

DUAL CURRENCY STATUS FOR THE EURO/STERLING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Ms Morrice: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the UK Government to make the necessary legal and financial arrangements for the euro to be officially recognised as a second currency alongside sterling in Northern Ireland after 1 January 2002.

I draw Members' attention to the fact that despite many attempts on my part, this is the first time that the Assembly has debated the vital issue of the single European currency. The debate is long overdue.

Although Northern Ireland is not part of the euro zone, the impact of its arrival on the local economy will be tremendous, and we must be prepared. Just four weeks from today the greatest single economic event in the history of the European Union will swing into action. It will affect 300 million people in tens of millions of homes in hundreds of thousands of villages in 12 European countries, and it will affect us. The United Kingdom may have chosen to "wait and see", but in Northern Ireland it must be recognised that we will be touched by the euro phenomenon whether we like it or not.

Northern Ireland is the only area of the United Kingdom that has a land border with a euro zone. Undoubtedly, Northern Ireland will feel the effects more than any other region of the United Kingdom. We are in a unique position, and we need special arrangements to allow us to take advantage of our situation. Our experience with dual currency has been restricted to pound/punt transactions in the border areas. However, we should not forget that there are only three million people using punts in the world. From January 2002, no one will be using punts, Deutschmarks, pesetas, lire or any other of the currencies of the 12 European countries involved. There will be more than 300 million people using euros. Northern Ireland, whether we like it or not, could find itself awash with euros in the months and years to come.

What should our traders, tourist establishments, businesses and bankers do? Should they operate a dual currency system? Can they afford to take on the exchange rate risk? Can they afford not to? Do they simply say "No euros served here"? I believe that those days are gone. Our farmers, businesses, industries and the public need guidance and support. Above all, they need clear political direction. That is why urgent action is needed. By calling on the Government to make the necessary legal and financial arrangements for the euro to be officially recognised as a second currency alongside sterling — I emphasise "alongside" sterling — we are simply asking for arrangements to be made to accommodate, facilitate and, where is it in the interests of business and industry, encourage the use of the euro in financial transactions in Northern Ireland.

We are not calling for laws to be imposed to force people to accept euros against their will. It should be done on a voluntary basis, and it should be demand-led and market-driven. The difference between that situation and what is being called "cross-border currency creep" — which will inevitably take place — is that we would be giving the euro an official welcome and are preparing ourselves for what will happen.

Mr Beggs: The motion, as it currently stands, is calling for the euro to be recognised as a second currency alongside sterling. That would mean that the euro would be legal tender and that any shop in Northern Ireland would have to transact business based upon it. The motion is, therefore, not introducing the euro on a voluntary basis, but rather putting it on a compulsory footing. That would add additional costs to every retail and tourist outlet in Northern Ireland. Does the Member accept that her motion, as it currently stands, is not a means of introducing the euro on a voluntary basis?

Ms Morrice: The Member's comments give me the opportunity to explain matters. It is important that Members understand the situation.

I asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey, about the euro and the matter of legal tender, and he explained that the euro is legal tender in Northern Ireland already. Foreign currencies are legal tender, so legal recognition does not mean that a currency is imposed upon traders, and I am not calling for it to be made compulsory tender. From the point of view of a party that is pro-European, there is no point in trying to force the euro upon shopkeepers. That would hardly endear them to the currency. The euro is legal tender, and it is treated in the same way as the dollar and the yen. Sterling is the only legal currency of the United Kingdom. I am asking for the euro to be given special status, for its "foreign currency" label to be removed and for it to be treated differently from the dollar and the yen. I say again that it would not be compulsory — it would be on a voluntary basis, demand-led and market-driven.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Is the Member drawing a distinction between legal tender and a double currency? The Member seems to be defining what is legal tender, then saying that she does not want it to be legal tender, although she claims that it is so — she wants it to be a second currency.

Can the Member explain that? It will take a good deal of explaining. Does she think, in the name of all good fortune, that the British Government will listen to a debate attended in this manner in the Assembly, and make a drastic change to the entire financial arrangements of the United Kingdom before the referendum takes place? If she thinks so she must be living in a country whose name I do not even know.

Ms Morrice: I will go to great pains to explain matters to Members who do not understand them. Sir Reg Empey

informed the House that the euro is already legal tender in Northern Ireland — Members can refer to Hansard on that. I went to great pains to phone the Treasury and ask for an explanation. The explanation was given to me, and I was grateful for it. All foreign currencies are legal tender because they can be traded in this country. The UK has a very liberal regime in that regard. The euro should not be treated as foreign currency. My next remarks are for the benefit of Rev Dr Ian Paisley in particular. I do not know whether the Bank of England has been listening to the previous discussions in Northern Ireland, but it has decided to remove the foreign currency label from the euro. That important step has been taken in the City of London.

There are practical benefits. Members will understand the plight of the farmers. They are crying out for help. Their exports have been crippled by the strength of sterling, as we know well. They are sympathetic towards the United Kingdom's entry into the single European currency. It would be a positive move for the farmers. Why should we make them wait for the outcome of a referendum?

I do not know whether Members are aware of it, but earlier this year the European Council of Ministers agreed that subsidies to farmers could be paid in euros. However, the UK Government have so far applied that form of payment to export refunds only. In other words, only the large, exporting farmers can benefit. What happens to the small farmers? Why can they not receive all their subsidies — which can make up as much as 100% of their wage packets — in euros? If that is allowed by Europe, why are the UK Government preventing it? I understand that the Ulster Farmers' Union would be very pleased to see subsidies paid in euros.

Big businesses — and not just those in the border areas — will move to a dual-currency regime themselves. They recognise that it is in their interests to do so. That, however, could leave the small businesses, which cannot afford to operate in two currencies, high and dry. Euro customers will flock to the large retail outlets, which will be offering goods and change in euros. The small businesses will be bypassed. We need a level playing field.

The United Kingdom Government have got us into this situation. It is the duty of the Treasury to provide appropriate financial support to allow our small businesses to operate in euros and sterling if they so desire. I want to underline that — if small businesses want to use euros, they should be allowed to do so, and they should be given appropriate financial support directly from London.

Tourism is vital to our economy, and we want it to grow. The Minister in charge of tourism, Sir Reg Empey, has said that he expects two thirds of our tourists to come from the euro zone this year. That is as a result of the slowdown in transatlantic traffic in the aftermath of the events of 11 September. We are also attempting to

market Ireland — North and South — as a tourist destination. Sir Reg Empey has said that it will be difficult to do that because we are dealing in two currencies.

By encouraging our large and small hotels, our restaurants and our tourist facilities in Northern Ireland to operate in euros as well as in pounds, we send an important message to our guests: Northern Ireland is open for all business.

3.30 pm

We must also send an important message to foreign investors. Allowing them to operate in euros would encourage them to regard Northern Ireland as a special place to do business, either in euros or in pounds. They can use Northern Ireland as a stepping stone to a European market of 300 million people, and do so in the currency of their choice. They will avoid the huge cost of foreign exchange. That is something that the new super-agency should look into.

I could talk forever about the benefits of moving towards a dual currency system — in cross-border trade, for example, which we are trying to promote. With regard to cross-border transport, do we want Ulsterbus to become "Ulster bureau de change on wheels"? Bus drivers should be allowed to take their money in euros and to give their change in euros. Should not students who study abroad be entitled to receive their grants in euros if they wish? What about people who regularly travel abroad? The list is endless.

I want to stress, to Mr Beggs in particular, that a dual currency system cannot be imposed upon those who may be reluctant Europeans. It must be operated voluntarily. We must recognise that the euro is a reality. We must stop playing King Canute; we must stop trying to stem the rising tide of the euro onto these shores; we must stop treating it as a foreign body. It is in the best interests of all to facilitate its arrival and to get the best of both worlds.

The Women's Coalition's motion is not an attempt to pre-empt the decision of a referendum. As a party we are pro-European; however, we are also pragmatists. We respect the will of the people. By supporting the motion, Members will be supporting a pragmatic solution to accommodate the euro in Northern Ireland, and they will be sending an important message to our European partners. The motion is not intended to introduce the euro by the back door. Rather, it places Northern Ireland at the front door of the euro in the United Kingdom and at the forefront of investment in Europe.

Dr Birnie: The subject of the euro is a very important one. When the history of Europe since the second world war is written, the introduction of the euro will stand alongside the collapse of the Berlin Wall as one of the most significant events of the past five or six decades.

To this extent I congratulate Ms Morrice, and I am grateful to her for moving the motion.

Beyond that, I am struggling with the sense (or otherwise) of the motion. As about 20% of Northern Ireland's manufacturing output is sold to the prospective "Euroland" — the countries that will make it up from 1 January 2002 — it clearly does make commercial sense for exporting firms to prepare themselves for the euro. No doubt they will do so. However, I doubt, and this is my quarrel with the motion, that we need such a motion to encourage firms to do that.

We must bear in mind that introducing a new currency entails a large administrative cost. The same costs will apply if the euro is introduced as a dual currency in the Province.

The estimated potential cost of that varies between £200 million and £750 million. Those figures derive from the Small Firms Association in the Republic of Ireland, adapted to the size of the Northern Ireland economy, and the House of Commons Select Committee on Trade and Industry report on the single currency.

Are the proposers of the motion entirely happy that the Northern Ireland economy should have such a cost imposed on it, which will inevitably follow the introduction of a second, officially recognised currency?

Ms Morrice: It is important that I immediately clear up any misunderstanding. The Member will recall that I said that there will be administrative costs, but I am calling on the UK Treasury to pay those costs. The UK Government got us into this situation. They will pay those costs if we get into the euro, and they should be paying them in advance now. I am not calling on the Northern Ireland economy to pay those costs — I am calling on the Treasury to do so.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Member for her contribution. However, with all respect, it is entirely incredible that HM Treasury would stump up between £200 million and £750 million on the self-indulgent introduction of a dual currency in a single region of the United Kingdom. Week after week in the House, there are repeated calls to reform Barnett and to get extra money from HM Treasury for policing, railways, gas pipelines and hospitals. If we add the euro to that, I imagine that Gordon Brown will start to chew the carpet and say, "Get these mad Northern Irish people away from me".

It is quite clear that the proposers of the motion favour the entire euro project. That is their right, but the majority of public opinion in the United Kingdom is against the introduction of the euro. Indeed, even in Germany — the powerhouse of the Continental European economy — it seems that the majority of opinion, if given a free choice, would vote to retain the Deutschmark. Perhaps the proposers imagine a creeping euro status whereby the

Province is half in and half out of the single currency, and that that will forward eventual adoption of the euro.

The economic case against full UK membership of the euro is overwhelming. Therefore the same arguments surely apply to any formalised dual currency status. A publication entitled 'The Economic Case Against the Euro' was issued last month by a group called New Europe. That document proves demonstrably that, under the five economic tests that were set by Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, there is little or no case for either the UK as a whole, or Northern Ireland in particular, joining the euro in the foreseeable future. If that is true for total adoption of the euro, it surely applies to the implication of the strict wording of the motion.

The trade cycles of the UK and the Continental European Union remain out of line, and a common European monetary policy of "one size fits all" will not work. Contrary to Ms Morrice's argument, neither the euro nor, by implication, dual currency status are needed to promote foreign direct investment into either Northern Ireland or Great Britain. Of IDB-backed external investment into the Province in recent years, 97% came from non-euro countries — only 3% came from the euro zone.

In short, the euro would not be good for jobs for the United Kingdom financial sector or for the overall health of the economy. Before we back the motion, we should remember that the recent experience of the Southern Irish economy's preparation for the adoption of the euro has not been a happy one. During the 1990s, the Republic experienced rapid economic growth. Much of that can be explained by the free exchange rate that existed at that time. In 1993 the punt was devalued by a substantial amount, which increased competitiveness. Many economists believe that that led to much of the growth of the "Celtic tiger" economy.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The Member will recall that the Republic received a heavy subsidy from Europe — something like £6 million a day was poured into the Southern Irish economy.

Dr Birnie: I agree with the Member that that was a contributory factor, but many Southern Irish economists feel that the devaluation of the punt was of even more significance.

Notwithstanding a favourable macroeconomic performance, the Southern Irish Government have this year been repeatedly subjected to what can only be described as bullying from the European Commission. That is part and parcel of the loss of autonomy — the ability to set policy to fit regional or national conditions. An eminent Southern Irish economist, Prof Peter Neary of University College Dublin, said in 1997 that, as far as he knew, every university economist in the Republic of Ireland was concerned at the harm which would be done to the Southern economy through joining the euro in a position where sterling was not doing so. As the Nobel prizewinning

economist Milton Friedman has argued recently about the Southern Irish economy, the euro experiment has represented a case of locking itself to the rest of the EU economies while throwing away the key.

While the aspirations behind this motion are in part worthy, the motion is unnecessary. Where businesses find it beneficial to adapt to a multicurrency set-up, they will do so. They have been doing that for years, especially in the border regions. I can see no advantage in officially recognising a second currency alongside sterling, to use Ms Morrice's words. She has failed to explain how her motion will differ from what will happen in any case. I oppose the motion.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the motion, which calls on the United Kingdom Government to make the necessary legal and financial arrangements for the euro to be officially recognised from 1 January 2002 as a second currency in Northern Ireland alongside sterling.

I come from Derry, the second city, which is geographically next to Donegal. Since partition, Donegal has suffered economically by being cut off from its natural hinterland. However, being practical, the people of Donegal and ourselves on the other side of the border have got used to living with it and, occasionally, have used the border to our advantage. I could, for example, quote the difference in punt and pound. We know we will get a better rate for sterling if we change it and spend it across the border, and considerable savings can be made. We all notice the queues at filling stations across the border, and that proves my point. We can also save on holidays; everyone wants a bargain and to get the best possible rate.

However, the downside is that for the last year all bills in the Republic of Ireland have been in dual currency — punds and euros. The Republic has got used to it, but we across the border still endeavour to work out rates.

Why should that concern us? After all, the UK Government have still to decide when to join the EU currency and adopt the euro. It concerns us because traders and business people in every border area are gearing up for the euro. It is happening in my city, and it will be more obvious in the run-up to Christmas. To encourage business and to attract customers from the Republic of Ireland traders, traditionally give a very good rate for the punt. In many instances that means punt for pound, and that continues into sale time, after 1 January.

From 1 January 2002 three currencies will be in operation — the punt, the pound and the euro. That will add further confusion. We have the added problem that the punt will no longer be legal tender, North or South, after 9 February. From 1 January 2002 to 9 February 2002 there will be a period of dual circulation when both punt and euro will be accepted. After that, banks in the North will accept punds until 15 February. That will help traders in border areas as shoppers attempt to get rid of their punds.

In my area we are aware that individuals are offered large loans in punds, interest free — provided they are paid back in euros. The black market is already in operation.

Banks have also advised business that cheques made out in punds after 31 December will not be accepted.

3.45 pm

At a recent seminar in Derry, traders were informed that automated teller machines in Derry will dispense both euros and sterling from the beginning of the new year. Less than 40% of small businesses in the North are prepared for the euro, and 27% are adopting a wait-and-see approach. Therefore, issues such as the exchange rate must be addressed now. The exchange rate is currently set weekly; when the euro is adopted, it must be set daily. Dual pricing must also be addressed, so that customers know how much an item costs. The currency in Northern Ireland needs to be regularised. For us to achieve proper economic stability, the euro must be officially recognised as a second currency.

What is the euro? It is the single currency of the European monetary union, which was adopted by 11 member states on 1 January 1999. Those 11 member states are Belgium, Germany, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal and Finland. On 1 January 2001, Greece became the twelfth member state to adopt the euro. The name "euro" was chosen by the European heads of state at a conference in Madrid in December 1995.

What will it be like to use the euro? We shall have to get used to it irrespective of whether we are pro-European. It is similar to the existing national currency except that the bank notes and coins will be different. After January 2002, people who cross the border to spend money in the Republic will receive their change in euros.

We shall experience the real difference when we travel to countries that have adopted the euro, because it will no longer be necessary to exchange currency and, therefore, we shall not have to pay commission. We shall not have to spend time calculating price comparisons, and we shall not have to waste time shopping around for the best exchange rate.

Other countries are adopting the euro. We must prepare for that now. It will, as Ms Morrice said, be a challenge for small businesses. The onus is on the UK Government to provide small businesses with the necessary finance to cope. They will have to make complicated changes to their information technology systems, their pricing and marketing policies and their financial management and accounting systems.

To prepare for that, I ask the Executive to note today's debate and mandate all Departments to, if requested, pay bills in euros from 1 January 2002. It is imperative that the Assembly show the way forward. I represent a pro-European party, and it is clear, from listening to the

...ate, that there are few pro-Europeans in the Chamber. I congratulate the mover of the motion, and I support it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I oppose the motion. A gun has been put to our heads. We were told that we can have a referendum, but the euro will be in place before we are allowed to make our decision. The previous speaker told the House that the euro would be adopted anyway. However, the British people stand before the introduction of the euro, and they, through the ballot box, have the right to say whether they want the euro. No one can tell us that we must have it. The referendum will give the British public the opportunity to say either yes or no.

If the British public vote no, what becomes of the hon Lady's speech? It is utter nonsense for Ms Morrice to tell us that in the cloud cuckoo land in which she lives, the British Government will pay millions of pounds to bring her stupid little motion into effect. We cannot get enough money from the British Government to deal with bed shortages in hospitals. Does Ms Morrice really mean to tell the House that a couple of hundred million pounds will be set aside to fund a part-time euro to dance in tandem with the pound simply to please her?

Ms Morrice: Will the Member give way?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I shall not give way, because I have been told that I have little time. If the Member wishes to use the motion to create a back door for the adoption of the euro, she is welcome to do so. However, she should acknowledge that it is a back door. She should not tell us about a house with the euro standing at the door.

The Member wants to push the euro in through the back door. I am told that I should write to the Speaker to request that I be paid in euros in future.

We must get down to brass tacks — this motion deals with something that will not happen. There are good reasons why it will not happen: Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. The decision to enter or not to enter the single currency will be made as a result of a UK-wide referendum. The decision will be a political, economic and constitutional one of fundamental importance. This debate divides all the parties in Westminster. To listen to some people, one would think that everyone was convinced that we must go down the euro road. Everyone is not convinced, and to say that the farming community wants to follow this route is nonsense.

The farming community is worried about why it does not get the same money as the middlemen. The farmers do not care whether the money is paid in euros or in pounds — they simply want the money, and they deserve it. Farmers do not get the money that they deserve for the job that they do. It is nonsense to say that they want the money to be paid in euros. Not one farming organisation has mentioned that issue to me. The Member must be a miracle woman if she thinks she knows what farmers want.

The Prime Minister and the Chancellor are at odds on this issue. Only last week, the chairman of the Labour Party, Mr Charles Clarke, said that the Government should recommend entry into the euro even if the Treasury cannot prove that the single currency would be good for the economy. Members of the Cabinet are in public debate about what will happen.

Co-operation between nation states in Europe is to the benefit of those states, but I oppose the creation of a European superstate. Before a country gives up its currency, it should remember that he who pays the piper has the right to call the tune. A country can have independence in nothing if it is not allowed to use its money as it wants.

Members must examine the facts about British trade. The rest of the world is far more important to British trade than the euro zone, and we must remember that. I welcome Sir Reg Empey's visit to China. If the salvation of our economy lies in Europe, why does he visit China? He does so because he realises that investment in Northern Ireland will not come from the euro zone. We shall not receive vast investment from Europe now. Those days are over, and we must look to other places. We trade as much with America as we do with Germany and France. How can the American Government do well when it pays in dollars and not in euros? Why does the Member not advocate that they change their dollars into euros and start trading in Europe?

The population of the euro zone is slowly decreasing, while the population of the rest of the world is rapidly increasing. The pound and the dollar are overwhelmingly more important for British trade than the euro. The Treasury itself reveals that only 19% of our exported goods are invoiced in euros, while 27% are exported in dollars and 52% in sterling. The pound/dollar rate is the most stable in the world, so joining the euro would not increase stability for foreign trade — it would probably destabilise it. Although the euro zone will remain an enormously significant trading block, future changes in population and income levels per head mean that its relative significance in the world is at its high-water mark.

New markets will become increasingly important. It is ironic that, as the UK considers abandoning its independent currency for the euro, the importance of trade with the euro zone may be about to fade.

The Member for North Down claims that the motion is about giving guidance to people when the euro arrives. I do not understand what she means. The euro is replacing the Irish punt, but there has never been any need for a dual currency system while the punt was legal tender. The idea that the euro will flood across the border and that people will not know how to deal with it is nonsense.

She argues that farmers want the euro. What does she base that argument on? Farmers want a fair deal for their

products from those who buy them in the production chain. It is regrettable that the Member believes that the introduction of the euro will cure the ills of the farming community. It will do nothing of the kind.

The people of the UK will decide if, and when, they will enter the euro zone — no one will decide for them. Judging by what the hon Member from the Official Unionists said, it seems there has been a turning of the tide for the euro. As a result, there is no need for a King Canute. The winds of business and trade are telling us not to stay in the euro zone, but rather to get business from every nook and cranny of the planet into Northern Ireland.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion is useful in opening up the debate on the euro — an issue that has not been debated enough — and I welcome the opportunity to speak about it. However, my party will not be supporting the motion because it is not practical, and because neither Gordon Brown nor Tony Blair will defer to the implications of the motion if it is passed.

An informal dual currency has been operating on this island, and it will continue to operate after 1 January 2002. Sinn Féin would like to see a united Irish currency that operates outside the European monetary union and that will retain the economic power and control that comes with having an independent currency. That will include the power to set interest rates, control the growth of money supply and determine an ideal exchange rate position. These are vital tools of any state's economic strategy and play a crucial role in ensuring a dynamic sustainable economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I detect an undercurrent of conversation — it is difficult to hear what Dr O'Hagan is saying.

Dr O'Hagan: The experience with the euro has shown that the European Central Bank takes no account of the needs of the small economies on the periphery of Europe when formulating monetary policy.

The present dual currency system works against the creation of a united Irish economy, as will the introduction of the euro. The scenario of Britain being outside the single currency while the Twenty-six Counties adopts it creates an economic fault line between North and South on this island. Although Sinn Féin is opposed to the European monetary union in its current form, it does not want to see more obstacles to economic development and trade on the island. We must therefore ensure that the introduction of the euro does not cause yet another blockage to positive economic development on the island of Ireland.

The failure of the EU itself, as well as the Irish and British Governments, to consider the negative effects of the euro on trade in Ireland shows the lack of thought

that has been put into the actual effects of introducing a single currency.

4.00 pm

The economic effects of partition in border areas are greater than ever. Changing currency values leave communities on both sides of the border continually seeking the best means of increasing their spending power. Short-term gains for consumers on either side of the border are no recompense for the long-term damage inflicted on the border economy by this dual currency predicament. Therefore, the motion, as it stands, does not address the greater problem of economic sovereignty and the underlying economic problems.

The euro project is the centrepiece of a process of economic and political integration, in which more and more power is to be ceded, not only to centralised decision-making processes but to a range of unelected bodies. Participation in the euro has removed substantial economic decision-making powers from the Dublin Government. The ability to run deficits, borrow money and set exchange and interest rates is gone. The Twenty-six Counties is now victim to a "one-size-fits-all" policy formulated and managed not by any elected body but by the autonomous European Central Bank (ECB). Not one Irish official is among the senior management of that bank. Added to that is an ongoing campaign to end the right of the Dublin Government to set their own tax rates. That litany of failure should be nothing new to the people of the Six Counties or to our business community. For years, we have all been victim to the same "one-size-fits-all" policies of Westminster, which were formulated with little thought to the economic impact that decisions will have outside England.

A single EU currency, in its current format, is not of benefit to the island of Ireland economy. Until 1979, we had a single currency on the island of Ireland, and a connection with sterling. The Twenty-six Counties has merely substituted one unsatisfactory form of monetary union for another. We want to bring real power back to the people of the island of Ireland, not to be ceded to a new union. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ford: I am grateful for the previous two Members' contributions. If I had any doubt about the motion's virtue, the terms on which it has been rejected by the DUP and Sinn Féin enable me to be sure that it has considerable merit.

My party fully supports the swift and early entry of the UK into the European monetary union. There is no doubt that the current self-exclusion policy of the UK Government brings uncertainty to businessmen and potential investors — whether domestic or external — and creates dislocations on this island and in the UK as a whole. It is time that action was taken to address that.

Dr Birnie: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: After only 49 seconds — certainly.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Member. His point is that self-exclusion dislocates business. How does he explain the fact that the UK gross domestic produce growth is higher than that of “Euroland”, and is projected to be higher again next year?

Mr Ford: Those of us who witnessed what happened to the British economy during the Thatcher years of the 1980s have little difficulty in seeing the lower base from which the British economy is now recovering. It is certainly not an economy that is booming and forging ahead of Europe. Rather, it is one starting from a low base and that is still catching up with Europe. No doubt the better economic minds on the Ulster Unionist Benches, and in the Speaker’s Chair at present, will continue to deal with that debate for some months.

I interpret the resolution from Ms Morrice and Prof McWilliams as one looking towards some voluntary arrangements to deal with the inevitable currency difficulties. There is no doubt that the changeover to the euro, the expectations of developments in that direction and what Dr O’Hagan has described as the informal dual currency system pose problems for small business. There is no doubt that unless we do something to assist small businesses to deal with that, there will be economic difficulties for this region that will not apply elsewhere in the UK. It is therefore right that we should seek ways to deal with that problem and to assist small businesses to cope with the situation.

Mrs Courtney spoke about cross-border trade, as it affects commerce in the city of Derry. There are, of course, many small firms in border areas — and, increasingly, in other parts of Northern Ireland — that are having to adapt their work to deal with cross-border activity and the two-currency problems entailed in that. Dr Paisley correctly suggests that farmers are more concerned about getting a fair share for their production than the precise currency in which it is paid. However, surely even he would agree that it is a little bizarre to hear journalists discuss on the radio the ewe premium being set at 21 euros, when nobody knows whether, when it is actually paid, it will be 61p, 62p, 63p or 64p — or whatever — per euro. That is a fundamental issue, and I have heard farmers complain about their inability to predict the value of European grants. However, that, of course, is an argument to support all of the UK adopting the euro, rather than one specific region.

Changes are starting to occur, and the UK Government are clearly preparing for the referendum that will lead to the UK’s entry into the European monetary union. It is therefore right that the particular problems that we experience — in the only UK region that has a land frontier with the euro zone — should be addressed. Small businesses should be given the assistance that they require, whether it be from the Treasury or from the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Ms Jane Morrice said that the UK Government had got us into this mess — they certainly have some obligation to assist the economic development of this region and to help us to get out of the mess. Looking back some years, we were in a situation where the punt and sterling were part of a common currency union but not of a customs union. Now we are part of a common customs union without being in a currency union. Perhaps we will achieve the full benefits that are necessary for our economic development, and that of the other part of the island, only when we are both in the same customs and currency union.

I may have some reservations about the precise way in which the motion is phrased, but the terms in which it has been outlined by the proposer make it worthy of support. There is no doubt in my mind that the euro represents the best way forward for this society, and the motion is a step towards recognising the transitional nature of the arrangements that will exist from 1 January 2002. I support the motion, and I ask the House to support the concept of practical measures to deal with the informal currency system that we are about to enter.

Mr Beggs: I oppose the motion, and I will speak about the wording of it rather than comment on what the proposer of the motion has said. We vote on the wording of the motion, and that is what we should be talking about. Government can legislate and make financial arrangements, but who will pay for their implementation? Who will pay for new cash registers and new accountancy software in our businesses? Will it be the taxpayer, or will it fall to our hard-pressed businesses just as we are entering difficult financial trading times?

The motion refers to the official recognition of the euro as a second currency. Euros will, of course, be traded in Northern Ireland in the same way as punts, francs and pesetas have been traded. That is already happening, so why is it being called for in the motion? Why have we stated the emotive date of 1 January 2002, when the euro will replace all those currencies in Europe? It is obvious that Ms Morrice is looking for much more than is currently happening, and I am taking a reasonable interpretation of the wording of the motion — as opposed to what the proposer has said.

The motion refers to there being a second currency alongside sterling. It refers to a second currency and not to all the other currencies in the world, such as the dollars, that can be traded. Surely it is therefore referring to a second currency that is to be used in our tills. That is a reasonable assumption. What the Member has said in the debate does not add up to what is written in her motion. My understanding is that if her motion were to be agreed, the measures would not be introduced on a voluntary basis.

Nowhere in the motion is it stated that that should happen on a voluntary basis. As I said earlier, this is

happening automatically on a voluntary basis. Businesses that rely on trade in other parts of Europe or across the border — hoteliers, and so forth — are already making preparations. It is important that they provide convenient payment methods for their potential customers.

The motion concerns compulsory dual currency, which would be the worst possible outcome for Northern Ireland. It would mean additional costs for Northern Ireland, the only place in Europe that would have dual currency. If the motion were to be adopted, additional costs would be imposed on our businesses that would not exist anywhere else in "Euroland" or in the United Kingdom. That would disadvantage businesses.

The Member also calls on central Government to provide additional funds to pay for preparations for dual currency. As my Colleague has stated, that would cost hundreds of millions of pounds. How high on the list of priorities for public expenditure in Northern Ireland is preparation for the euro? If additional funding were given from the Barnett formula because of euro preparation, would the choice be to spend millions of pounds converting tills and accountancy software? Surely it would be spent on health, education, public transport and the protection of children rather than on financing the Member's single euro indulgence.

Banks, businesses, retailers and hoteliers are already making these preparations. It is right and proper that they should do so. The official recognition of a second currency would mean having two currencies in the tills. That is my interpretation, and I must reinforce that point. It would be an extremely expensive exercise for rural shopkeepers and for proprietors of corner shops in urban areas. How many tourists are expected in order to justify the additional financial burden in having dual currency and dual accounts? Firms could go out of business.

The euro is being presented as a solution to all our ills. However, the single European currency would hand over some economic control to Europe and would ultimately lead to the further development of a European superstate. To date, close co-operation has been beneficial to all the people of Europe. Now that Northern Ireland has devolution, the real danger is that, if a European superstate were to be promoted, more and more decision-making would be handed over to that superstate. We may also receive a flood of European Directives, as is already being experienced by Assembly Committees. There is no choice involved with European Directives; they must be approved. So much for devolution.

Who contributed to the decision-making on the preparation of these European Directives? The people of Northern Ireland have little involvement in that process. Decisions are made at a high level by representatives of the Governments of all the nation states in Europe. There is little consultation with the Northern Ireland Assembly on any of these Directives.

The Committee of the Centre is currently conducting an investigation into interaction with the European Community. That may be an important area that is not being dealt with. A European superstate goes completely against the grain of devolution. More decision-making is being handed over to European central Governments above the heads of the people. There will be limited means of influencing decisions.

The motion as it stands does not correspond with the mover's words. I oppose additional costs on local businesses and increased central control by a European superstate, and I oppose the motion.

4.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to switch off mobile phones and pagers before coming into the Chamber.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome this all-too-brief opportunity to have a debate on the euro, although that it is an oblique discussion. We are not talking about introducing the euro directly, although many of my colleagues have been talking about that. The euro will be legal tender from 1 January 2002. I reassure Esmond Birnie that he is not the only person who is confused. We are all struggling to discover what it will mean for us. It is timely that we should face the issue.

Much of the discussion in the Chamber has been about the pros and cons of the euro. However, from the wording of the motion I do not think that that is the issue. We all accept that the euro will not be the official currency in Northern Ireland or Britain after 1 January. This is not about replacing sterling; it is about facing the reality that in twenty-seven days' time the cash in people's pockets and the currency in their bank accounts and chequebooks will change in most of Europe.

The punt will remain for approximately a month until the banks gather them in. After 9 February there will be no more French or Belgian francs, lire, guilders, pesetas, Deutschmarks, drachmas, or markka. There will still be Danish and Swedish kronor, as well as sterling. For most people the currencies that are disappearing represent 1% or 2% of their expenditure. When added together, about 10% of our financial expenditure could be handled in euros.

Most of us do not admit that we go across the border to buy fuel for our cars. Many local transport companies have re-registered vehicles in the South and buy their fuel there. Many of us spend the odd weekend in Dublin or elsewhere in Southern Ireland, in places such as Donegal, and many of us holiday abroad. The combined impact of this will be much greater than that of people from the South spending punts in the North. I estimate that it could be two or three times greater.

The greatest interest will be in tourism. Almost all of our tourist expenditure will be in euros. We will still have British visitors, and I hope that we will still have Canadian and American visitors, although the transatlantic trade is

... We may have some Swedish visitors, but they do not form a big section of our tourist market. I hope that we will have Southern Irish visitors, and a few French, Spanish, German, Italian, Dutch and Belgian visitors. I am not just talking about past visitors, I am talking about those whom we hope to bring here, and those for whom the Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland Limited are marketing. All of those people will have euros in their pockets.

I have no doubt that many of our tourist businesses and entrepreneurs in other fields will accept euros. They will be accepted in the same way as the Irish pound has been exchangeable along the border and in many large stores in Belfast and in provincial towns. They will be accepted in the same way as sterling can be exchanged in Dublin, and the punt works in Newry, Derry and Belfast — on an unofficial and informal basis.

There will be many more euros to handle than there ever were punts. Any unwillingness, disinterest or lack of enthusiasm on the part of shops, bars or hotels to freely accept or tolerate the euro, will be seen by tourists as awkward, unfriendly and unwelcoming. It will give a less than subtle message that their business is not wanted, and they may decide not to come back.

I am not making a case for or against the euro. On 1 January, we will still have sterling, but our dealings with external currency will change. How will we grapple with that? I have a small business interest, and the bank has already advised me to set up a euro account to deal with what are trivial bits and pieces of exchange. As I understand it, most small businesses are being advised along those lines. Up to 20% of our financial transactions, whether they are for business, tourism or personal reasons, will be in euros. We will not need to spend vast amounts of money that are badly needed elsewhere, but we need to create and manage a euro tolerance. Otherwise, the clumsiness that might emerge will inflict damage on our credibility.

Despite the fact that we will remain a sterling zone, we need to encourage people to be familiar with the euro. When they get on a plane and go to any European country on holiday, the euro will be the currency. When I go abroad, it takes me about three days to become familiar with the currency. The challenge, and the motivation behind Ms Morrice's motion, is to create a sensible connection between the two financial systems that makes sense of the exchange between them, so that our import and export business can move freely.

I do not wish to deal today with the strong case in favour of the euro. I know that those who are opposed have an equally strong case against it. I want to make a simple, rational, common-sense case for coexistence or cohabitation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please draw your remarks to a close, Dr McDonnell.

Dr McDonnell: I like to believe that sterling will still be acceptable along the border, and perhaps in Dublin and at the interface with France, Belgium and Holland. We must get to grips with that situation and make exchange easy for business.

Mr S Wilson: I am not surprised that the motion has been put down by the Women's Coalition and supported vociferously by the Alliance Party. The motion calls for two currencies in Northern Ireland. As we have all witnessed in the last couple of weeks, when it comes to schizophrenia, both parties are very adept at behaving in that way. A couple of weeks ago, they wanted to belong to two communities. They wanted to be Unionist, and they wanted to be Nationalist. Now they want to have pounds, and they want to have euros.

Ms Morrice: It is the best of both worlds.

Mr S Wilson: It is the worst of all worlds; that is the problem. If it were the best of both worlds the DUP would support the motion. Let us consider the arguments. Members have been told that Northern Ireland cannot help but be affected by this issue because it shares a land boundary with a country of the euro zone. I am not very touched by that argument. It is not a new phenomenon that two countries that share a land boundary should have to deal with different currencies. That happened in Europe until this year.

Ms Morrice: There were not 300 million of them.

Mr S Wilson: Three hundred million people use dollars, and more of those people come here on holiday than those from Europe. We are not awash with dollars. Nevertheless, there is an argument that there must be a special arrangement in Northern Ireland because many people will be using euros and because we share a land boundary with the euro zone. If those special arrangements are not required between Canada and the United States or between France and Germany until this year, why should there be a special case for Northern Ireland after 1 January 2002?

It has also been said that treating the euro as the second currency in Northern Ireland will be voluntary. However, Ms Morrice does not regard this as voluntary. In fact, its being voluntary would invalidate all her arguments. On one hand she says that it will be a disaster if businesses do not recognise the euro as a second currency; on the other hand she says that they can pick and choose whether they want it. She must make up her mind, although I know that that is difficult.

Members were also told that it would help farmers. I have taught some economics students in my life; some of them were good, and others were poor. However, if I were marking an essay by Ms Morrice I would not give it a pass grade. She says that if farmers were paid in euros all their concerns about the effects of the exchange rate would cease. What does she think the farmers will

do with the euros when they get them? They are not going to pay wages, electricity bills or feed bills with them. They will have to change them into sterling. Therefore the argument that euros will do away with the exchange problems that farmers have been complaining about is false.

That takes me to the logical extension of her argument, which is, as my hon Friend Dr Paisley said, that the euro be introduced into Northern Ireland as the first step towards imposing a common currency on the United Kingdom.

Ms Morrice said that the introduction of the euro would help tourism. An article from 'Ulster Business' quotes a man who should know about tourism because he owns several hotels in Northern Ireland. Howard Hastings has said that we should say "yes" to Europe — as Dr Paisley said earlier — but "no" to the euro. That is the view of someone who works in tourism every day, who knows the effects and who has said that these arguments are not valid.

It was also argued that the euro would make Northern Ireland's trade with Europe easier. Dr Birnie pointed out that 80% of Northern Ireland's international trade is outside the euro zone. Therefore most businesses will still have to deal with exchange fluctuations. Some businesses have traded almost exclusively in dollars for many years, but they do not argue that Northern Ireland must join the Federal Reserve or introduce the dollar into Northern Ireland. Trading as the currency exists can be done; it is done every day. Nevertheless, Members are told that if they do not agree the motion Northern Ireland will face economic disaster.

Of course, we should not worry about the cost; we can get it from the Treasury. That is the final argument — let us go to the Treasury, hold out our hands, and it will pay.

4.30 pm

If the Treasury were to give Northern Ireland another 200 million quid, I would want it to be spent on something more than slot machines and cash registers. Yet it appears that this is the priority that the Women's Coalition, the Alliance Party and, it seems, the SDLP share in the event of the extra money becoming available. Let me give an example. A newspaper recently published an article about a company which runs a few buses between Donegal and Northern Ireland. It reckoned that the changeover to the euro will cost it £40,000. That is for one small business. That will be multiplied across Northern Ireland, and the figures estimated are £200 million or £700 million — nobody is sure.

I can think of far better things to spend our money on, especially when all of the arguments that have been made are fallacious. The reason behind this is not that it will help the farmers and tourism, that it is realistic or that it will help our trade with the rest of Europe. The

real reason is that those euro fanatics who are looking at the political landscape in the United Kingdom know that 80% of the population in the United Kingdom will not voluntarily vote to go into the euro zone. So what do you do? Esmond Birnie has described it; you introduce the currency by stealth, "euro creep", as it is called — or "euro creeps".

Ms Morrice: What would the Member do if the referendum in Northern Ireland were counted separately and Northern Ireland voted for entry into the single currency?

Mr S Wilson: Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and I hope that it will be treated as such when it comes to a referendum. I have no doubt that good sense will prevail in Northern Ireland as much as it will prevail in the rest of the United Kingdom and that the people here will oppose it.

The fact of the matter is — and Esmond Birnie has mentioned it — that it is less and less likely that the five economic tests that Gordon Brown has set will be met. It is less and less likely that people in the United Kingdom will be persuaded to voluntarily accept the euro. We have seen the kind of interference that comes from Europe — it is now telling the Irish Republic how much tax it can levy. We are not members of the euro zone, yet it is telling Gordon Brown how much he can spend. Next week we will discuss the Budget. Under the proposals for a common currency, Brussels can determine our level of spending and taxation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr S Wilson: I will finish now. That is why people will reject the introduction of the euro. That is why we have to have it sneaked in by the back door. That is the real motive behind the motion.

Mr M Robinson: On 1 January 1999, the euro was launched to great acclaim and much media frenzy. We were informed of the many benefits associated with the euro; how it would be a strong currency and would one day rival the mighty dollar. Unfortunately this has not been the case.

For the first three years, the new currency has struggled in the markets, and its value has plummeted month after month. Advocates of a single currency feel that it makes sound business and economic sense, in that it will create lower interest rates and faster growth. However, interest rates are unique to each country. No one interest rate fits all; no one interest rate is right for both Belfast and Brussels.

It is therefore obvious that countries that have signed up to the single currency will end up with interest rates that are either too high or too low. How could any country be sure that it is getting a fair deal in line with the needs of that particular country? One currency, one bank, one interest rate will inevitably lead to common

ation, one budget and one economic policy. As I have already mentioned, each country is very different economically, so how can a single budget, which will meet the needs of every country, be created?

There will obviously be winners and losers. If we look at the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, it is blatantly obvious who the winners and losers were. As part of the common fisheries policy, the EU tightened the quota system against the United Kingdom. As a result, thousands of trawlermen have lost their jobs, and hundreds of vessels have been taken out of commission. Under the latest proposals, Britain is expected to cut her fishing fleet under the quota system by another 40%. The decimation of the fishing industry has caused problems of unemployment and recession in the fishing towns and villages across our Province. This is one all-too-obvious example of how community policy can damage not only jobs and employment, but the social and community fabric in affected areas.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that while the fishing industry in the United Kingdom has suffered because of job and boat losses, other European fleets have done better at the expense of the fish in UK waters?

Mr M Robinson: In agreeing with my Colleague, I would like to thank him for illuminating the point that I was making.

The assertion of governmental or imperial power has always rested upon the assertion of the rights to levy taxes, to spend money and to impose a portrait of the head of the king or queen upon the coin. The European Union is following a well-trodden path in wishing to issue and design its own coinage. The power to tax is fundamental in establishing governmental rights. It is difficult to see why we would even contemplate a common economic policy run by the very people who brought us the common fisheries policy and the common agricultural policy.

In discussing the single currency, we cannot help but mention the fact that we would be moving towards the centralisation of federal power and, therefore, the creation of a single Government. How would it be possible to govern a single country called Europe, given the different languages, histories, cultures, identities, et cetera? Each and every country should be proud of its heritage and culture. Unfortunately the introduction of a single currency is only going to further weaken our culture and our identity.

Yes, Northern Ireland is unique in that it shares a land border with the Republic of Ireland, which as we all know has opted to introduce the euro. However, this should not pose any great difficulty, as we have managed for over 20 years with two different currencies, since the Republic of Ireland introduced its own currency by replacing the pound with the punt.

It is an absurd notion to have the two currencies working alongside one another. The cost of implementing this

would be phenomenal. The costs of conversion are huge. Every computer, vending machine, slot machine, accounting system and bank telling machine would need to be changed. There are over 20,000 automated teller machines handling the existing type of paper currency note in the UK. All of these would have to be replaced to handle entirely different styles and shapes of notes. Also, 500,000 point-of-sale terminals in shops around the country would require either fundamental overhaul or replacement to handle any new currency. All accounting and cash settlement systems would need to be adjusted in order to deal in the re-denominated currency, and in the period of transition these would need to shift from sterling to the euro and back again using the fixed conversion factor.

Around the European Union as a whole there are 12 billion bank notes in circulation and another eight billion in store. All or most of these would need to be replaced with new ones. The complete coinage would require re-minting into the new shapes and specifications of the euro. In the case of a small shopkeeper, the costs would be considerable. They would have to make facilities available for transactions in both sterling and euros. In practice, this would mean doubling up the number of tills in the shop to handle two separate sets of banknotes and coins. The total cost to business is estimated at more than £30 billion in total.

What return could they possibly earn on this? In effect, it would be all cost and no benefit. Who would end up footing this bill? Would the customer end up paying the price in more ways than one? We should be proud of the pound and all that it stands for. John Redwood MP said that if we join the euro, there is no point to general elections, as so many of the important decisions about our prosperity will be taken behind closed doors by unelected officials in some far-away bank?

Ms Morrice: I would like to address several issues. The issue of cost was raised by Dr Bimie and by several Members from the DUP Benches. I would like to tease out that issue in order to understand it better. For example, let us suppose that we will have a referendum. Dr Paisley put this point well. What will happen if the people of the UK say, "Yes"? We will have to convert our currency into euros and have a transitional period. Who will pay for that? Surely the Treasury will not expect the people of Northern Ireland to foot the bill for that currency change? The Treasury will have to pay for the conversion.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms Morrice: I do not know how much time I have.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is limited, but she can decide to give way.

Ms Morrice: How much time do I have?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has approximately eight minutes.

Ms Morrice: I will not give way, because I must respond to the arguments. If the people of the UK say, "No", we are still going to have euros in Northern Ireland. I make that point in answer to Mr Sammy Wilson's comments. Has his head been buried in the sand? Does he not visit Newry or any other border town? Does he not see that currency is crossing the border, and that the euro will cross the border? I would point out to him that there are several thousand miles of water between the United States of America and us. Perhaps he has not noticed that. Canada and America have the same problem with cross-border currency and trade.

Some Members got out their single, transferable speeches as soon as they saw the motion on the Order Paper. They began to say "No" to the euro; "No" to entering a single currency; "No" to the central bank, and "No" to a common — *[Interruption]*.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Morrice: I am not calling for our entry into the single currency, common control or the central bank.

Some Members: Oh yes you are.

Ms Morrice: Oh no I'm not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member knows that her comments must be directed to the Chair and not to the other side of the Chamber.

Ms Morrice: I will direct my comments through the Chair.

I am not calling for those things. The difference is stated in the motion. The euro should be sitting "alongside sterling". Did Members read that in the motion?

Mr Beggs made an important point. I would like to take time out, because Mr Beggs is probably on the conversion list as far as political persuasion is concerned. He said that he misunderstood the motion because it does not mention the word "voluntary". However, it does not mention the word "compulsory" either. I hope that I have explained that it is about accommodating, facilitating and, when it is in the interests of business and industry, encouraging the use of the euro. I am not talking about it's being enshrined in law, or compulsory. I want it to be voluntary, demand-led and market-driven.

I hope that Mr Beggs will understand, and perhaps be persuaded to change his position on the motion, as a result of my explanation.

4.45 pm

I thank Dr McDonnell and Mrs Courtney for their support. It was useful to hear Mrs Courtney's reference to experiences in the border areas. Businesses there are having problems and are having to accommodate for them without any guidance. However, problems do not occur only in the border areas. I have heard about a small business in north Belfast — *[Interruption]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Morrice: — that could not obtain a conversion rate for the euro from the bank. Yes, there are forward-thinking businesses in Northern Ireland, although it seems some banks have yet to get there. I appreciate Dr McDonnell's point about "euro tolerance". If we do not have that we shall damage our credibility. Why not have co-existence?

I was disappointed, although not surprised, with Sinn Féin's position on the motion. That demonstrates how far we still must go to achieve modern political and economic thinking. I thank Mr Ford who pointed out the problems for small business. It is vital that we understand those problems. I also thank him for explaining to those Members who are supposed to be so close to the farming community that he has come across farmers who would appreciate their subsidies being paid in euros. Those Members who think that that is not the case should go to the farmers and ask them. Perhaps they would then respond differently to the motion.

Mr Shannon: How many farmers are there in north Down?

Ms Morrice: There is a problem here, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wish to make that clear.

I am afraid that those who vote against the motion do not realise that it is a pragmatic solution. They simply "do not want a euro about the place". We are correct to wait for a referendum.

I have already referred to Mark Robinson and Sammy Wilson. I mentioned the head-in-the sand approach and the single transferable speech.

There is no question that the referendum that takes place on the UK's membership of the single European currency will be the deciding factor on whether the UK enters it. The Women's Coalition believes that the single European currency is important and valuable. However, the criteria and the timing must be right. We in the party are pragmatists. The motion offers a solution in the interim. I remind Members that support for the motion is not necessarily support for the euro, nor is it support for UK membership of the single currency. The motion seeks only to make provision for the unique situation in Northern Ireland.

The euro is a reality. It will make its way north of the border whether we like it or not. Our farmers, our businesses and our industry need to know how to deal with it. By supporting the motion the Assembly would send out a clear message to the people that it represents — Northern Ireland is open for business in euros and in pounds. Let the people decide.

Question put and negatived.

Adjourned at 4.55 pm.