home and it is proudly diverse. The scenes of racist violence, destruction, thuggery and intimidation are disgusting and are not reflective of the Belfast that I know and love. On Saturday, I was on the ground alongside activists, countering the racist demonstration at City Hall. Later that day, I stood side by side with the proud residents of the lower Ormeau Road, who stood up and stopped the racist mob from progressing further on our streets. Later that day, I met the owners of businesses that were attacked along Botanic. Indeed, accommodation housing refugees and asylum seekers was attacked.

Lessons can be learned from the policing operation, and mistakes must not be repeated. The priority must be to protect people and property and face down racism, violence and intimidation. However, those responsible for what happened over the past number of days are the individuals and groups who whipped up hate online and then came out onto our streets to cause havoc and mayhem, fuelled by Islamophobia and racist hate. Those people must now be held accountable for their actions and face the full force of the law. There can be no place for racism, hatred, discrimination or intimidation anywhere in our society.

Throughout the past week, I have been on the ground, constantly engaging with our minority

communities and our businesses in areas where sporadic violence and attacks have been continuing. People are living in real fear, and you are hearing that daily. Already, we are hearing reports of nurses planning to leave the North in search of a safer location. They are people who work in our hospitals, they are our local shopkeepers and they are our neighbours.

The message coming from the Chamber today must be one of unity — no ifs, no buts. Belfast is a proud, multicultural city. Hate, racism and discrimination will not be tolerated by its people. It is time for all political parties and community leaders to be unequivocal in their condemnation of racist, Islamophobic violence. No longer can people be allowed to hide from public scrutiny. With one voice today, we say, "Stop". Stop the hate, stop the Islamophobia, stop the racism, stop the hatred and discrimination and stop the intimidation. We must stand in solidarity with our minority communities, and I will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with you as one community. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: We will have silence in the Gallery, please.

Dr Aiken: I rise to add my party's support to the motion and the amendment. Yesterday, I saw two very clear examples of the challenges that our society faces and of how our very valued migrants are involved. I spent several hours yesterday in Antrim Area Hospital's A&E with one of my children. Throughout the hospital, healthcare professionals of many races, religions and nationalities worked assiduously to help our constituents, including my daughter, through their health challenges. The people I saw and talked to from south Antrim in A&E and across the hospital were grateful for the professional medical care that they were receiving.

I did not hear one complaint about receiving help, from whatever source it came.

12.30 pm

I then heard of an attack on the home and car of a healthcare worker in Ballyclare. That attack on someone who is in Northern Ireland specifically to help our people is despicable and utterly abhorrent. The fact that that person came from a Filipino background is absolutely irrelevant. The fact is that this is a migrant worker who came to Northern Ireland to help. This very day, in my office in Ballyclare, people will be complaining about healthcare services, social services and all the rest. We have people in our community who have come here to help,

yet some very misguided people think, in some way, that it is appropriate to attack them. It is not. It has to stop, and it has to stop now. The fact that, across all of Northern Ireland, we increasingly rely on our friends from overseas who come to Northern Ireland to help us make it a much better place is something that all of us as politicians should be welcoming. We need to explain to those who do not understand that it is a net benefit to all of us, and we must make that so.

Finally, an additional issue that I would like to raise is that of anti-Semitism. In many ways, anti-Semitism is the canary in the coal mine for many of the issues that we have had. A year and a half ago, I spoke in the synagogue about concerns of anti-Semitism rising across Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland and about the impact that that was likely to have. There is no space in Northern Ireland for anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism, xenophobia or anything else. As politicians, we all must call people out for them. I would like to see an emphasis on anti-Semitism put alongside the other forms of horrific racism.

Mr O'Toole: First, I associate my party with the unequivocal condemnations of the race hate that we have seen on our streets in recent days. I also welcome members of the Muslim community who are sitting in the Public Gallery today listening to us. We owe them not just a welcome but an apology for what they and their community have had to endure in this society and this city over recent weeks and days. I say to them, "Sorry, but also thank you. Thank you for what your community and the people from all communities who have come to this society offer us every single day and continue to offer us. We are in your debt".

When I became an MLA for South Belfast, I had a choice of where to locate my constituency office. I am proud that my office is located in the middle of University Street. It is in the heart of one of the most diverse areas of not just this city or region but probably the whole island of Ireland. Students and academics who study and research at Queen's enhance and enrich that community. There are medical staff — doctors and nurses — working at the City Hospital right now to save lives. They were working to save lives last Saturday afternoon when a racist mob charged through that part of Belfast destroying property, intimidating them and seeking to spread their hate. Not only is that unacceptable but it is a profound failure of those people to understand the contribution that migrants make to this society, specifically given the Islamophobic context of those who were campaigning on Saturday.

In that part of Belfast, there are small businesses and small business owners, such as Rahmi Akyol, who has been in Belfast for more than three decades and runs his shisha cafe on lower Botanic Avenue. Rahmi has contributed jobs and services to that part of Belfast for decades. He has contributed immeasurably more than the hate-filled thugs who rampaged through the streets and sought to destroy his business and to intimidate him and his customers.

What therefore do we need to do now? Regarding a response, we need to do three broad things. First, we need to ensure that there is a robust policing response. It is clear that members of ethnic minority communities, and specifically the Muslim community, have real and profound questions about the policing of Saturday's events. It is also clear that there has been a gradual erosion of confidence among members of the Muslim community in the ability of the police to deal with hate crime. Some of that is clearly happening in the context of depleted resources, but it means that the policing response needs to be robust and immediate, and prosecutions need to be swift. I want to hear more about what the police are doing and how the Public Prosecution Service seeks to bring forward prosecutions swiftly.

Secondly, we need robust action from the Executive. I welcome the fact that the Executive are meeting today, but we need to see clear, deliverable actions in the coming weeks and months and before the end of the mandate. First, we need — finally — an updated racial equality strategy. We have been waiting nearly a decade for one. If ever there was a moment that proves that we need an updated racial equality strategy, it is now. We also need stand-alone hate crime legislation, and I welcome the commitment from the Justice Minister to progress that speedily.

Thirdly, it is clear that we need robust action at a national and international level on the wild west of social media: on people who spew hate on it and on those who seek to derive power and influence from the people who are spewing hate.

In recent years, we have almost lost sight of how enriching and glorious the increasing diversity of Northern Ireland has been, in part because we are a bit hung up on the historic diversity and division that we have inherited. Was it not wonderful to see, in recent weeks, athletes from this place standing proudly under both 'Amhrán na bhFiann' and 'God Save the King' as they won medals and did us all proud? It should not be hard to celebrate the new

diversity in our society, which sees people coming from all over the world to enrich and contribute to it. They are us. They are us, not the hate-filled yobs who rampaged through the streets of my constituency last Saturday.

In closing, I say to the Muslim community and the wider minority community in Northern Ireland not just that we are with you but that you are us. You are part of us, you will continue to be part of us, we will defend you and we will support you. Thank you.

Ms Sheerin: I am glad that we stand together today in response to some of the worst days that we have seen in our society recently. It is important that we do so to send a strong message that we are united against hatred, racism and Islamophobia and that love and hope will prevail over hate. It is important that we send a message to the racist thugs who have attempted to destroy parts of our community over recent days and weeks that we will not tolerate it, that what they are doing is wrong and that it must stop. It is racist, sectarian and Islamophobic and it does not represent the people whom we represent. If we are to take society forward and build a better future for everybody, we must send that message and condemn what we have seen.

To our ethnic minority communities, I say that we support you, we stand with you and we defend your right to a life free from intimidation and discrimination. We see your fear and send solidarity to you. We value you. We see the part that you play in our society. You are a part of our society, and we want it to stay that way. You make our society a better place, and you are a part of us. Those who incited the violence will not win. People who have been responsible for criminal behaviour in recent days must be held to account by the PSNI and our justice system. There is an onus on us all as leaders in our communities and as elected representatives to stand together and call this out.

Discrimination has no place in our society. No one is born with hate in their heart; it exists and grows only through ignorance and fear and by allowing misinformation to win. When those who know better do not challenge it or call it out, they become compliant in allowing a narrative that is wrong to win out. We therefore have a responsibility as leaders in our areas to stand together against it and call it out. We must send the message today that we are opposed to this violence and that hope will win over hate.

Ms Bradshaw: I support today's motion in order to tell those people from ethnic minority

communities who now live in Northern Ireland that they are valued, that this is their home as much as anyone else's and that we will endorse and support the rebuilding that now has to be done. Let me be clear: that rebuilding goes well beyond the clear-up of destroyed properties and even beyond the restoration of vital businesses. It requires action from political leaders and the rebuilding of trust.

There are people who have chosen to make Northern Ireland their home and to contribute to this society who now feel hurt, fearful and isolated. They need reassurance, and we are here today to provide them with that support, regardless of their religion, ethnicity or community background. I support Steve Aiken's point about adding anti-Semitism, because hate is hate.

I will quickly get to the substantive parts of the motion. In the racial equality strategy 2015-2025, there was a commitment to review the race relations order, which is now 27 years old and entirely out of date. The consultation on the draft order concluded in June 2023, which was 14 months ago, yet the official line from the Executive Office is that the report on the responses and feedback is under review and that it aims to bring forward updated race relations legislation in 2025-26. Given that its purpose is to provide the best possible legal protections against racism and to move towards a more equal society, and given that it would include provisions for advancing long-awaited ethnic equality monitoring, I would like to hear from the First Minister whether there is any way that it could be brought forward sooner as per the motion.

I will turn to the racial equality strategy, which is needed in order to address issues that, sadly, remain current and evermore urgent, such as tackling race hate crimes and racist bullying in our schools and ensuring fair employment. The current version was drafted a decade ago, and that makes it rather outdated, given how much things have changed in that time — many, sadly, for the worse. I would like the First Minister to outline what work is taking place in her Department in order to ensure that there is a seamless transition between the current strategy and the next. I would also like to hear a commitment that such a strategy will be developed with the community and voluntary sector and that it will be far-reaching and adequately funded for maximum impact.

I will turn to the refugee integration strategy. It is almost 20 years since OFMDFM first committed to it. The current iteration was consulted on in late 2021 and early 2022 and

was meant to run from 2022 to 2027. However, due to the political impasse, it has been significantly delayed. It was the understanding of the Committee for the Executive Office that it should have been signed off in May 2024. However, TEO's official position remains that the revised draft strategy and associated thematic delivery plans will be brought before the Executive "in due course". I would like to hear a firm date for that from the First Minister today.

As I said in my opening remarks, we now need to see a period of rebuilding. As we see that begin, we must reflect on the vital work of a sector that has for far too long been undervalued. When destruction of this nature arises, we see community groups and voluntary organisations being prominent with their response. They offer immediate assistance with the clean-ups, offer support and advice for those impacted on and continue to act as a consistent voice against racism and division. I pay particular tribute to the Belfast Islamic Centre, the Northern Ireland Muslim Family Association and the many other ethnic minority groups operating in South Belfast for their tireless efforts in the past week to support the people who have been impacted on by the attacks.

At least three PSNI officers have been injured in the line of duty in the past week. We must never normalise that, and I give thanks for their service, especially the front-line officers who have been on duty in South Belfast in the past week.

This is a moment for cohesion in the Chamber and for us to speak with a common voice. We all recognise that there is a lot of work to get on with, particularly to reassure every member of our community that they are valued and that their interests will be protected and promoted on an equal basis. We are saying today that if you attack one member of our community, regardless of their creed or colour, you attack all members of our community, and it is on that basis that we will start rebuilding.

12.45 pm

Ms Kimmins: Today's plenary meeting is an important opportunity for us all to stand together and condemn the horrendous images and the attacks that we have seen on our migrant communities over the past number of days. We have to show leadership and ensure that they know that we stand with them and will do everything that we can to protect them.

I stand here not just as Sinn Féin's health spokesperson but as a citizen who sees every single day just how much those who have come from other countries enrich and contribute to our society in so many ways. Thousands of hard-working international doctors, nurses, surgeons, midwives and other healthcare professionals in the health service have dedicated and continue to dedicate their lives to our health and well-being. Those people have left their home countries, families and communities to come here, where they are saving lives and providing invaluable care to patients from all backgrounds bar none.

Just 18 months ago, general medicine at my local hospital, Daisy Hill Hospital, was on the brink of collapse due to crippling staff shortages. Thankfully, because of the decisions of many overseas workers — healthcare professionals — who chose to come to Ireland and work in our health service, those services have been stabilised and protected. We must be and are eternally grateful to each and every one of them.

The very least that people from minority ethnic communities deserve is respect and to have the same safety and security as any other individual across this island. Ireland is the land of céad míle fáilte [*Translation: one hundred thousand welcomes*]. Our communities have embraced and welcomed many people from other communities over the years, just as many of our people were welcomed when they emigrated to countries across the world. Just yesterday, I spoke to some international healthcare workers in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area. They described the fear that they feel as they watch the disgraceful and despicable scenes that we have seen over recent days. They are afraid to go to work, to come home or to take their children out in public. I say this to them: we stand with you, we value you, and we have the utmost respect for the huge contribution that you make to society every day. This is your home, and you are all welcome here.

Racism and hatred are never acceptable — no ifs, no buts and, most importantly, no excuses.

Mr Chambers: I had not intended to speak in the debate, as all that needs to be said has been said eloquently and sincerely by the previous contributors. I hope that those who feel threatened or frightened by the disgraceful events of recent days can take some comfort from the support that has been expressed in the Chamber and, indeed, in the broader community.

Some months ago, I was a reluctant but very grateful guest in the wards of the Ulster Hospital. Injections, drips and regular medication were the main features of my two-week stay. At least 25% of the medical and nursing staff who administered that treatment, 24/7, were from overseas. I am sad that, but can understand fully why, some of those medical practitioners have expressed their intention to take their skills elsewhere. I appeal to all overseas staff in our health and social care system: do not leave. The community of which you and your family are valued members needs you. You are not an outsider but, totally and completely, one of us.

Ms McLaughlin: It is important that we are here today. My party was glad to support the recall of the Assembly.

It is hard to find the words to describe what we have seen unfold in the past week in the capital city and elsewhere. The scenes of racist attacks, wanton destruction and outright hatred have been appalling, disturbing and plainly wrong. Last weekend, we saw nothing short of an explosion of hate on our streets. It has shaken us all. I hope that today provides an opportunity for loud and unequivocal condemnation of that hate from every single politician and every single party. That is political leadership, and I hope that, collectively, we do that today.

Over the past week, far right agitators have sought to cruelly and criminally exploit people, often our teenagers, for their own racist ends. Those agitators have shown the worst of our society. They have shown the dark underbelly of the racist and fascist attitudes that still exist. They made me embarrassed and ashamed, not just because those elements still exist but because this is 2024 and we still have a society where those kinds of attitudes are allowed to fester and grow and where too many people still point to desperate people who come across on boats and dinghies as being the enemy. The vast majority of us know that it is inequality, not immigration, that is the real enemy.

I was proud to stand in a packed Guildhall Square last night and listen to our mayor — our first citizen — give a powerful, passionate speech against right-wing agitators. It was a message of hope, and it was powerfully delivered by our first black mayor. That gave me hope, because that is who we are, and that is who Northern Ireland is. We heard that loud and clear at those demonstrations. The barriers to housing or employment are not because of migrants or refugees, of whom, by the way, we take a staggeringly low share. Those barriers

are because of policy failure. Housing Rights has been clear that the housing crisis, in particular, is not caused by migration but by the devastatingly low levels of social housing that have been built. We need to get back to the facts in this public debate, and it is the job of all of us in this Chamber to educate and inform and never demonise.

In the face of this violence, many people are rightly asking themselves what kind of society we are building for the next generation. It is also important to say today that our society cannot be one where this kind of behaviour is allowed to proceed or go unpunished or where attitudes remain unchanged, nor can it be one where we appeal to criminal gangs to use their influence to bring down tempers or quell racist incidents. Some of the language that we have heard over the past week, as well as some of the silence that has taken place, has been misguided and sinister.

In short, it is my firm view that the people of Northern Ireland deserve so much better than this. The people of Northern Ireland are better than this. However, unfortunately, I also know that, as shocked as many were by the events of recent days, there are others, particularly from our minority communities, who were less shocked because they have seen such pervasive and perverse hate before. They see it in their daily lives, and they are less shocked because they know that the views that fuel the hate have, for many years now, been given credence and credibility by Governments, particularly across the water, that are more interested in stunts than solutions. There is no doubt that the rhetoric of recent years is coming home to roost, and the failure of the Government here is contributing to that crisis.

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: I will.

Mr McGrath: Thank you. Does the Member agree that the stop-go nature of politics here has impacted on the delivery of many of the strategies and that we can draw a direct line to some of the problems that we are facing today? Does she also agree that we need to see the Executive delivering on strategies and not just announcing them?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms McLaughlin: Absolutely. I totally agree with the Member.

Although I and many others welcome the recall of the Assembly as the right thing to happen, we want to hear more than warm words. Today, I want to hear from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and I want to see progress towards swift agreement on the refugee integration strategy and an update on the racial equality strategy. We also want to see and will play our part in ensuring strong accountability in Westminster on this issue to ensure that the new Government there live up to their commitments and overhaul the asylum system in a fair, compassionate and just way.

As a society and as political leaders, we will all have a job of work to do to deal with the root causes of racism, Islamophobia and xenophobia. Everywhere that we find them, we need to call them out. I would like to hear from the First Ministers about how they have engaged with the PSNI on its response last weekend and how it will deal with the issues, particularly given that there is the possibility of there being more protests this weekend.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: Although we recognise the PSNI's service last weekend —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: OK. Although we recognise the PSNI's service last weekend, many people, including representatives of Amnesty International, have said that our police have questions to answer about why they did not stop those racists —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member please take her seat?

Ms McLaughlin: — from attacking communities and businesses with apparent impunity.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member take her seat, please?

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you.

Mr Gaston: I certainly did not envisage that this would be the way in which I would be breaking myself into Assembly debate, but there are times when we need to pull up our socks, get on our feet and lead from the front.

I strongly condemn the violence that we have seen in recent days. I will be clear from the outset that the destruction of property and

physical attacks on people have no place in Northern Ireland, and they never have. Those responsible need to be brought to justice regardless of the label that they do it under or the organisation from which they stem. I have taken multiple calls from business owners across North Antrim who are concerned about the potential risk to their employees and the potential effect on their business should workers decide to return home.

Take Wrightbus as an example from my constituency. It employs over 2,000 people. Owing to the lack of a skilled workforce locally, it has had to bring in 600 skilled workers from the Philippines. Those workers come to Northern Ireland to work, and they contribute financially to the country and integrate into their local community and with their neighbours. They should be made to feel very welcome in Northern Ireland. Across Northern Ireland, multiple sectors depend on foreign workers, and I appeal to those who take to the streets to exercise their right to protest to do so with that fact in mind.

I have come to the conclusion that one of the main problems that people such as me have with condemning the violence in this place alongside some of those who condemn the violence in this place is the structures that exist here. The First Minister has said that there was no alternative to the IRA campaign. Let me remind the House what that means. It means that there was no alternative to the murder of Thomas Niedermayer, a German industrialist who brought employment to Belfast, only to be abducted, murdered and buried face down in a dump by the Provisional IRA. It was a horrific case, and it ultimately resulted in a number of his family members taking their own lives. You cannot say, out of one side of your mouth, that the violence directed at immigrants in recent days is wrong whilst defending, out of the other side of your mouth, the murder of a migrant who brought jobs to west Belfast. All murder was and is wrong, and all violence was and is wrong, and the very fact that there are people sitting in this place who cannot say that is a huge problem.

I hear regularly from people who see that violence has worked for others in Northern Ireland and who now believe that it is the only way in which to make others sit up and take notice of their concerns. I hear that argument time and time again. I will never defend violence, but Members need to recognise and respect the fact that people have the right to protest peacefully and express their concerns. Whether the House likes to hear it or not, there are legitimate concerns about legal and illegal

immigration in Northern Ireland and throughout the rest of the United Kingdom.

I welcome the statement from the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Police and Crime Commissioner, Ms Donna Jones, who said:

"the only way to stem the tide of violent disorder is to acknowledge what is causing it."

She went on to say:

"The government must acknowledge what is causing this civil unrest in order to prevent it. Arresting people, or creating violent disorder units, is treating the symptom and not the cause."

Honeyed words from the House, spoken while ignoring the problems, will not make the issue go away. The people who have legitimate concerns are fathers, mothers and grandparents. It is simply wrong to brand them as being far right, as many have tried to do.

It is only right to acknowledge that the tragic murders in Southport was the catalyst that sparked the current unrest, which is similar to the trouble that we have seen in France and, indeed, the Republic. Unchecked, unpoliced and illegal migration needs to be brought to an end.

1.00 pm

I have repeatedly heard it claimed that the number of people leaving Northern Ireland is greater than the number of those coming here. Data published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency proves that claim to be false. In fact, there was a net international flow of over 5,000 people in the year ending mid-2022. The reality is that many working-class communities, such as Harryville in my constituency, recognise that immigration has been a factor in the pressures on housing.

Ms Nicholl: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. I wonder how he can put the housing crisis at the feet of migrants, when it is, in fact, politicians who are responsible for investment.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Gaston: If the Member had listened to me, she would have heard me say that immigration has been a factor. I did not say that it was solely the cause of the problem.

There are also greater pressures in my constituency, like seeing a doctor or dentist, where — whether or not you like to admit it — immigration has played a part. There are pressures in schools, and immigration has been a factor, mainly due to a language barrier.
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will be heard.

Mr Gaston: Yes, years of underinvestment in this place and the Departments have played a part in that, but burying your heads in the sand will not make the issue go away. My goodness, all the rigorous implementers in the House who cheer every time the protocol separates us further from the rest of the United Kingdom, including on immigration policy, also have to take some responsibility for the mess in which we find ourselves.

Moving forward, it is highly likely that Northern Ireland will face greater challenges than the rest of the UK. While the Government in Westminster will look to grapple with the issue, we in Northern Ireland are excluded —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up

Mr Gaston: — from such measures as a result of the protocol.

Mr Carroll: I place on the record my disgust at the brutal racist violence that we have witnessed in recent days. I also extend solidarity to all the victims. The far right forces behind those attacks are in the minority, and countless people here are determined to stamp out racism, Islamophobia and bigotry of any kind. The scenes that we have seen in recent days have been abhorrent. Certainly, based on the experience of the weekend, things could have been a lot worse, had we not had an organised anti-racist response to those who wanted to divide us. When a small far right mob gathered at the City Hall on Saturday, it was met with thousands of anti-racist campaigners. I pay credit to every campaigner who took a stand then and who is taking a stand against the hate of the far right. On Saturday, however, after the protest, we saw a group of violent thugs virtually being given free rein to attack migrants and migrant-owned businesses. The PSNI has serious questions to answer on that front.

The violence witnessed in recent days did not occur in a vacuum. The far right has been emboldened by the racism of those in power who want to scapegoat migrants for their own failings. Those Governments have failed to

build social homes — some should listen to that point — cut public services, kept wages down and punished working-class people through brutal economic measures like the two-child limit. Migrants, refugees or asylum seekers are not to blame. Deprivation, wrought by successive Westminster and Stormont Administrations, is fertile ground for racist ideas to grow and fester.

Racism, however, does not stem from working-class communities. It is a top-down ideology that is created and fuelled by government policy. The Tories, who spent years attacking our communities, told us that people fleeing for their lives in small boats were the problem. They wanted us to focus on people who had nothing whilst turning a blind eye to the wealthy, who are hoarding ever-increasing amounts of obscene wealth. They caricatured migrants, asylum seekers and refugees and tried to strip them of their human rights through the disgraceful Rwanda Act.

The Labour Party has continued the Tories' hostile environment policy, which condemns asylum seekers, who are fleeing war, poverty and persecution, to a life of misery here. The measures designed to degrade and punish them for coming here happened on the watch of the Executive, who are tied to the hostile environment policy by a million threads. We see detention and deportation facilities like Larne House operating under Stormont's nose. We have the Executive's failure to bring forward a racial equality strategy, and yet people in this House wonder whether we have a racism problem. Political choices that either ignore or pander to racism have led us to where we are today, and, even now, after all the racist violence, there are elected representatives who still continue to give succour to far right thugs who have loyalist paramilitaries in their ranks. They say, "These people have legitimate concerns". Let me say this: there is nothing legitimate about the racism, Islamophobia and hate of those who have coordinated and organised these attacks.

It is a great irony that those who excuse racism and talk about so-called legitimate concerns are the same people who have overseen the housing crisis, the crisis in our NHS and much else. However, it would make an absolute mockery of us all if we were to listen to politicians who refuse to build public homes or tackle sky-high rents and who do the bidding of landlords at every single turn.

Migrants are not the problem. We have a problem with landlords, a problem with underfunding and a problem with a Government

who refuse to tackle the housing crisis. Working-class unity is key for delivering on housing, overcoming poverty and seeing investment in all our public services. We need to combine those struggles with the anti-racism struggle because we are stronger together. We can win only if we are together. It will be up to us to stand up for one another, because the Government and the police force have failed.

I also offer a severe word of caution about the subsequent police response. Young people who are incited to riot by loyalist paramilitaries do not need to be fired at with lethal plastic bullets, which should be banned. If the state wants to deal with rioting, it should deal with the paramilitary and far right leaders who are orchestrating and organising this violence. However, I will not hold my breath.

We need a mass anti-racism movement so that we can reclaim our streets and isolate the far right. We need working-class people to unite against racism in their communities, workplaces and everywhere that it raises its ugly head. Stand up against racism. Do not give it any quarter or truck. Solidarity.

Ms Sugden: It sends an important message that we have come together as an Assembly to unequivocally condemn the behaviour, which has been motivated by racism, that we are watching unfold in Belfast and across the United Kingdom.

I wish to remember three beautiful girls — Bebe, Elsie and Alice — whose precious lives were taken by a man: a young man. If there is any protest that we should all join, it should be that to address the persistent violence against women and girls. It is not all men — indeed, men and boys are victims too — but when violence occurs, facts tell us that the perpetrator is usually a man. That is the crisis that we need to address, and I ask Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom to reflect on that rather than on the misinformation that is clouding judgement on the issue.

I also pay tribute to the community in Southport. We need to look to their example, which shows that, despite profound loss and a deep wound that will scar their community for ever, they have remembered their babies with dignity. They do not want violence. They do not want it in the name of those whom they loved.

I will say this to those who are rioting and being abusive: do not dare to claim that it is for anyone but yourself. I say to those who are being targeted: I am so sorry that living here has made you feel scared, intimidated and

unsafe. As someone who is deeply proud to be from Northern Ireland, I am horrified and ashamed that this behaviour is being associated with my home and yours. I say to immigrants that ethnic minorities are not a community apart. You are our community. You are the doctors in our hospitals, the businesses that have provided jobs, the colour and culture that have enriched our lives, and the people who are doing the targeting can claim only to live here.

Let us all be very clear. The motivation for riots — they are not protests — criminal damage and intimidation is racism. Those who are leading them are racists. Their *raison d'être* is to whitewash our community. If you tell me that you are not a racist, do not try to justify the behaviour. Stop the whataboutery and stop standing with them. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland are wonderful, welcoming people. Let us not allow this behaviour to represent us. Share your concerns, protest peacefully, contact your MLA, but do not protest in the way that we are seeing.

I acknowledge that there are problems, but they were created by successive Governments, or their absence, in Stormont and Westminster. What sense or justification is there in destroying a business that creates jobs, serves the community and contributes to our economy? If you are frustrated because you cannot find a house, access your GP or heat your home because the Government plan to take away your subsidy, do not blame those who are in the same position as you. They are also in that position. The colour of their skin does not stop the very real problems of bad government and poor public services. If anything, it exacerbates them.

What we are seeing should be a stark warning to the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government. You need to build back confidence in the people of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. That starts with a Programme for Government and action on resourcing our police force and building houses. Start listening to the people who elect us, and start serving them accordingly.

It means nothing that the Union flag is joined with the Irish flag as a symbol of this behaviour. If anything, it justifies nothing and desecrates both. A criminal is a criminal, regardless of the flag that they fly. Setting aside sectarianism for racism is neither novel nor something to be proud of. Paramilitaries do not exist for a cause or because they are concerned about you. It is entirely about them, whether that is selling drugs, making money or other forms of

criminality. Those things are much easier when the police are distracted elsewhere. It is your community that they are exploiting and your children whom they are manipulating.

I am horrified at seeing children in the middle of all the current violence, but, sadly, that is not new. I will remind parents, however, that the criminal age of responsibility in Northern Ireland is 10 years old. Their cute smile will not save them, nor will their primary-school uniform. They will be criminals for the rest of their life. Is that what we really want for them? Is that what we want for the future of Northern Ireland? I stand against racism.

Mr Speaker: I call the First Minister, Michelle O'Neill. You have 15 minutes.

Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. [*Translation: Thank you, Mr Speaker.*] I welcome the fact that the Assembly has convened today and that we are very strongly united in standing firmly against the racism, violence and intimidation that we have witnessed over the past few days. I welcome the fact that we have many people in the Public Gallery today and that many people at home will be watching on and looking for strong political leadership at this time of violence and intimidation.

I very much welcome the tone that has been set, by and large, by most contributors to the debate. Racism is a stain on our society. There is a no to racism: there is no place for it in our society. There is no excuse, no rationale, no justification: racism is wrong in every single form.

I want to speak directly to those who are inciting hatred in our society today. We see you, we reject you, and we reject your attitudes and actions. To those who are involved in violence and intimidation and in causing chaos and destruction, I say this: you will be dealt with by the full force of the law. To those who are targeting our minority communities, I say this: stop now, because you do not speak for us, and you will never speak for us.

The racism and violence that we have witnessed are in stark contrast to the values of equality and respect that the Executive and the Assembly strive to promote and uphold. That was reaffirmed earlier today when our four-party Executive met. We see the devastating impact that those crimes have on victims. We have spoken to them. You all know them: they are your friends, your family and your community. We can see the devastation that has happened, and our thoughts are with all

those people. Much more than that, though, they want to know that we have their back and that we will stand with them.

Our healthcare workers are afraid to go to work. Our nurses are afraid to come home from work. Our mothers and families are afraid to take their children to a summer scheme or to the park. Our young people are afraid to walk the streets. That was a message that we heard loud and clear, and Members were hearing that too from the people whom they were engaging with. Certainly, yesterday, when the deputy First Minister and I met the racial equality subgroup, we heard that message. Yesterday evening, we met business owners who were impacted on, and we heard about their devastation and the support that they need.

Make no mistake about it: last week's activity and the activity — I call it activity, but it is criminality — that we have witnessed over recent days was nothing more than raw racism, and it has to be addressed with a zero tolerance approach. Officials from the Executive Office are engaging with colleagues across Departments, with Belfast City Council, and with agencies and groups on the ground to explore how financial support can be provided to businesses that have been damaged or impacted on by the protests.

The Executive will continue to implement the racial equality strategy 2015-2025, but, as Members have indicated, we need to work towards moving to the next stage of that. We acknowledge the work that has been done and the contributions that have been made right across our minority ethnic community, not just to our economic life but to our public, political, social and cultural life. This is our community. We must never lose sight of the fact that this is our community that we are talking about.

We want to see all our local businesses grow, not be destroyed by acts of violence. The strategy itself acknowledges:

"We should be under no illusion about the size of the challenge involved in tackling racial inequalities."

and that it:

"will require time, effort and resources"

to be put in that direction.

It also recognises that each and every one of us has responsibility for playing our part in combating racism and racial inequalities by

embracing the diversity that undoubtedly contributes to building a more vibrant, shared and equal society.

1.15 pm

Full implementation requires the support of everybody out there: all of us and all partners. I acknowledge all that has been done by the voluntary and community organisations that work to combat racism, not just in weeks like this, at these horrendous times, but all year round, day in and day out. We commend your tireless efforts.

The minority ethnic development fund is an example of the Executive's programme that supports the invaluable work of those organisations. One of our key aims has been to establish dedicated structures to ensure that racial equality is given continued focus and that there is a strong link with our minority ethnic population.

Under the racial equality strategy, a subgroup was established to function as a strong voice within government on issues specifically affecting minority ethnic people, migrants and race relations. The subgroup has a significant role to play in supporting the delivery of the current priorities and, crucially, steering where we go and developing future priorities.

We need to provide — I think that the Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office mentioned this — the best possible legal protection that we can to stand against racism and highlight that that was one of the key actions of the strategy itself. We have completed the public consultation, and the report on that, which was published this week, will inform how we move forward and what the next legislative change will look like. It moves us a step forward, closer to a more equal and safe society. While it will remain a key priority to deliver fully the current racial equality strategy, it is so important that we get the post-2025 strategy right and — this is why I concur with the motion — bring it forward as quickly as we can.

The Executive also recognise the need to work collaboratively, including with the racial equality subgroup, thematic groups and the wider minority ethnic community and sector to ensure that we have inclusive processes, that we have the conversations and that we develop how we move forward together. Officials are already engaging on that in anticipation of the expiration of the current strategy. In addition to our racial equality strategy, the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy represents

our commitment to building a truly shared and united society, regardless of people's political, religious or ethnic backgrounds. As recent events have highlighted, much more work needs to be done.

We are also very conscious of the fact that the fabric of society has changed since the launch of the T:BUC strategy way back when. On that basis, we have asked our officials to conduct a review of the strategy, including how to ensure that it meets the needs of our society, given its current make-up, and that it is a truly inclusive strategy for everybody who calls this place home, because in that will be the success of it.

I acknowledge the work of the PSNI and other bodies during the unrest, and I reaffirm our commitment to work together to deliver a shared, peaceful and inclusive society. We are acutely aware of the resources issue that the Justice Minister mentioned. All our public services have been decimated by 14 years of Tory austerity. We are fighting back against that, and we want the new Labour Government to turn the tide on the austerity agenda of the past 14 years. We need properly funded public services. The Chief Constable was at the Executive meeting this morning. We talked about the situation that is unfolding. We also talked about the shared priority to tackle and push back against racism and to take a zero tolerance approach to intimidation and violence and push that back. We will continue to work with the PSNI to achieve a better funding model for the Police Service, as we will for our health and education systems and all our public services.

People who have been displaced represent some of the most vulnerable in our society. We all have a responsibility to challenge prejudice and intimidation wherever we see it. People who are seeking protection make significant contributions to our society. We should value that. I certainly value that. We value that. Those people bring with them a rich diversity of culture, along with new ideas and approaches. Diversity will always have that strength. The publication of a refugee integration strategy therefore remains a priority for us in order to establish a clear framework through which we can collectively and successfully support two-way integration.

All that work is best delivered through effective and properly resourced public services. As I said, we are acutely aware of the underfunding situation when it comes to our public services, and we are committed to doing all that we can. Our Finance Minister, Caoimhe Archibald, is

making the case for that fair funding model to the Treasury and will continue to do so.

We will, of course, continue all our efforts across government and in wider society to tackle racism and inequality in all their forms, which have been brought into sharp focus over the course of recent days.

People are looking to all of us in the Chamber for political leadership, and I know that Members want to provide that leadership, but we have to speak out and confront hate. We must challenge the lies that fuel this type of activity. We have to challenge them and make it abundantly clear that there is no tolerance of racism, hate, discrimination, intimidation, violence or criminality.

This afternoon, I have covered some of the policy issues to which the motion refers. I could go into a lot more detail, but, for me, today is about sending a strong message. It is about a clarity of message coming from this elected body. It is about our sending that very strong message today, in an unequivocal way, that we reject racism.

I started by speaking to those who are involved in criminal activity and in violence and intimidation, so let me finish by speaking to those people from an ethnic minority background who have been impacted on by the events of recent days, and not just recent days, as it is an underbelly in our society that we need to tackle. We say to you that your political leaders say no to racism. We say to you that your political leaders say no to intolerance and hate. We say yes to an inclusive society and yes to diversity. We say to you that you are our brothers and our sisters. We say to you that you are our community. Working with every person who has been elected to the House, I am determined to do everything that I can to build that better society, to choose hope over fear and to ensure that every child here has the best opportunity to flourish. We say no to this malevolent, violent activity, and we say no to racism. Let that be the only message that flows from the Chamber today.

Mr Buckley: Let me be crystal clear: I utterly condemn the violence that has taken place on our streets and across the United Kingdom: no ifs, no buts. I express my sympathy to the families of Elsie, aged seven, Alice, aged nine, and Bebe, aged six, who were so callously murdered in Southport. The violent scenes across the United Kingdom in the aftermath of those horrendous murders do nothing to honour their memory. Such actions are illegal, reckless

and counterproductive to the vital discussions that we need to have about our country's immigration policies. There can be no doubt that the UK's long-term uncontrolled immigration policy has sparked considerable concerns across the nation. Many citizens, me included, feel that it is contributing to the considerable strain on our public resources. Ignoring those concerns does a huge disservice to the very people whom we claim to represent, regardless of background. The issues deserve proper scrutiny, political debate and policy changes, but never — never — should they result in racist street attacks, whether those be in east, west or south Belfast or across the United Kingdom. No.

It is therefore essential to differentiate between opposing uncontrolled and illegal immigration and opposing immigration altogether. Most people support legal, controlled and managed immigration. Our country has a proud history of welcoming those who seek a better life, who contribute positively to our society and who respect our laws and values. They are vital to sectors such as healthcare, as has been mentioned, in which we rely heavily on skilled professionals from abroad to maintain the quality of our services. Immigration that is tailored to our country's specific needs is beneficial and necessary. Conversely, large-scale, uncontrolled immigration over a prolonged period is causing serious issues for local constituents. As an elected representative, I would be failing my constituents if I were not prepared to speak about those issues in this place.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: I will in a moment.

The additional strain — I emphasise the word "additional" — on public services such as housing, school places and council services cannot be ignored. I see this day in and day out as an elected representative. My first duty is to ensure our citizens' security, well-being and prosperity. One of the most dangerous aspects of the current debate is the tendency for commentators and politicians to brand anyone who questions uncontrolled immigration and its contributing impact on society as far right and racist. Members, the mother who has concerns about getting her child a school place is not far right or racist. The 25-year-old who cannot get housing in his local community is not far right or racist. The elderly citizen who is angered that their winter fuel payment has been taken from them whilst £80 million a day is being spent to house asylum seekers in hotels is not racist or far right, Members. To label them as such is a

mischaracterisation and stifles the constructive dialogue and alienates a large section of the population who have legitimate concerns.

The current Westminster policy —.

Ms Forsythe: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: Go ahead.

Ms Forsythe: Does the Member agree that the current Westminster Government have much to do to develop policies to make a difference in this area?

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Buckley: It is an absolutely critical point, because the current Westminster policy failures in relation to immigration have led to a situation where many people feel that their voice is not heard nor their communities protected. I understand that I may speak from a different point of view than many Members in this Chamber, but it is better for me to say it in this place than for people outside of this place to express it in a violent way, which is unacceptable. We must channel this energy into meaningful dialogue and actions to address the underlying policy failures, whether that be weak border controls, underinvestment in key public services, low police numbers or a UK-wide benefit system that continues to attract illegal immigration to the United Kingdom. We need a targeted immigration policy that deals with societal realities, grows our economy and, crucially, —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Buckley: — enriches our country by representing and respecting its cultural identity.

Mr Speaker: I call Kate Nicholl to make the winding-up speech on the motion.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you, Mr Speaker. First, I thank members of the Muslim community for their presence here today, for their resilience and for their dignity. Some of what you have had to hear this afternoon will not have been easy. I acknowledge the fear that they and those from minority ethnic communities are living through. That should be our focus, and you have been let down. Collectively, we need to do better. What has unfolded over the past few days has been shocking, unsettling and very sad. It is hard to make sense of it. How did

we get here? Was it 14 years of a Tory Government and their hostile environment? Was it the newspaper headlines demonising the most vulnerable and platforming hostility as though it were a legitimate viewpoint? We know that there are dark forces at play on social media. How much of this was them? What impact has our failure to progress key pieces of legislation, our stop-start government and our financial instability had? Is political hesitancy and, at times, silence in the face of hate crime to blame? Anna Lo always said that sectarianism and racism are two sides of the same coin. Has our inability to meaningfully tackle sectarianism, having normalised suspicion and dislike of the other, been a driving force? My view is that all of this is true. Wound together and set against a context of misinformation, disinformation and inequality, here we find ourselves, a complex path that has led us to a dark and frightening place.

Thankfully, there are ways out of here, but we will need to grow together. As a first step, we must agree that the violence on our streets is unacceptable. We wholeheartedly condemn it, and those responsible must feel the full weight of the law. Members have been in agreement on this. Secondly, we need to name the problem. Those businesses that were attacked were owned by Muslims. The end point of the riots was the Belfast Islamic Centre. There is no ambiguity here. The unrest was powered by racism and Islamophobia, and the motion states that.

1.30 pm

We need to focus on how we listen to the voices of those who have been impacted on. Not one of us who has spoken today has their lived experience. Those who are in fear need to be safe and protected, and we must be visible to them and guided by their needs. The path from here gets harder. Tackling inequality is not easy. We have an insufficient Budget and crises everywhere you look. Housing, poverty, health and education all need to be fixed. We need a properly resourced Justice budget. Legislation is not far from completion on racial equality, refugee integration and anti-poverty, but the good news is that the Assembly is up and running, we have Ministers in place and we can get on with it, and we must.

I feel very uncomfortable with the insistence of some beginning their remarks by stating that there are legitimate concerns. I will read what the Victims' Commissioner said, which was:

"So-called 'legitimate concerns' are never acknowledged when we have condemned examples of sectarian hate crime, sexual assault or street violence in the past. It should therefore play no part in our messaging when we condemn violence against victims who are non-white."

Some Members: Hear, hear.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Ms Nicholl: I want to get on, and then I will bring you in.

There is a right to peaceful protest, and there are people who have concerns. Those points are true. However, there is no right to incitement. While it may not be your intention, the result of qualifying your condemnation is to make those who are being targeted feel that politicians are prioritising the perpetrators over the victims. Legitimate concerns do not validate illegitimate protest. The protest outside today bears no equivalence to the one that was held on Saturday.

I acknowledge that, while the intent of the riots was rooted in racism, not all those who attended them were racist. Too many in our society, from every walk of life, are struggling. That is the issue, not immigration and not housing. It is shameful to focus on that when victims, who are sitting in the Public Gallery, are living in fear right now and we make it about housing policy. Housing policy is a failure of politicians, not of people who have a different religion or skin colour.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Nicholl: Decades of deliberate misinformation will be hard to untangle. Across the world, there is a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment. Those with nothing are pitted against each other by those with everything. Here is where our leadership really matters. Here is where we have to say, "This is misinformation." We have a moral duty to address the lies that people are being told and the manipulation and to stress that only 0.6% of the UK population are asylum seekers and that 85% of refugees are in developing countries. We need to be clear that Northern Ireland needs newcomers in order to grow. Can we please stay away from the narrative of the good migrant versus the bad migrant? Your working in a hospital does not make you better than an asylum seeker. We are all human beings. We all have worth, and we all have value.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Nicholl: Our diversity makes us richer, and we need to tap into the warmth and empathy that our people possess in volumes. That empathy and compassion are sometimes hard to access because of poverty and the failure of our public services to meet their needs, but those are two separate conversations. We are here today talking about racist crime and Islamophobia. We will have another conversation about housing. Please do not conflate the issues. It is negligent and dangerous to do that. Our views on politics, history, economics and the constitutional question will vary, but I really hope that, today, one thing that we can agree on is that we are all united in our desire to make this place a better one where everyone, regardless of their religion or race, can feel safe, be happy and lead a good life.

I will finish by reading the words of Muhammad Atif, who is from the Belfast Multi-Cultural Association. He is in the Public Gallery, but he spoke to us on the stairs outside. It is right that we end with his words. He said:

"We must reflect on the message that we are sending to our children. What kind of society do we want them to inherit? Is it one where division and intolerance thrive or one that celebrates diversity and unity? We have witnessed failures from authorities and politicians in adequately protecting Muslim and immigrant communities, and now they have the opportunity to correct that. It is imperative that today, you send a resounding message of solidarity that we stand united against racism, Islamophobia and discrimination in all forms. We urge every citizen of Northern Ireland to embrace our diversity and recognise it as a strength. Together, let us build a future where everyone, regardless of their background, skin colour and religious beliefs, feels valued and safe. The time is now to affirm our commitment to inclusively, making Northern Ireland a welcoming home for all."

He asks:

"Will you promise me this? Will you promise this to yourself? Will you promise this to our next generations?"

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 28; Noes 43.

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Beattie, Mr Bradley, Mr Brett, Ms Brownlee, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Crawford, Mr Elliott, Mrs Erskine, Ms Forsythe, Mr Frew, Mr Gaston, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Kingston, Mrs Little-Pengelly, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Martin, Mr Middleton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr T Buchanan and Mr Kingston

NOES

Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Baker, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms Bradshaw, Miss Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Delargy, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dillon, Mr Donnelly, Mr Durkan, Ms Egan, Ms Ennis, Ms Ferguson, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Mrs Guy, Miss Hargey, Mr Honeyford, Mr Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr McAleer, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McMurray, Mr McNulty, Mr McReynolds, Mr Mathison, Ms Mulholland, Ms Á Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Ms Nicholl, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Miss Reilly, Ms Sheerin, Ms Sugden.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Honeyford and Mr McMurray

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns the criminal damage and targeting of businesses in recent days; rejects all forms of Islamophobia, xenophobia and racism; endorses the work of voluntary sector organisations combating racism and supporting those impacted by it; recognises the work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other public-sector bodies protecting our communities during the recent unrest; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to finalise the draft refugee integration strategy and associated thematic delivery plan and present it to the Executive; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring forward the renewed race relations order, and set out the process of replacing the racial equality strategy 2015-2025 by the end of 2024.

Adjourned at 1.51 pm.