

Referendum on the New European Union Treaty

Mr Deputy 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 to propose and 10 minutes to make his winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the United Kingdom Government to hold a referendum on the new European Union treaty.

Members are familiar with organisations that are relentless and single-minded in the pursuit of their own agenda, even when the beliefs that they promote are held only by a minority of the population. They are also familiar with how powerful political and commercial interest groups have, for half a century, attempted to bring into being a united states of Europe, which would cause each member state to lose its individual identity as it became absorbed into a bureaucratic monolith.

The powerful agenda to subdue individual nations to the will of the European Central Bank has been characterised at every step of the journey by the surrender of the civil and religious rights and liberties that are enjoyed by citizens of the United Kingdom. It has also been characterised by a determined effort by sinister forces to diminish our distinctive British identity.

When the European Economic Community was formed in 1957 with six member states, we were assured that it was a beneficial organisation that was designated to enable European neighbours to tackle mutual social and economic issues. By 1973, when the United Kingdom was absorbed into the EEC without a national referendum, the principle of the primacy of European law over the national law of member states was already clearly established. Even then, it was clear that there would be major winners and major losers. Some countries such as the United Kingdom paid an extreme price for its continued membership, while other countries became major beneficiaries, with massive amounts of financial and other gains flowing their way. One only has to look across the border to see how the Celtic tiger has flourished as a result, while the UK pays the second-largest contribution, worth £12 billion, to the EU, of which, it has been said, it only gets a fraction back.

5.00 pm

In the past 34 years the European Union has grown to include 27 member states. At no stage during those decades of enlargement were the people of

the United Kingdom afforded the opportunity to declare their consent, or opposition, in a referendum. Now, countries like Croatia, Macedonia — and Turkey, with its dubious reputation on human rights and still in military occupation of parts of Cyprus, another EU member state — want to join the European Union. The admission of a country such as Turkey, without a referendum, flies in the face of common sense.

The agenda established with the Treaty of Rome has been vigorously pursued through the Single European Act 1986; the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992; the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997 and most recently through the Treaty of Nice in 2001. The European express train, with large numbers of net beneficiary countries already on board, came to an abrupt halt when the people of Holland and France halted its progress by voting against further expansion of the European constitution in 2005.

The treaty, to which they declared their opposition in referenda, was developed and proposed by an intergovernmental conference in 2004 so as to create a constitution for Europe and give the European Union all that would flow from that, such as a legal identity, a president, a motto, a flag, an anthem, and all the trappings of constitutional power, with no accountability to the people of any individual member state.

People in the United Kingdom, including the majority of people in Northern Ireland, do not want to lose their distinct British cultural and political identity to a European Union whose powers supersede those of its member states. We want to have a genuine say in the direction of our foreign policy, and we want to retain independent control of the way in which we relate to deprived countries and communities in the Third World.

We are all appalled at the enormous increase in bureaucracy and fraud that characterises many departments and programmes in the European Union. We want to have a say in changing things to suit the people who pay the European piper but never get to choose the tune. We want to be able to control our borders and have the power to impact directly on issues such as immigration, terrorism, asylum and crime.

We do not want an international system of rolling devolution to take us to the point where we surrender power to the people of a hugely expanded European community. We do not want to pay over the odds for every morsel from Europe that might come our way. Can anyone honestly say that EU membership has made a major difference in the lives and life chances of the people of Northern Ireland?

Our farmers get the worst deal in Europe, and at no stage in the whole European journey have we been given the chance to have a democratic referendum. We do not want the United Kingdom Government, acting on our behalf, to move the European process forward without a full and open discussion on the issues involved and without submitting proposed changes to a referendum.

Throughout Tony Blair's administration we became accustomed to spin and the overcoming of reasoned arguments and justice. We became accustomed to Government deceit and unaccountable decision-making that was not in the best interest of our country or the Province. It is my considered view that what we have had to endure in Northern Ireland is indicative of the need to have power in our own hands, as far as possible, to influence our laws, our lives, our future and that of our children. Direct rule Ministers taught us that lesson.

We all understand the need for co-operation in matters of mutual interest. Indeed, we can see many benefits in European co-operation. However, we do not want a treaty that establishes a constitution for Europe that will lead to complete integration into a European super-state without our Government affording us the democratic right to have a referendum on the issue.

As Members of this Assembly, our duty is to defend the rights and freedoms of those who put us here. Gordon Brown is attempting to get the European train rolling again by declaring that if certain red lines are drawn in the amended treaty — that is, if certain subtle, but significant changes in the text are made — he will proceed with submerging British interests into a federal Europe.

It is not for Mr Brown alone to determine what represents an acceptable treaty for the people of the United Kingdom. Mr Brown and his party do not represent the majority of the people in the United Kingdom on this issue. This treaty is not right for the majority of the people of the United Kingdom, and we must be given the opportunity to declare our opposition to it by means of a referendum. It is wrong for the UK to give up 60 national vetoes and agree to an EU foreign minister and a president of Europe. It is wrong to agree to 96% of the original EU constitution. Just like there will never be a united Ireland, there must never be a united states of Europe.

Mr McLaughlin: Thank you very much, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I support the motion, but possibly for different reasons from those of the proposer. I welcome the debate. *[Interruption.]* Let me assure the Members opposite that this debate will be an all-island one — the people of the South will also have their say in the matter.

We should all be concerned about the issue of the democratic deficit. Already, the Council of Ministers and the European Commission exercise powers and vetoes over the democratic decisions of the European Parliament, and much of the legislation that we pass here originates from them — they initiate the process, and the legislation eventually arrives in legislative Assemblies such as this one. Thus, the democratic deficit is a considerable issue. We must consider the idea of participation in a process that elects MEPs who then often find themselves following a trail that has been set out by unelected members of the Council of Ministers or European commissioners. That is a serious issue for us all. I very much welcome the debate, and I look forward to the amplification of those important issues.

There is the question of the ability of sovereign Governments in Dublin, London or Paris — let alone a legislative Assembly such as this one — to rein in the bureaucrats in Brussels and Strasbourg. The idea of the new European Union treaty was to set up a superstate. The treaty was rejected in referendums in France and in Holland. Did that deter the Council of Ministers? No, it doctored the text and presented it again. It took out words such as “constitution”, but its intention is still very much the same. That is very important. There are people here who have long experience of the issues of either a lack of democratic accountability or the absence of democracy itself. We must therefore do our utmost and play our full part in bringing to the attention of the populace the implications of this drift towards a centralisation of power in the hands of unelected bureaucrats at the heart of Europe.

That is not a Euro-sceptic approach. *[Laughter.]* It is an approach that ensures that we address the questions. Members can make their own contribution to this debate. However, it is important that they reflect on whether critical engagement with the reality of the European Union is, in fact, protecting democratic rights. Alternatively, we can simply close our eyes; it will still be there, and it will still take more and more powers onto itself. However, we cannot walk away from the European Union, nor will deciding simply to ignore the reality of it enhance or protect democratic rights. Likewise, we cannot adopt the position that no progressive legislation has emerged; such legislation has emerged, and we must acknowledge the positive impact that it has had on society in Ireland. However, the key issue that must be addressed is whether people’s democratic rights and judgements are being respected when they cast their votes in European elections. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: It is interesting to follow the comments of the Member for South Antrim Mr McLaughlin. He claimed that he was not being a Euro-sceptic — his speech was a little more to the right than Attila the Hun.

It is deeply disquieting that Ministers want to sign the United Kingdom up to a treaty without first asking the British people their opinion. There is, after all, no pressing reason why a decision has to be made quickly. The debate on a new constitution is already years old and has been the subject of a great deal of spin, fudge and misrepresentation. No change there, then.

The essence of the debate was summed up by Keith Vaz, the Labour MP and former Minister for Europe — an unlikely person for me to quote. He said on 31 August this year:

“We don’t need a referendum on the reformed treaty because we didn’t have one on the Nice Treaty or on Maastricht. But I think there’s a difference between need and desirability.”

That, in a nutshell, sums up why there should be a national debate, followed by a referendum. It is not because there has to be, in a technical or legal sense, but because, for a variety of reasons, it is desirable that there should be. At the top of that list of reasons must be the Prime Minister’s own professed desire to make matters more transparent than they had been under his predecessor. What has the Prime Minister to fear if he believes that this new treaty represents a good deal for Britain? Surely he is capable of defending such a good deal in any referendum or election campaign. One thing is certain: a national debate followed by a referendum would confer legitimacy on the whole process. However, the evidence of the past week, and, particularly, of this weekend, suggests that the Prime Minister may not want to engage with the people. His rapid U-turn on an election suggests precisely that.

The Foreign Secretary says that the Government have made it clear that because of the real changes in form, substance and style, and the abandonment of the constitution, we have moved away from the previous situation and now have a treaty that is in line with previous treaties. In that approach he misses the point. The French and Dutch voters rejected the previous versions of this treaty — which was then known as the new European constitution — and, in doing so, forced its modification. Without those referendums we would be facing an EU constitution that has taken centralism in Europe one step too far.

Would the Government deny the British people the same rights as French and Dutch citizens? Surely in doing so they are being bad Europeans, since they are arguing for a two-tier Europe. In one of those tiers the people are allowed the right to vote and decide, but in the other they are not. There is, then, a democratic Europe in France and in the Netherlands, and a top-down despotic one in Britain, of all places.

The Prime Minister's intellectual case against allowing a referendum has now collapsed. If he persists in forcing this issue through without a referendum following "the election that wasn't" last week, his moral authority will continue to be seriously undermined. How can he pose as a democrat or as someone who wants to listen to the people, and yet deny a referendum on an issue which most disinterested observers say is little different from the original form of the —

Mr Burnside: Does the Member agree that if the United Kingdom Parliament and Government deny the right of the British people to have a referendum here in Northern Ireland, we should organise our own referendum to express the views of the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr Kennedy: I would have much preferred that a general election campaign had been called at the earliest possible time so that this issue could have been fully debated and amplified among the people and a verdict given, so that we could have taken our place in that national argument as part of the United Kingdom. The situation is little different from the original form of the EU constitution, on which this Government promised a referendum. That is why I support the motion in its undiluted simplicity.

Mr A Maginness: I oppose the motion, but welcome Mr Easton's refreshing honesty, which, I presume, reflects the DUP's anti-European Union position, and contrasts with the representations made by Sinn Féin's representative Mitchel McLaughlin who disingenuously said that he was not a Euro-sceptic. His speech could quite easily have been an editorial from the Daily Mail.

5.15pm

There is absolutely no difference between the type of things that he was saying and the type of things that the 'Daily Mail' says, day in and day out. That is scarcely surprising because, at heart, Sinn Féin opposes the European Union. Recently, it changed its mind and has given nominal support to the European Union. However, Sinn Féin has opposed every major change to the European Union. It opposed enlargement and it is opposed to the present proposals.

It is claimed that the proposals create a greater central control in the European Union. Nothing could be further from the truth. The treaty proposes that the EU have a president to serve permanently for two and a half years, instead of chopping and changing every six months. That would provide continuity of service to the European Commission. A high representative of the European Union would speak for the EU on foreign affairs and security policy. That would be a positive step for continuity in the European

Commission. The national Parliaments would have an increased role in making European law. I would have thought that Members from both sides of the House would agree that that would be a positive step.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I have to get through this and I have only a few minutes left.

I am, perhaps, a sole voice in the Chamber today, apart my good friend, Carmel Hanna.

Mr S Wilson: And the Alliance Party.

Mr A Maginness: And maybe the Alliance Party as well.

The treaty proposes to reduce the size of the European Commission to two thirds of its current membership. Surely that is something that Members should welcome. The treaty also extends qualified majority voting in a sensible, weighted manner. The proposed system will give the larger countries less voting weight, and that is important because it gives smaller countries, such as Ireland, a greater say in European affairs. A new system of voting is also proposed for the European Council. That is also helpful for allowing smaller countries, such as Ireland, a greater degree of influence over decision-making. Surely that is to be welcomed because people have criticised the European Union over many decades for ignoring the smaller voices in its membership. The expanded EU, with its 27 member states, cannot allow each of those countries a veto because it would grind to halt.

Under the treaty, MEPs would have increased responsibility for determining policy, and would be involved in co-decision-making with the Commission. I would have thought that all Members of the House would want that, if they were in favour of more democracy. The European Parliament and ordinary MEPs would have more power. That is important and it would enhance the role of politicians from here and elsewhere. Another important aspect of the treaty is that it would allow countries of the European Union to come together and engage in areas of enhanced co-operation.

Mr Ford: I shall do my best to annoy Sammy Wilson as much as possible by congratulating Mr Easton on proposing the motion. I welcome the opportunity for the House to debate the motion, which I shall support. I do so almost entirely not for the reasons that were put forward by the three Members who have spoken in favour of it, and with considerable agreement with the points

that Alban Maginness made against the motion. Such is the kind of politics that takes place in the Chamber.

Fundamentally, I disagree with the narrow-minded interpretation that has been put forward by Mr Easton in his proposing of the motion. Yet, Mr Easton hit on a key issue if Europe is to make progress. That was highlighted when Danny Kennedy referred to the difference between the need for a referendum and the desirability of a referendum. Those who are involved in European Government at different levels have, largely, envisaged their futures in enhancing co-operation; however, it is clear that there are problems in bringing the citizens of Europe with them. That is why I disagree with Mr Maginness's point in opposing a referendum.

At least we have been spared the "bent banana" debate, but we have been concerned about national self-interest in a nineteenth-century version of sovereignty. Frankly, that is no longer the world in which we live. Eleven or 12 years ago, on a visit to Copenhagen, I met a Danish politician and sat with him on the banks of the Skagerrak looking across the narrow stretch of water to Sweden. As a boy, he had watched the Soviet Baltic fleet steaming past in a way that directly threatened to the people of Denmark.

In December 2004, I had the pleasure of returning to Copenhagen when the Europe of 15 became the Europe of 25. Three former states of the Soviet Union were among the ten extra nations that joined. That is how much the European project has moved on. We should concentrate on what Europe has done to build a culture of peace and prosperity for its citizens. That is why the European Union is not made up of 6, 9, 10, 12, 15, or even 25 member states; rather it is composed of 27 member states. Other countries wish to join, as huge progress has been made, and working together in Europe has benefited everyone.

However, it is clear that many people have been left behind and have not reaped the benefits. That is why I urge Alban Maginness to take heart and to have confidence that, in a referendum, the case can be argued for the benefits of belonging to the European Union. Many of the points that he highlighted about the new arrangements in the reform treaty are valid. By and large, they are tidying-up exercises, yet there is a need to show that people can be brought along with them.

The hypocrisy of the Conservative Party that refused a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, which is of great significance, has now been turned on its head into demanding a referendum, but that does not mean that those of us who want the people of Europe to be engaged with Europe and engaged with a cross-European future, should not also support such a call.

I remember the 1975 referendum to which Alex Easton briefly referred, in that it was actually a fundamental debate about whether the United Kingdom should be in or out of Europe. Indeed, that is the argument that Mr Easton advances today. It is not about the treaty — it is about whether we should participate at all. I welcome the opportunity to have a debate about the role of the United Kingdom in general, and Northern Ireland in particular, and the benefits that we will have from the future of Europe. That referendum was called as an opportunity for the Harold Wilson Government to escape difficult decisions, by palming them off on a referendum. It resulted in a convincing and clear decision among the people of the United Kingdom that they wish to remain in Europe. Against expectations, a resounding majority in Northern Ireland also wished to remain in Europe and to play their part in it.

Therefore, let us have the referendum. Let us have an honest, clear and open debate about all the implications, and let us not pretend that it is simply about the fine detail of the treaty, because there is a strong argument to be made for the United Kingdom being active in Europe. The case, frankly, is whether we will be influential in Europe, or irrelevant in Europe. I want that case to be discussed, and I want the United Kingdom to continue to play its part in that Europe as we move forward. A referendum on the EU treaty is long overdue: bring it on.

Mr McCausland: The European Union treaty is a matter of the utmost importance. Two years ago, a proposed constitution was rejected in France and in the Netherlands. There was also widespread opposition to a proposed constitution in many other countries across Europe. We now look back and realise that there was stalemate on the issue. In June 2007, during a European summit, EU leaders agreed on a detailed mandate to finalise the text of a new treaty.

If one looks at the extent of the opposition and the debate around the EU treaty that has taken place over the past two years, and the nature of the proposals that are currently being pushed forward, one will see that it is a matter of some substance. This is not a minor issue; it is a matter of the utmost importance. That is why we are entitled to have a referendum on the new European Union treaty.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCausland: No; I will follow the Member's example and not give way. The treaty makes a proposal for an EU foreign minister, dressed up under the name of a high representative. There is also a proposal to extend qualified majority voting, and other proposals are being put forward that would significantly change the nature of Europe. Danny Kennedy said that

centralism in Europe has been taken a step too far, but many Members would say that — when it comes to Europe — there have already been many steps too far.

There is a strong and overwhelming case for a referendum. The danger is that the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, appears to be afraid of a referendum. Last weekend, he ran away from an election, and I was pleased to see that Alex Salmond — in good Scots — described him as a “big feartie from Fife”. The Prime Minister is afraid; he ran away from an election, and he is trying to run away, again, from a referendum on Europe. If he believes that the European Union treaty is a good thing, he will be willing to have a referendum, because he will be sure and certain of the quality of his case and of the strength of his arguments. He will have no fears or doubts; he will go into a referendum with confidence, believing that he will win. However, the Prime Minister realises that if he goes into a referendum, he might well lose.

I believe in co-operation among different nation states, but I do not believe in the ongoing, gradual or incremental integration that is being put forward as the vision for the European Union, and which will eventually lead to a united states of Europe. I also believe in democracy and that the people should have a right to a say on matters relating to Europe. I do not believe in Gordon Brown, as a dictator, enforcing his decision on the treaty without consulting the people. We were promised a referendum, and we deserve one.

In Great Britain, it is clear that there is growing momentum for a referendum, and there is a cross-party coalition including such Labour MPs as Kate Hoey and Frank Field, which is promoting the case for one. As democrats, we should add our voices to that campaign and send out the loud and clear message to Gordon Brown that the political representatives of the people of Northern Ireland — this part of the United Kingdom — are convinced that there should be a referendum, and that they are joining their voices with those across the rest of the United Kingdom in saying that the referendum must take place.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, which, if passed and implemented, will give the entire Irish nation an opportunity to have a say on their national future by way of a referendum. However, if a referendum is not held, the imposed treaty that embodies the revised EU constitution will cause a great many problems for the people of Ireland.

The new treaty will, first, add to the powers of the Brussels institutions, which already make the majority of our laws while, correspondingly, reducing the powers of national states and their citizens. Secondly, in making those laws,

the new treaty will increase the voting weight of the bigger states and reduce that of the smaller states. Thirdly, it will deprive the member states of the right to have a permanent representative on the European Commission — the body that has the monopoly on proposing European laws. Large states, as well as small ones, will lose a permanent commissioner. Fourthly, the new treaty will contain a mechanism to enable majority voting for European law-making to be extended to new policy areas by agreement among Governments, without the need for new treaties or treaty ratification.

5.30 pm

Fifthly, it would make the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights legally binding on member states and their citizens, and that would give the 27 judges of the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg the final decision on the wide range of human rights matters covered by the charter. Their decisions would, therefore, supersede national constitutions, the Supreme Court, and the Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. It would greatly extend the power of the European Court of Justice. The charter would apply in all areas of EU decision-making, which makes most of our laws, and it would lead to disputes between the EU Court of Justice in Luxembourg and the Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, as the former would have superiority in the event of any conflict between the two.

Moreover, the constitution would provide that the exercise of the rights and freedoms recognised by the charter would be limited to meet the objectives of general interest recognised by the EU, which means that the rights set out by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights would not be fundamental after all, but would be varied in the interest of the smooth running of the market.

Sixthly, and perhaps most important, the treaty would, in effect, create and establish a super-national state for the first time, making the new EU separate from, and superior to, its 27 member states. That would make it like the United States, inasmuch as the United States is separate from, and constitutionally superior to, individual states such as California and New York. It would mean that the citizens of the new EU state would become real and legal citizens of that state, rather than the national, or ordinary, citizens they are at present. It would give the new treaty the character of a constitution, or basic law, and that is a fundamental step that we should not take until the people have had a thorough debate on its full implications, which are deep and wide. I urge that the people are made aware of them.

The revised treaty will contain 90% or more of the constitution that the French and Dutch voters rejected two years ago. In effect, that means that an EU

elite could avoid referendums and push through issues that they deem relevant without reference to national Parliaments.

Mr S Wilson: If there is any group of people in the UK who would understand the reason for having this issue debated and resolved, resulting in a referendum being held, it is the people of Northern Ireland, because they know the impact of undemocratic governance and what that looks like.

The Member for North Belfast Alban Maginness said that people have nothing to worry about in the treaty and that it should be welcomed because it gives them greater say. Despite what he said, when the detail is examined, it is quite clear that anyone making such an argument would make Arthur Daley look like an honest car salesman. Pat Doherty has already gone through some of the problems, and do not forget that others who support the treaty said that it is a constitution in all but name. Indeed, some people say that 99% of what was in the old constitutional proposal is contained in this treaty.

Alban Maginness says that we are now going to have a president, who would be in office for two and a half years. That president could have a second term and would not have to be elected; indeed, he or she could be someone who has never stood for election. Yet the draft treaty is supposed to create a democratic organisation and lead to more democracy in Europe. Alban Maginness says that someone would hold the position, with the fancy name of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Effectively, however, that is a European foreign Minister.

There could be a situation in which the UK is taking a national route in foreign affairs but the EU, through that High Representative, is taking another. That is supposed to be a step forward. The European Union will take on the legal personality through which it can have its own treaties and agreements with other nations. Again, those arrangements would diminish the sovereignty of the UK.

There will be an increase in qualified voting in about 70 new areas. Alban Maginness has said that the national Governments would have more of a say in a range of areas. However, more powers in matters such as defence, foreign affairs and migration will be centralised in the European Union.

I do not count the European Commission as a democratic body, but at least each state is entitled to representation on it. However, that will no longer be the case. Nonetheless, Alban Maginness says that we should not worry about that: there will be no need for a referendum because all those changes will make the European Union more democratic. The more that one looks at the terms of the draft treaty, the more it becomes clear that the document is about

centralising power and putting it in the hands of those who can subvert the wishes of local people. There seems to be a total contradiction: on the one hand, people in Northern Ireland welcome the fact that there is now a devolved Assembly where decisions can be made locally and in which local people have a input, but at the same time, Europe is moving towards concentrating power more centrally into the hands of people who have not even been elected. That is the reason that there should be a referendum on the draft treaty.

The other Euro fanatic who spoke in the debate disappointed me in the stance that he took. However, he supports our motion so I cannot have a go at him. He believes that people can be persuaded to hand over yet more powers to Brussels. I say to Mr Ford that all the evidence shows that people in the United Kingdom — and all over Europe — are sick and tired of the centralising tendencies. However, at least he is a democrat and wishes to give people the opportunity to have a say about whether they wish to move towards centralisation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr S Wilson: The SDLP has been shown to be undemocratic on this occasion.

Mr Savage: I speak as a member of the only mainstream unionist party in the House that has representation in the European Parliament. *[Laughter.]*

I share the concerns of the proposers of the motion that, in the next few weeks and months, a document that is, to all intents and purposes, the rewrapped EU constitution will be approved.

The EU constitution fell because it did not receive the support of either the French or the Dutch, who both rejected it in referendums in 2005. Although the 2001 Labour manifesto promised a referendum in the UK on a new constitution, it was held off in order to allow for what was described as “a period of reflection”. That was time to basically allow the Brussels bureaucrats to think of a new way to achieve their aims.

The period of reflection is now over, and what we have is the EU constitution in all but name. It is now to be called a “reform treaty”. Surely the Brussels bureaucrats could have come up with a better name than that.

I fear that we are being sold a pup. Many of the original elements of the EU constitution are to be found in this wonderful new reform treaty. There will be a full-time president of the European Council, who will sit for a 30-month term;

an EU foreign minister; fewer European Commission members; and a change in national-voting weightings to reflect population levels.

New treaty proposals are being drafted during the German presidency, which is keen to include a shift to qualified-majority voting in an extra 51 areas of EU policy. Germany also wishes to make the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union — a declaration made in 2000 — legally binding.

Members acknowledge that Europe is a difficult issue. The Labour Party is scared to lose a referendum, and the Conservative Party has split asunder on the issue. The bottom line is that we must not allow Europe to impose a pseudo-constitution on us — a document that, to all intents and purposes, is the same as the one that was rejected two years ago. The only difference is in the repackaging. Contrary to statements from Brussels bureaucrats, that pseudo-constitution would erode national sovereignty and damage Britain's global position. As a British citizen, and an elected representative, I will not vote to allow that to happen.

Members acknowledge Northern Ireland's unique position as the only part of the UK to have a land border with another EU member state, and, because of that, people in Northern Ireland are well aware and astute when it comes to European issues. They want to have their say — and they deserve that.

As a member of the European unionist party, I know that our party provides the people of Northern Ireland with that mainstream unionist voice that they want to hear — and that must be heard — in the corridors of power in Brussels. I support the motion.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the debate, although it will come as no surprise that, at this time, I do not support the proposal for a referendum. It is premature; we do not have the full picture. We have some substance, but we must still fill in the blanks. At this stage, we cannot make an informed decision.

I am not a Euro-fanatic, but I believe in the European ideal. I am not sure if Mr Ford — who is not in the Chamber — is aware that Sir Menzies Campbell said that the reforms to the new European Union treaty were sufficiently different as to not require a plebiscite. That is for David's information.

Since the SDLP was founded in 1970, it has supported the European ideal, and every Member of the Assembly must be aware of the immense benefits to the people of Northern Ireland — many hundreds of millions of pounds from structural funds, cohesion funds, special support programmes and other EU contributions to the International Fund for Ireland. Given those benefits, the rest of the EU member states — if they have ever thought about it — must be

somewhat amazed that all three Northern Ireland MEPs are negative on the idea of Europe.

I am old enough to remember when our esteemed First Minister ran on the platform that the whole idea of Europe and its union was a devilish Roman plot. Sinn Féin has called for a Europe of equals; however, since 1972, in the Republic, Sinn Féin has opposed every referendum on Europe. Its inconsistency lies in the fact that, although it wants European institutions to intervene, it simultaneously denies them the authority to do so because it knows that health and education matters, and so on, are the preserve of the sovereign states.

These are institutional changes to the constitution, and they still require considerable discussion, which is why I welcome today's debate. People must have a better understanding of those matters in order to allay fears — and they do seem to be fears — of the planned reforms.

5.45 pm

We want a constitution that is effective, transparent and accountable, and, of course, we must look after our own interests in Northern Ireland. However, it is important to think of it in a much wider context, owing to the involvement and needs of less-well-off countries. As David Ford has said, it is a culture of peace as well as prosperity — that is important to remember.

If there were a referendum, would a positive outcome really make any difference? Would the DUP continue to be instinctively and reflexively anti-European anyway, and would Sinn Féin continue to be in the same anti-European camp?

Mr Spratt: Whether we are pro-Europe or anti-Europe in our politics, when something is brought forward that has a massive constitutional impact on the United Kingdom, it is only right that the people should decide. In this case, the EU treaty is quite clearly, if progressed, going to fundamentally change the European Union and Britain's place in it.

The packaging of this latest European treaty is misleading to the country. It is not a treaty; it is a constitution in all but name. Furthermore, it is a constitution that has already been rejected. The bureaucrats in Brussels want to fool us into believing that it is non-threatening and based on slight technicalities that will have little impact on the sovereignty of our own Government.

Mr Brown says that there will not be a referendum, because the constitution does not fundamentally change the relationship between the EU and the UK.

Mr Brown is fooling no one, especially not the British people. There is near unanimity across Europe that the new EU treaty is fundamentally the substance of the EU constitution repackaged. The Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland, Bertie Ahern, says that 90% of that constitution is still there; I do not always agree with the man, but on this occasion, it is hard to differ.

When we examine what is in that 90% that is recycled from the constitution, we see dangers that must be repelled, and which the people of the UK must be given a say on. Paragraphs 1, 4 and 18 of the mandate for the current intergovernmental conference bring back, unless stated, the whole of the EU constitution. For example, paragraph 18 tells us that parts of the old EU constitution:

“will be inserted into the Treaty [regarding such areas as] security and justice, ... the improvements to the governance of the euro, ... specific provisions such as public services, space, energy, civil protection”.

The list goes on.

Further provisions, such as that for a new EU president, would allow that individual to set the EU's agenda. There would also be an EU foreign minister. Such provisions would allow the EU to sign treaties in its own right, and our sovereignty in foreign policy would be further eroded. The jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice would be widened. Those proposals are dangerous to our sovereignty. The effects might not be immediate, but they would be far-reaching in the future.

The proposals will not stop here; they will, I am sure, evolve into a broader agenda whereby the lines across Europe are further blurred and our powers in home affairs on issues such as asylum, immigration and many other key policy areas are diminished. We totally reject anything that allows that, and we vehemently oppose anything that threatens our vetoes on EU affairs, which this treaty does. In my opinion, we should be looking at ways to pull back from involvement with the EU, rather than bolstering our links.

The current British Government lay much weight on the supposed opt-outs that they have been assured of by Brussels. The vain attempts by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to dispel so-called myths fool no one. The assurances received from Brussels in the past have proved to be worthless. Surely we should learn from the mistakes of the past.

A recent 'Daily Telegraph' poll shows that two thirds of voters want a referendum on the EU treaty. In the past few days, we have seen that Gordon

Brown is not keen to go to the polls. However, on the issue of the treaty, the British people must decide.

What is there to fear, Mr Brown? That the vote will be against the treaty? Let the people speak. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I, too, support the motion.

Thomas Jefferson once said:

"Information is the currency of democracy."

There can be no democracy if people do not know what is happening, and they cannot know what is happening when statements that cloud the facts are issued and distract from the real topic. The topic, in this instance, is that the British Government, through Gordon Brown, are trying to induct the United Kingdom, through the back door, into a united states of Europe. That information must be recognised and processed. People must be given a chance to exercise their democratic right to have a say in something that will affect their national identity.

As many of my colleagues have said, we, in Northern Ireland, are no strangers to strong-arm tactics, to the overriding of fairness and democracy and to having little say in the decisions made for our country. Direct rule has taught us much, and we are, therefore, in a strong position to say to the Government on the mainland that to be dictated to by an overseer far removed from the day-to-day life of the nation, can never be a good thing.

Whether Gordon Brown admits it or not, it is not difficult to see what the treaty means for the UK. It means that our social policy will be dictated to us, and our Health Service inundated with Europeans who feel like using our superior NHS. Since practically every case in the European Court of Human Rights is bogged down in litigation and costs thousands and thousands of pounds, those who threaten legal action will always be shunted to the top of the queue to save the hassle.

What of the embassies? The EU will have a 5,500 strong diplomatic service and maintain EU embassies all over the world. What will happen to our embassies and consulates?

The City of London could lose the freedom that has turned it into a multi-trillion pound hub of world finance. The increase in EU influence will jeopardise UK independence with respect to the police, justice, energy, transport, employment policy and financial regulation. Those are vital areas

that affect the lives of all of us every day. We could even find Brussels dictating energy prices and quite possibly casting an envious eye on our North Sea oilfields.

It goes further than that. The EU will also have the right to regulate wage caps and transfer caps for soccer clubs, with the European Commission taking over as ruler of the game right across Europe. With respect to justice, the proposed treaty means more rights for criminals, making it harder to fight crime. EU judges could stop the Secretary of State for Justice from recommending longer sentences for horrific crimes, or make it impossible for him to recommend that serial killers should not be released from jail.

The implications of the treaty go on and on. Police will have the right to enter your home, even if they are from outside the United Kingdom. We have heard much talk about the EU army, and we all know the stories about it. Is it true? Do people feel that it is right? Is it worth asking whether we would prefer Britain to be defended by its world-class armed forces, or by those of some of the other EU states? I leave Members to decide for themselves.

The EU Commissioner for External Relations will be given a lovely new wordy title and be known as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. He will represent our country at the UN and elsewhere.

Those prospects are horrendous, and many of us have concerns about them. The irony of Gordon Brown taking the strong line against the Burmese junta for not listening to the wishes of the people is paradoxical considering the Labour Party's promise of a referendum on the EU constitution.

Members have probably seen the results of the YouGov poll, which showed a large majority of those asked about the European Union reform treaty to be opposed to it. Two national newspapers, 'The Sun' and 'The Daily Telegraph', represent opposite ends of the journalistic spectrum with regard to the type of readers that they appeal to, but 100,000 readers of 'The Sun' objected to the treaty and wanted to be able to vote on it in the referendum, and 100,000 readers of 'The Daily Telegraph' also wanted to have a referendum on it. The two ends of the spectrum were agreed on the subject.

I am very concerned about how the treaty will affect agriculture and fishing. I represent a rural area, and the more power the EU has, the more worried I become.

Gordon Brown must not be allowed to pull the wool over our eyes in this case. We in Northern Ireland must take a firm stand and settle for nothing less than what is our right — to have our say.

I have no desire to become part of a second-rate, characterless, spineless, united states of Europe. I am British, and proud to be so, despite our faults and failings. I will not stand back and allow Gordon Brown to accomplish the unification of Europe by the back door. I support the motion.

Mr Burnside: In a debate on European unity, in order to find out who sold the pup, it is worth examining the language and presentation of the Euro-fanatics and that of Euro-sceptics since we joined the Common Market. The pup was first sold when membership of the Common Market was described as membership of an area for free trade in goods and services. At that time, it was not even concerned with labour and people, but then slowly developed.

Following the establishment of the self-perpetuating bureaucracy called the European Commission, it gained power and interbred. The Commission wants to have more central control, and the one thing in Europe that has stopped — and will continue to stop — the new constitution has been the consultation by national Parliaments of their people.

The con job has been carried out by the Euro-fanatics, starting with Edward Heath and his supporters, and including David Ford and the Alliance Party. The Euro-fanatics said that we would gain a free-trade area. The European Union has grown and gained powers including that of intervention.

In the United Kingdom, and, I hope, in many other countries throughout the European Union, we now have the opportunity to take a decision and say enough is enough. We do not want centralisation, an increased bureaucracy, or a foreign minister. The honourable objectives represented by David Ford that arose post war, and the resolving of the conflict between east and west, were not dependent on the creation of a European Union.

It was the strong and powerful countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, who stood up to communist dictatorships, and the inherent weaknesses of the economic dictatorship of Eastern Europe that caused those systems to collapse. They collapsed because those of us in the west who believed in freedom and democracy stood up against them.

We must stop this centralising bureaucracy, which can only take power away from the people in Northern Ireland, and throughout the United Kingdom. Let us consult the people. At least the leader of the Alliance Party says let the people decide, unlike the SDLP, who are the real Euro-fanatics in Northern Ireland. The constitution is unnecessary.

I am optimistic about the association of states in Europe, because of the increase in membership since 1969. Those countries that are coming into the

European Union do not want centralised power and control. There is a blocking factor by virtue of the increased membership in the European Union — the people we must stop are the Euro-fanatics in the Commission, the full-time directorates, and the full-time politicians who would like to turn what is not a Parliament into a Parliament. I do not know whether I am member of the European unionist party or not — that was news to me this afternoon, but it seems to be an interesting new initiative.

The European Parliament is not and should not be a parliament that has sovereign power over the member states of Europe. It should be a consultative forum that can be used on behalf of the member states, to exert pressure whether in the case of the reform of the common agricultural policy, or at whatever stage the social and regional grants are at within the European Union. That is how we should use it — as a lobbying platform for our elected representatives to try to get better executive action through the Commission and the Council of Ministers.

I feel strongly that it is time for people to control the professional politicians and the Euro-fanatics, and to tell them that enough is enough, and that they do not want the new constitution. If there is a referendum in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, France, and perhaps Germany, a massive proportion of people will vote to say that they do not want or need a constitution. We are not a one-nation state; we will remain as individual nation states, as when we fought against the rise of communism and dictatorship from the East. If that happened again, I hope that Europe would operate together in defence of freedom and democracy within the European Union. I support the motion, and the resulting alliance between the DUP and Sinn Féin.

I do not support many such alliances. However, the people must decide. If they are given the choice, they will make the right decision.

6.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: It will be clear to Members that the business on the Order Paper will not be completed by 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until it is completed.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Paisley Jnr): I have listened with interest to the views of the House. Having heard Members' concerns and examined the draft provisions, it is clear that the new draft European reform treaty will give increased powers to Brussels. It must be asked whether the citizens of Northern Ireland will benefit from such a transfer of power or whether their interests are better served by the status quo. Members on all sides of the House will have noticed that

several speakers highlighted that the draft treaty is a constitution reform Bill in all but name. The European Scrutiny Committee of the House of Commons, which, I understand, will report soon, has indicated that the draft treaty is equivalent in substance and effect to the European draft constitution.

Many Members would be advised to take home a copy of the draft constitution and to compare it with the new text, which is now available on the Internet, and judge for themselves whether its 440 clauses differ at all from those of the draft treaty. They will, therefore, be able to draw their own conclusions on the similarity of those documents.

The Executive considered a paper on the draft European Union reform treaty on 27 September 2007. It is important to state that the Executive unanimously agreed that there should be a referendum. They have mandated the junior Ministers to negotiate to that end on their behalf. On 2 October 2007, I represented the Executive at a meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee on Europe in London. In attendance were, amongst others, the Foreign Secretary, David Miliband — who chaired the meeting — the Attorney General, Baroness Scotland QC, and the Scottish Parliament's Minister for Europe and External Affairs, Linda Fabiani. I took the opportunity to strongly press for a referendum and also to put on record my displeasure that the Prime Minister, without first consulting the people of Northern Ireland or the regions, has stated that there would be no referendum.

In concluding that there should be a referendum, the Executive said that there must be no dilution of the principles and provisions that relate to subsidiarity or proportionality, of the recognition of regional and local self-government within member states, or of the recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity that is enjoyed by many throughout the European Union.

Ratification of the draft treaty is a matter for each member state's Government according to its constitutional rules. Member states may choose to ratify through parliamentary procedure and/or a referendum. The UK Government has stated their position on ratification, which is that a referendum is not necessary because the draft reform treaty is an amending one. The Administrations in both Scotland and Wales deferred a decision on whether to lobby for a referendum until after the text of final treaty is known. That text is now available. I am sure that they will soon make their positions clear.

Carmel Hanna said that it would be premature to have a vote. As the text of the draft treaty is now available, the point has been reached where Members can study it and make their own conclusions on whether a referendum is necessary. As I have said, if one compares the 440 clauses of the draft

constitution with the 440 clauses of the draft treaty, one will see little difference between the two documents.

The Government in the Republic of Ireland have indicated that a referendum will be held there, most probably in the summer of 2008. Denmark is also planning a plebiscite, and referendums are possible in the Czech Republic, Poland, Portugal, and the Netherlands. The Labour Party promised a referendum on the draft treaty for the establishment for a European constitution in its manifesto for the 2005 general election. The pressure on Gordon Brown to hold a referendum on the draft reform treaty is steadily increasing.

Members of his parliamentary party — as well as of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats — are clamouring for a vote on the issue. At last week's Conservative Party conference in Blackpool, few will have missed the shadow Foreign Secretary, William Hague, promise a change in the law. He wants to amend the European Communities Act 1972 and require future Governments to hold referendums on future transfers of powers to Brussels.

There is a legal position for holding referendums in Northern Ireland. It is important to put that fact on record, given what Mr Burnside said in one of his interventions. I am sorry that he is not in the Chamber to hear what I am about to say. As a result of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, both holding referendums and the proposed reform treaty are excepted matters. No Department in Northern Ireland has the power to organise or fund such a referendum. That could only happen after primary legislation were laid at Westminster.

I note that Mr Burnside, during Danny Kennedy's speech, said that he would like a referendum to be held in Northern Ireland alone. The new "ourselves alone" position that has been adopted would fundamentally weaken our position for holding a UK-wide referendum. That is an important point of distinction. The people of Northern Ireland would be sold a real pup were a referendum held here. It would be the biggest con job of all, because we know the sort of political capital that many would make out of it. I hope that Mr Burnside will recant that position when he has had time to reflect on his heat-of-the-moment outburst in the Chamber.

Whatever views individuals and parties in the House may hold on the European Union, and the parties that are represented on the Executive hold a wide spectrum of views, the European Union affects us all. It is important to note that the Executive have expressly stated that they are not taking a joint position on the fundamental principles contained in the treaty but are saying that there should be a referendum. Changes in the way in which the European

Union is run, and in its powers, procedures and its administration, matter to us all.

Approximately two thirds of the legislative and administrative actions in the region originate from decisions made in Brussels. Europe is integral to the policy-making and legislative process — it is not an add-on. Any Member who represents a rural constituency will know that European issues are not add-ons but are an integral part of much of the actions and activities in which the farming community is involved.

We are responsible for implementing the legislation that will affect the everyday lives of people in Northern Ireland and across the European Union. In administering those responsibilities, we become an essential step in the process of implementing the European Union's decisions. The way in which decisions are taken on such matters, and our opportunities for influencing those decisions, are of essential interest to us all.

Europe, and how it equips itself to respond to future challenges, is not of abstract concern to us; rather, it is of fundamental concern to us. Hence, there should be a referendum on the issue. In my view, the draft EU reform treaty is significant. We cannot pretend that it is not as far-reaching as its predecessor, the draft constitutional treaty of the EU, as some have claimed. That would be a deliberate misrepresentation of what is in the draft EU reform treaty. The Amato Group of high-level politicians, led by the former Italian Prime Minister Giuliano Amato, confirms that the draft EU reform treaty takes over all of the innovations contained in the draft constitutional treaty of the EU.

If it looks like a duck, if it walks like a duck and if it talks like a duck, it is fair to conclude that it is duck. The draft EU reform treaty speaks for itself — or quacks for itself — in that regard. The draft treaty, if ratified, will streamline voting in the European Council using qualified majorities rather than unanimity. All amending treaties — the Single European Act of 1987, and subsequently, Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice — have extended qualified majority voting. The draft EU reform treaty will extend majority voting under 50 articles and require codecision with the European Parliament under 39 articles. About 80% of EU legislation is already codecided with the Parliament. In the most sensitive areas of justice, home affairs and social security, the United Kingdom has the right to insist on unanimity or not to participate.

The extension does not apply to us in other areas; for example, as regards rules about the Eurozone. Benefits to us, such as the lifting of the beef ban, were secured through qualified majority voting, when they would almost certainly have been blocked through unanimity voting. Therefore, the so-

called “red lines”, which Alex Easton mentioned, are not as secure as some would try to portray them.

Mr Maginness talked about bringing Europe closer to its citizens. Indeed, the recognition of the need for reform coincided with a new awareness that the European Union has become remote from its own citizens. Many people think that it adds an unnecessary layer of governance and also restricts the freedom of action of national and regional Governments. Of course, one way to redress the balance is to give the citizens a vote on the reform treaty, and Mr Maginness himself posed the strongest argument for that. If he is so convinced by his argument, he would support putting the question to the people and letting them have a say on this important matter.

A ‘Financial Times’/Harris outline poll conducted in June of this year found that the majority — around two-thirds or more — of Spaniards, Germans, Britons, Italians and the French believed that the revised treaty was important enough to warrant a vote. The people of the United Kingdom are entitled to have a vote on that basis, too. We need a debate with our citizens on how to maximise the benefits that we derive from our membership. To a large degree, that debate was started by OFMDFM when it brought Mr Barroso to Northern Ireland.

EU legislation, EU funds, and the internal market have had a huge impact on the economic, social and environmental fabric of this region. Indeed, many thousands of community-based social-inclusion projects have been assisted through Peace moneys, which the Member for South Belfast Carmel Hanna rightly pointed out. Indeed, our farmers have received around £1.6 billion in direct support.

However, while many benefits have come from Europe, those funds should not be portrayed as perks or privileges; they are our rights. We are entitled to them, just as we are entitled to our right for a referendum. It is vitally important that the people of Northern Ireland get the opportunity to have their say on this important matter.

In conclusion, the Executive want to ensure that Northern Ireland citizens have their say. They should not be robbed of their right to vote. If we call for a referendum, we have a responsibility to lay the facts before the people. The issues are complex, but Northern Ireland has good reason to be interested in them. As elected representatives, we should not shirk our collective responsibility to explain the treaty to our electorate, and the reasons why we are for or against it. We should seek to engage in a transparent and well-informed debate. We must explain the context of the treaty to the people,

focusing especially on how it will impact on their lives, so that our voice will be heard and we can have a greater say in how Europe is shaped in the future.

Lord Morrow: The debate has been useful and interesting, and many useful and interesting comments have been made. A great constitutionalist once said the referendum is the “people’s veto”, and that:

“The nation is sovereign and may well decree that the constitution shall not be changed without the direct sanction of the nation.”

If that is one reason that we should have a referendum, then there is another good reason why we should have one: the Government promised in their 2005 manifesto that there would be one. However, it would not be the first promise that this Government have broken, and I suspect that it will not be the last.

I was very interested to hear what Minister Paisley had to say, and I am sure that Mr Alban Maginness cringed when he heard him say that the Executive were united in deciding that there should be a referendum. I am sure that he is listening to every word that we are saying now. The Executive were united on that decision, so the SDLP is committed to it. Mr Maginness and Carmel Hanna may not be, but at least the SDLP is.

So, Mr Maginness, you are a lonely voice, if not a lone voice. Your party is now up for a referendum, and we welcome it on board.

6.15 pm

I was a bit concerned by Mr Burnside’s intervention, although his speech was infinitely better than Mr Maginness’s. He said that Northern Ireland should consider having a referendum on our own. No, thank you. We are not in Europe because we are Northern Ireland; we are in Europe because we are a part of the United Kingdom.

Mr Burnside: I thank the Member for allowing me to make a point of clarification. A referendum is not mandatory under the British Constitution. If the United Kingdom Government and Parliament deny the people of Northern Ireland the right to express their view, I would be interested to know the opinion of the people of Northern Ireland in that process. That is my understanding of the British Constitution. I would want our national Parliament and Government to hold a referendum first, but if they did not, I do not see why we should not have a local referendum that expresses an opinion for the Government to take account of.

Lord Morrow: I will take that as a climbdown. However, the Member is acutely aware that there is no such thing as a British Constitution.

Mr Burnside: There is.

Lord Morrow: I beg to differ. The Member and I will have to differ, as we do on many things.

I must take issue again with Mr Maginness. He was so steadfast in his position, and although what he said was not convincing, he tried to convince us. The challenge for the likes of Mr Maginness is simply this: why does he fear a referendum? Is he afraid of the result?

Mr Maginness has every right to be afraid of the result, because a recent study found that, in the rest of the United Kingdom, 85% of Conservative Party voters wanted a referendum and 55% of Labour supporters wanted one. I see that Mr Ford has flown the nest. I wish he had stayed, because he is another fanatical European. A total of 59% of Liberal Democrats — a majority of Mr Ford's sister party — wanted a referendum.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: Since I have named the Member, I will give way.

Mr A Maginness: First, I want to emphasise that the SDLP has never been against a referendum in principle. Secondly — and this was reflected in both SDLP contributions — because the treaty has not been completed as yet, and despite what junior Minister Ian Paisley Jnr has said, it is premature to make a decision. On the substance of what we have seen, and in respect of the document that Mr Paisley Jnr is holding in his hand, we are talking about institutional changes, not constitutional changes. Therefore, the argument that constitutional changes demand referendums does not hold, because we are talking about institutional changes.

Lord Morrow: Only Mr Maginness could explain that. His task is now in front of him: does he support his Minister in calling for a referendum, or does he not? We are all confused. As Mr Maginness sat down, I saw the forlorn looks on the faces of everyone in the House. He will have to sort that out in the not-too-distant future, but his intervention has not clarified the issue at all, because he has made it distinctly clear that he is not in favour of a referendum. I listened to what he said — that his was a lone voice. I did not understand the implication of that at the time, but I understand it now, because it seems that his is a lone voice in the SDLP too. That is the Member's problem, and he will have to square that.

Following World War II, there was no stronger symbol of Britain's central role in shaping the architecture of the world than its place as one of only five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. That position promoted Britain substantially, and permitted it to form part of a major influence on a global platform. That strength would be greatly jeopardised, however, if the Minister for Africa, Asia and the UN, Lord Malloch Brown, a former UN deputy secretary general, gets his wish to relinquish Britain's seat in favour of representation by the European Union.

The EU constitutional treaty proposes to have its own foreign minister, to be known as a high representative, who will act on the world stage on behalf of all of the 27 member states, as a whole. That will mean that more power and control is exerted from the EU's central headquarters over its 480 million citizens.

I cannot understand for the life of me why those who are opposed to a referendum would want the centralisation of control. I am absolutely delighted that the House, with one or two exceptions, has practically united in the view that there should be a referendum. I am delighted that Mr Ford is back in the House, and even he accepts that there should be a referendum, although for different reasons from those of us on this side of the House.

Why should there not be a referendum? The treaty is everything. It is a constitution, and let no-one say that it is not a constitution but only a bit of tweaking here and there. No less a person than Bertie Ahern has said that 90% of the old treaty has been retained. I suspect that Mr Maginness, his party and others opposite would listen more readily to him than to some of the Members in the Chamber.

The centralisation that is proposed by the treaty is a dominant force that will pull away from the democracy and democratic rights that are at the heart of the United Kingdom. Despite that, people in the Assembly have claimed today that that would be legitimate. I am delighted that the Executive are united on the issue and said that they feel that it would be unacceptable for there not to be a referendum. I am also delighted that the House has delivered a loud and clear message that a referendum is a must.

I am not talking about an all-island referendum, but a referendum for the United Kingdom, of which Northern Ireland is an integral part. Therefore, the Assembly must speak with one voice, without any suggestion that there should be separate referendums for Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic to find out what the whole island wants. The Irish Republic must do what it feels is necessary, and the Assembly does not say what the Republic should, or should not, do. However, as part of the United Kingdom, we want a

referendum for the United Kingdom so that we can speak as one voice and one people. We are confident that that voice will say “no” to the new treaty and “no” to the new constitution. Anyone who advocates otherwise should be man enough to accept what the people decide.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the United Kingdom Government to hold a referendum on the new European Union treaty.

Adjourned at 6.24 pm.