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The second future issue is education. We have massive issues with education. We have some excellent schools, which we should celebrate, but we have a long, under-achieving tail. We need to address that educational disadvantage, because it can breed long-term disengagement and disaffection in communities. People believe not only that they are not getting a fair share in education, but that they are impeded in influencing the community around them. We must consider how we educate our young people—we educate them separately, and the people who teach them are also separated. Only 7% of young people are in integrated settings, but 79% of parents say that that would be their choice. We need to consider how we build on that for future generations.

**Kate Hoey:** Does the hon. Lady therefore welcome the motion passed in the Assembly yesterday? It was supported by all parties bar one, which I will not name. The motion supported getting rid of the exception in employment law allowing discrimination on the grounds of religious belief. The Assembly was united apart from one party.

**Naomi Long:** I welcome that measure—it is long overdue. That is one way of opening up the teaching profession. Indeed, it means that students could be opened up to people from different backgrounds from their own, which is important.

Finally, there is the issue of shared spaces and shared housing. We need to change the language, away from people simply saying that people choose to live segregated lives, either to an acknowledgement that the threat that makes people choose to live that way is no longer there, and that we will set out to prove that that is the case; or to an acknowledgement that the threat is there and real, that separation is safer, and that we will tackle the forces that are posing a threat, whether they are paramilitaries or others. Shared spaces do not have to be neutral, but they do have to be managed. We have to put effort into ensuring that they are available for the people of Northern Ireland. It is not easy to achieve. My colleague David Ford has worked with groups on issues relating to interfaces, and reducing and opening barriers. We have to build confidence, and get statutory support in place.

Most of the matters I have highlighted are devolved, with the exception of dealing with the past and parades. However, there is a role for the British and Irish Governments as joint custodians of this process, participating in the wider discussion, facilitating and encouraging progress, and supporting the Executive in those areas where agreement can be found.

In recent months, Northern Ireland has found itself staring back into the abyss. We are faced with the choice of going back there again or doing the work now to

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ensure that that does not happen. We can choose to spend our time poking each other in the eye, or we can try to find a way to treat each other with dignity and respect. I am an optimist. It is not that I think that things are better than they are; I firmly believe that they can be better. That is the challenge to each of us, and we need to show the leadership to fulfil it.

**4.26 pm**

**Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab):** I welcome the debate and thank the shadow Secretary of State for ensuring that it took place. Looking back 20 years, I am absolutely delighted by how my party’s policy on Northern Ireland has changed radically. When I was first elected, one was almost shouted down if one said anything that in any way vaguely implied that one might not want a united Ireland. Our policy used to be that we would persuade people that a united Ireland was their best future. That changed under the previous Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and from then things improved. We got the Belfast agreement and, as everyone has said, things have changed so much in Northern Ireland that, as someone who was born and brought up there and still goes back regularly, I cannot help but see the differences and changes, which are mostly for the best.

I pay tribute to the Prime Minister. “Risk” is the wrong word to use, but he certainly took a big leap by agreeing to have the G8 in Northern Ireland. We do not host the G8 summit that often, so to hold it in a part of the United Kingdom where a lot of people across the world will be saying, “How on earth are we going to go to Northern Ireland?” was a fantastic thing for him to do. I think it will be a wonderful experience for all of those people. It may not be such a wonderful experience for any of our colleagues going in and out of Belfast international airport on 16 and 17 June, as I think there will be a lot of security, but there is security at all G8 summits. I think we have to remind people that it will be no different from the security at any G8 anywhere in the world. I welcome the decision to hold the summit in Northern Ireland very much.

There is one area in particular that I shall mention towards the end of speech. I will be as brief as possible, because I know that my colleagues from Northern Ireland want to speak. I will deal with only a couple of matters.

On the flags issue, it was not as if there were thousands and thousands of people on the streets of Belfast demanding that the flag be taken down from Belfast city hall. We know that this was a Sinn Fein agenda—it is what they have always wanted. The sad thing was that they were given that chance by people who perhaps thought that they were working in the interests of uniting people, and all it has done is divide people.

I am concerned about the Historic Enquiries Team, and hope that the Minister will say something about it. There are real issues that we need to explore: the length of time some of the things are taking and perhaps the way it is being run now. We need to have a detailed look at how that organisation is working. I hope that the Minister will come back to that.

I want to deal today with a crucial, but non-devolved, matter. Northern Ireland has a fantastic heritage of sport, sporting opportunities and sporting people famous

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all over the world. I need not remind anybody that we have the best golfers in the world or of people such as Mary Peters who have done extremely well at the Olympics over the years. These people have made Northern Ireland known to those involved in sport all over the world. We have some very good young people, yet we are faced with an issue that people do not like to talk about, because they think, “Oh, sport’s not political, so let’s not make it political”. But it is a real issue. In many sports, it is difficult for a young person from a particular community in Northern Ireland who wants to be part of a British team and of the UK ever to compete for a British team, unless they move to England, Wales or Scotland.

Boxing is one example. There are some boxing clubs—probably not many—where young boxers have no desire to box under the tricolour, but they have to because boxing is organised on an all-Ireland basis. The international boxing community recognises all-Ireland boxing, so if someone wants to box for a British team, they have to join a club in England, Scotland or Wales. The Belfast agreement was supposed to ensure parity and enable people to choose whether they felt more Irish or more British, yet in sport it is very much one way. Swimming is another example. Swimming clubs in Northern Ireland cannot affiliate to the Amateur Swimming Association, even though its general secretary would love to have them. They are not allowed to because they have to affiliate to the Irish swimming association, which does not want clubs affiliated to British swimming.

It is the same in tennis. A washing machine powder advert once ran a special offer giving people special help in tennis, but Northern Ireland was excluded because it was not seen as part of the British set-up. I will not repeat the story of the Olympics, but a number of colleagues are concerned that before the next Olympics we find a way of not referring to “Team GB”. It ignores Northern Ireland. There were people from Northern Ireland in the British team in several sports. I am not saying that because I consider Northern Ireland to be a part of the United Kingdom, everyone there must be in a British team, but the House has to ensure that the rights and opportunities of young people who feel British are recognised.

When I was sports Minister, I tried to do something about this matter, but it was even more difficult then because we did not have the agreements. Now we have them, however, there is no reason for the Minister, the Secretary of State or Northern Ireland politicians not to say, “This is wrong.” Every youngster must have the right to choose. Boxing, swimming and tennis clubs should be able to affiliate to British boxing, as well as to Irish boxing, if that is what they want. They might not all want to, but they must have that right. My constituents buy their lottery tickets hoping to help a British team in the Olympics. Some of that money quite rightly helps to fund the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, because it has a team in the Commonwealth games, but some of those youngsters also compete for Ireland against British teams. So we have this ridiculous situation where my constituents are paying for people to have extra training and support to help them win a gold medal instead of a British person.

I find it upsetting that when people who feel strongly in Northern Ireland raise this matter they are accused almost of being sectarian. It is not sectarian for someone

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to want to be able to compete for the country that is their nationality. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and if someone feels British and they live in Northern Ireland, they should be allowed to do that. I hope that the Minister will refer to that and not just ignore it, as many other Ministers have over the years.

Let me end by saying that I am delighted at the progress in Northern Ireland, but also adding my concern that, although it is easy to talk about the bad old days and the good days now, it does not take an awful lot to go back to some of the things that happened in the bad old days. We have seen some of those and hon. Members have outlined some of the terrible things that have happened. Devolution now applies to many areas, but we in this Parliament should remember that the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, of which I am a member and which the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) chairs so well, needs to keep an eye on things in Northern Ireland. We cannot just say, “It’s all finished; it’s all better.” Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom. Members in this House need to remember that and not be fobbed off by the idea that everything in the garden is rosy over there, because it certainly is not…

**Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab)** …I enjoy it when my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) speaks of sport. She could have mentioned her own remarkable achievements in that area. When I met her and the Sandy Row boxing club the other day, we did not discuss all-Ireland boxing, but we have now been educated on it. Sports groups and organisations in Northern Ireland are providing leadership. Two football teams from slightly different traditions in Belfast—Crusaders and Cliftonville—have for the past two or three years, very quietly and peacefully and without great fanfare, been getting on with cross-community working. I am not sure whether they have ever been given credit on the Floor of the House, but I would like to give credit to the Crus and to Cliftonville for their achievements in that area. I also congratulate the appropriate Members of Parliament for the support that they have given.