

**The National Assembly for
Wales
(The Record)**

Tuesday 13 November 2001

**Minority Party Debate
(The Conservative Party)**

The New Assembly Building

Glyn Davies: I propose that:

- ◆ *the National Assembly resolves to cancel forthwith the project to build the new Assembly Chamber building and resolves to commit the money saved to the Assembly's health budget. (NDM832)*

I have spoken about the proposed new Assembly building in this, our existing debating Chamber, on several occasions. There have been two consistent strands running through all my contributions. First, I have consistently sought to prevent the project from going ahead, and secondly I have consistently claimed that Assembly Members have not been presented with the project's true financial implications. I have also repeatedly warned that eventually the true costs of the project will come out. In fact, I contend that the project's costs have not gone up at all, it is just that we and the public are now for the first time finding out what they are.

No issue has caused, nor continues to cause, our National Assembly more damage than the utter shambles over the new building project. We all have our own ideas on where the blame for this shambles lies, and we may have different ideas on how to straighten it out, but I suspect that we all agree that we would like to draw a line under the indecision.

We have chosen the future of the new debating Chamber as the subject of our minority debate in an attempt to encourage clear direction. The Conservatives' stance is clear and remains unchanged: to spend a huge sum of money on a new debating Chamber, before the National Assembly has a track record of achievement that is recognised and acknowledged by the Welsh people, is not the right thing to do.

We all know that our present Chamber is no more than adequate and that today the issue is less clear cut because £8 million has already been spent on the infamous hole in the ground. However, our view remains clear: the costs are too high and the project should be cancelled and the money invested in public services. Such a decision, in our view, would transform the light in which the Assembly is regarded by the Welsh people.

We are all trying, in our different ways, to make a success of the National Assembly. We are working—some of us in Government, some of us in opposition, the Liberal Democrats in both—to win the backing of the people of Wales. Scrapping this project may stir up Wales's chattering classes, but it would also be hugely welcomed across Wales, and would do more to ensure that the Welsh public respects the Assembly than any other decision we could take.

Since we tabled this motion, some Assembly Members have told me that we have debated this issue too often already. My response is that we have not debated this issue honestly at all. If we had done so, I believe that we might not have gone ahead with the project, and certainly not as one of our new Assembly's first major expenditures.

Let us look back. First, we considered building a new debating Chamber, the likely cost of which was said to be approximately £10 million, plus some additional costs. I do not

know how many of us believed those figures; I certainly did not. Lord Rogers was then chosen to design the building. He is an architect who works at the edge of technology—so much so that we still do not know if it is actually possible to build his design for the roof. Whether Lord Rogers has ever brought a project in on budget is a good question. Predictably, the budget rose to £22 million, plus a contingency reserve of 15 per cent. On discussing the design and the model with people who had built major projects, I became convinced that £30 million was the minimum true cost, and said so. Since then there has been a delay of three months while the First Minister assessed the position, which cost £386,000. In addition, the discount that was reasonably anticipated given the prestigious nature of the project has long since disappeared because of the row associated with it. In my view, if the project is to go ahead now, and meet the purpose that its supporters claim for it, we must contemplate a total figure probably approaching £40 million.

Conservatives are pragmatic by instinct. We recognise that this is an absolute shambles that must be sorted out. Two choices face us. The right and sensible choice from our perspective—the people's choice—is to scrap the project today. The wrong choice, genuinely espoused by others, is to take the path to spending nearly £40 million on a project that the taxpayers will see as the Members' own project. The decision is easy for the Conservative Party: we want to scrap the project.

I acknowledge that the decision is more difficult for others, especially for Labour Assembly Members, because the First Minister has not given any leadership on this difficult issue. He gives coded signals to the media and public that he is against the project—a 'Good old Rhodri, man of the people' line. In the Assembly he says the minimum that he can get away with, leaving the Minister for Finance swinging in the wind and hanging out to dry.

We must all come to terms with this lack of leadership. Perhaps we should view our First Minister as an ambassador, representing the Assembly among the people, making best use of his encyclopaedic general knowledge of Wales and ready wit, while the rest of us confront the hard choices that must be made. Perhaps our First Minister can be our equivalent of Max Boyce, entertaining the people while the other 59 Members face up to the difficult decisions.

If you do not support our motion today, you are, effectively, saying that you are willing to spend nearly £40 million on this prestigious—we say unnecessary—project. On the other hand, if you believe that we should not spend nearly £40 million on building a new Assembly debating Chamber—and I know that some Members in other parties agree with me—vote with us. Draw a line under this project and have done with it. Scrap the project and spend the money on the people of Wales instead.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Fourteen Members have indicated that they wish to speak. They will not all be able to contribute unless Members limit themselves to three minutes. Instead of the voluntary limit in the last debate, I will impose a limit of three minutes on every speaker, except for the Minister and Nick Bourne, who will conclude the debate and who will have 15 minutes in which to speak.

John Griffiths: There is a tremendous reek of Conservative hypocrisy about this debate, as there was in the previous debate on miners' compensation. We all know the Conservatives' record in Wales on the national health service, which they have sought to bring into this debate, and that on miners' compensation. It is a shameful record, and I raise it because many people to whom I have spoken believe that that point should be made repeatedly.

Alun Cairns: You mentioned our record on the health service: will you confirm that after nearly five years of Labour rule in Wales, we now have the worst health statistics on record?

John Griffiths: Alun, you should ask yourself why, for the second Westminster general election running, we have a Tory-free Wales. The people have delivered their verdict; they know the Conservatives' record on health and other issues, and they know our record, and they have delivered their judgment.

The arguments for a new Assembly building are well rehearsed. We return to this subject repeatedly, and we have seen the hypocrisy of the Welsh Conservatives repeatedly. We know that the building is needed for practical reasons, which they must recognise. It is needed also for symbolic reasons; it is partly about self-confidence in Wales and it is important that Wales is seen to have a landmark building to symbolise the new democracy and political reality. It is now time to get on with it. That is my message today. We know that a blank cheque cannot be written, but we also know that there are always difficulties with this sort of public building. We have seen that with the Scottish Parliament building, and Portcullis House at Westminster, the costs of which increased far in excess of any inflation in this project in Wales. Difficulties always exist, but we know that this building is needed. We must bite the bullet and get on with it.

4:50 p.m.

We should not compromise by building a radically smaller building or one of lesser quality. We want a high quality building that sends out the message that we are serious about the new politics in Wales. We want a building to symbolise that. We do not want the hypocrisy of the Conservatives.

Alun Cairns: It is ideal that I am speaking after John Griffiths, as I wish to raise a few points that he mentioned. There is no doubt that the embarrassment of this Assembly building is creating enormous problems for Wales's image. The hole in the ground outside, with a £34,000 fence surrounding it, is an embarrassment to the Assembly administration, and to Plaid Cymru, which supported the administration and propped it up when it needed to drive the vote through. It was a paradise for the London media sketch writers recently, who commented on an industrial estate. I need not say that they were not on an industrial estate. The only industrial estate that stands before us is the one outside—that great big hole in the ground. They reacted badly to the condition—

Cynog Dafis: What do you think should be done with the hole in the ground?

Alun Cairns: I am clear enough on that. The present situation cannot continue. The

First Minister must chose the way forward—either scrap the new building, or drive it through and accept the political consequences. I am against this building, and I do not want the project to continue.

The image of Wales and the National Assembly for Wales has been damaged. We would have sent a strong message to the London journalists, if we could have said, ‘yes, our existing Assembly building is adequate—it is not a flash building, it is not at the cutting edge of technology, but our public services are much better’. Would it not have been nice to say that we have a better health service instead? Would it not have been nice to say, ‘yes, but we have shorter waiting lists’? I remind John Griffiths that after four and a half years of a Labour administration we now have the worst health statistics on record. Labour looks to a time further back than that, but it has had enough time to sort that out.

Phil Williams: Does it not show a lack of a sense of proportion that you go on and on about the cost of the new Assembly building and pay so little attention to the fact that there was an underspend of £54 million on health last year and £45 million the year before? There was a total underspend of £272 million. Is that not far more important? The resources are there. Why do you pay so much attention to a much smaller part of the budget?

Alun Cairns: The Welsh Conservatives’ manifesto states that we want to increase spending on health, and we want allocations for each budget line used to the full. That raises questions about the First Minister’s leadership—I will come back to that in a few seconds.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. Your time has just expired, Alun. That was a good try.

Alun Cairns: I have given way several times. Do I not get time in compensation?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, sorry.

David Melding: Point of order. I challenge the speed of that decision.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will move on.

Alison Halford: The decision to have a new building was taken before this Assembly was created. The building was seen as essential to establish a home for Welsh democracy. I supported it, and still do. Furthermore, we were allowed to debate this matter—let us be grateful for that. [*Laughter.*] Do I get extra time for laughter? We would be failing in our duty if we did not realise that the project was damaged goods even before the Assembly set eyes on it. There were no signed contracts, there was procurement confusion, disability access was played down in the original plan, crèche facilities had to be built in, and the land that was bought was too small for the building to fit onto it. I am not sure that we really knew how much it was going to cost. That was the poisoned chalice that Edwina Hart inherited.

It is not a choice between an Assembly building and better health. Wales deserves a great building that symbolises our democracy. However, I agree that that should not be at any price. As has been said, our situation is not like that in Scotland, where the price of the new Parliament building has escalated to over £200 million. It was a Conservative Government that approved the construction of Portcullis House, at a cost of £100 million, as my colleague mentioned.

Jonathan Morgan *rose*—

Alison Halford: I will not give way. That was £1 million for every office. It also rented trees. The Northern Ireland Assembly walked into the magnificent Stormont building, which was already adapted and suitable for all purposes. As a Member for a constituency in north Wales, I am more than aware of the economic needs of our public services. I am glad that Edwina is asking hard questions. However, we need this building. It is not our fault—

Jonathan Morgan: I am grateful to Alison for giving way. We know that the costs are rapidly heading towards £40 million. We do not know whether the costs will exceed that figure. How much more would you be willing to pay? At what point do you say no, Alison—£40 million, £50 million, £100 million?

Alison Halford: I cannot answer that question. I am not on the inner track when it comes to procurement and so on. Wales needs this building but, as I have already said, not at any cost. That is why Edwina Hart is doing a good job and needs our support.

I suggest that, if any consideration should be given of the new buildings proposed for Cardiff, it should be the Millennium Centre. That would give us time to learn the lessons of commissioning expensive public buildings. We have spent money on this project—let us get on with and let us get a building.

I accompanied a tour of 30 children from north Wales around the Assembly. It was probably the first north Wales school to visit the Assembly. The children were excited at seeing the Chamber and going to the Pierhead to see the model of the new building. When they return to Cardiff, as they will when they grow up, would it not be wonderful for them to see an innovative building, which would be a clear statement that, at last, Wales has come of age?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I owe Alun an apology. I have allowed Alison a little over three minutes, as she took an intervention. Alun was very generous—he took more than one intervention and I should have allowed him more time. I apologise for that.

David Davies: We must think today of the message that we will send out if we decide to continue with the new building, especially given the fact that only one in four people voted in favour of establishing the Assembly. Everyone knows of the problems with the costs—the cost has risen from £13 million to £40 million. Who knows what the final cost will be if we decide to progress with the project today?

There are already so many problems in our country—in the agriculture industry, for example. John Griffiths mentioned the health service, and I would like to tell him that

things are much worse under the Labour Party than they were under the Conservative Party. Local government suffers from a lack of money and, over the past year, many people have lost their jobs. I state unequivocally today that we do not need a new building. We must have constructive ideas. We should decide today to abandon this project and spend the money on something positive, such as a new children's hospital, to ensure that everyone can feel proud of the Assembly and its Members.

Richard Edwards: Even by the standards of controversy typical for new public building projects, the saga of the new Assembly Chamber is remarkable. It almost beggars belief that we are debating, yet again, whether or not it should even be built. I say almost because, of course, the sponsors of this motion are the Welsh Conservative group. Now there is a construct that defies belief—anti-devolution, anti-Assembly, anti new Chamber. Who needs a new Chamber when there is a nice one already in Westminster? The trouble is, no one in Wales will elect them to it. Therefore, here they are like a tapered boys brigade, lost in the fog, compelled down a path they do not want to take using navigation methods in which they do not believe—a sad, rudderless, emasculated rump whose most profound conviction is that it should not exist.

David Davies *rose—*

Richard Edwards: I will not take an intervention; I have not got time. You have plenty of speakers. The only time this conviction seems to waive is when the wicked witch of the north, the Member of Parliament for Ribble Valley, vents his spleen on this place and, by association, on them. Unfortunately, the many and varied problems that have bedevilled the new Chamber project from the outset have, without question, played into the hands of the enemies of devolution. It also does not help to caricature the events of the past few months as ego clashes between the main protagonists. It is ironic that this trivialisation stems from some of the biggest egos this side of Hollywood. The National Assembly and democracy in Wales requires an appropriate and accessible symbol if it is ever to achieve its full potential.

5:00 p.m.

Better governance for Wales is a long-term enterprise, demanding courage, leadership and, above all, vision. The Assembly has existed for two years and we have barely established its foundations. There is a long journey ahead of us and, let us not forget that we Assembly Members are only temporary keepers of our offices. Future generations will judge us harshly if we compromise vision for expediency dictated by the enemies of devolution. The Conservative Party calls for a children's hospital and for more money to be spent on the health service—it had 18 years in government in which it chose instead to hammer the health service and to undermine the social, economic and democratic fabric of this country. The Conservative Party made devolution and the Assembly necessary, and it makes the new Chamber essential.

Peter Rogers: If more Members brought their constituents to this Chamber, today's debate would be unnecessary. When I show people around this Chamber, they cannot believe that we are going to spend millions of pounds on something that we already have. They, quite rightly, see this as a waste of taxpayers' money that could be spent on

worthier causes.

Ann Jones: I am interested to hear that you have managed to bring so many of your constituents from north Wales to the Assembly. I represent a deprived area and my constituents can not afford to travel. Will you let me in on your secret or do you assist them to come here?

Peter Rogers: What I said was that if more Members brought their constituents here—*[Interruption.]* I agree with you, it is a long way. My constituents point out that Members were happy to stand up in this Chamber and call for a stop to the war in Afghanistan and wax lyrical on the humanitarian problems that were created as a result. However, the same Members have consistently voted to spend millions of pounds on somewhere for them to say those things. Their position is inconsistent. In politics, we frequently face difficult choices—this is not one of them. The choice is simple and I know what people would want us to do. I am confident that they would rather that we use the money to improve their quality of life and not our own. Put to good use in the health service, these millions could save lives. It is not too late to make that commitment.

Michael German: This reminds me of the general election euro debate, and we know what the result for the Conservatives was then. Now, we have a will they, won't they, sometime, never approach to this building. We are told that the Conservatives are split, some of them are in the never-ever brigade and others are in the 'yes, but not now' brigade. I would like to know who stands where. How many Conservative Members of Parliament are now sitting comfortably in Portcullis House, which they decided to build for themselves, at the cost of almost £300 million? Presumably, the Conservatives—they were Tories then, of course—did not object to Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament being built at the time and they were quite right not to object. Look at the numbers of visitors who go there. It is a major source of income. Why are our Conservatives so bereft of imagination that they cannot see that this new Assembly Chamber will repay its cost many times over, admittedly, not directly back to the public purse, but through the private sector operators of transport, hotels, restaurants and retail outlets. I would have thought that the Conservatives would be behind that level of leverage to benefit the private sector and the jobs and the prosperous economy that comes from it. The Chamber will be a tourist attraction.

Nobody likes new buildings as they are being planned or built. Consider the controversy that surrounded the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff. Now, those voices are silent and the public mood is different because Wales is hosting major events, including the FA Cup. Let us hope that the people in London hear the Conservatives' message. We do not want the Wembley Stadium to be built so that we can have more activity in Wales. That message would help us and we would reap its benefits.

More money per person from the people of Wales was spent on the Millennium Dome than will ever be needed to build the new Assembly building. A project devised by the Conservative Party to be used for only one year for shallow infotainment is considered more important than a building designed by an architect to last for decades, if not centuries, that would put Wales on the world stage and would ensure that the Welsh

people's Government is open, effective and accessible to all.

During the 1979 referendum, the Conservatives promised that if Wales voted no, it would get a new hospital. No prizes for guessing what really happened afterwards. The same arguments were made before the 1997 referendum and I think that the people of Wales were not going to be fooled twice. They did not believe the Conservatives' attempt at populism then and they will not do so this time.

The Assembly has debated this matter time and time again. On the 21 June, 2000, Alun Cairns said, and I agree with him,
'We have been here so many occasions in the past—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. Mike, your time is up.

Rod Richards: The Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities should be commended in this matter for her unswerving loyalty to the First Minister and for allowing him to hide behind her skirts. Either that is true or she has not realised that he has hung her out to dry. He has Hart in the right place, as they might say. Is she, or will she be, telling us that the First Minister is not ultimately responsible for this debacle? Does she expect us to believe that the First Minister does not have mud on his hands? Does she expect us to believe that the muck does not stop with the First Minister? If she does, she is showing more loyalty to him than he is entitled to.

Will the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities undertake that, if she goes ahead with this project, she will consider a commemoration of this glowing chapter in Welsh political history? There are precedents—the Battle of Hastings, where the Normans made a tapestry to commemorate their achievement at that time. That should be replicated so that this Government can commemorate its achievements in a tapestry. Imagine the depictions: we could have Ron Davies sitting outside Cardiff City Hall sharing a joke with Russell Goodway; we could have Alun Michael depositing £10 million in used notes outside Grosvenor Waterside to pay for the extension of this building's lease; we could have the First Minister in a shed out the back washing his hands of the project. What of the First Minister? He should be depicted on site, truly the Hart in the hole of Welsh politics. The central feature should be none other than Richard Rogers. I foresee him sitting astride his horse, Trigger—[*Laughter.*] I see that there are people here old enough to remember the old cowboy. This building could be famous by the end of this millennium and we should call the commemoration the 'by'ere tapestry'.

Dafydd Wigley: The Plaid Cymru group continues to support the building of a new Assembly Chamber and therefore, rejects the Tories' motion. We did not need comments from the London press to convince us that we need a better place than this Chamber.

Rhodri Glyn: Are you amazed, as I am, that London press sketch writers are needed to persuade the First Minister that he should support this project? Is it not high time that he supported the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities and gave clear leadership on this matter?

5:10 p.m.

Dafydd Wigley: Yes, it is high time. It was entertaining watching him on television the other evening, and perhaps we will have a similar statement in the Chamber.

We need a new chamber, not as a luxurious platform for visiting London prime ministers, but so that we can do a job of work. We want a chamber where our heads are not splitting after a three and a half hour meeting, where visitors can see more than the back of the heads of Members who they do not recognise and where I can see Huw Lewis's face in all its glory without having to depend on a television news bulletin in the evening. Given the £260 million spent on building the ugly monstrosity of an office block for Members of Parliament in London, we are not asking for much. Neither are we asking for the £235 million that will be needed for the Scottish Parliament's new building. We are asking for £30 million to build a suitable home for the first National Assembly since the days of Owain Glyndwr. Is that unreasonable? Where is our self-respect as a nation? Where is the message of confidence in the new Wales that is proud to stand tall among other world nations? I say to the Tories—who are trying to squeeze the last drop of political advantage from this saga—you should be ashamed.

Have the Tories learnt nothing in the two years that they have been here? They know the price of everything and the value of nothing. The sad truth is that, individually, Tory Members realise by now that we need a new chamber. They consent to that and tell us so in private.

Where do we stand on the new building? Edwina Hart was right to tell the world that she was nobody's pushover. I do not imagine that many people thought she was. She was right to say that we are not prepared to see the costs of a project originally priced at £8.2 million by the Richard Rogers Partnership, and built and fully fitted for a total of £17 million, escalate to £50 million—no way. We want our building, and we want it for a fair price—£30 million: yes; £50 million: no.

Edwina was also right to challenge builders and architects to do an honest job for a fair price. However, in doing this, we must learn the lessons of the sorry saga of the last three years. In 1998, I wrote to the Welsh Office to point out the dangers of escalating costs because the specifications at that time were not tight enough. We must be aware of the dangers and ensure the progress of a properly specified project with appropriate costs. We must send out a message that the days of cost-plus, open-ended and junket-ridden public sector building contracts have come to an end in Wales. The way forward is to draw up a firm, detailed, transparent and comprehensive specification for this project and to base a watertight contract on that. This, of course, depends on us, as Members, and the Government, not wanting deviations from the specifications to pander to some last-minute whim or other. It depends on a agreement with a reputable construction company to do the job on the basis of—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I must stop you, Dafydd. You have had four minutes.

Lorraine Barrett: I would have given you some of the time I have to speak, Dafydd, because I agree with everything you have said. However, I want to have my say.

Even though Glyn Davies is always entertaining, this is becoming tedious. He went over and over the same old stuff that we have all heard before. In fact, I could have read it in the Record. The new building has been discussed endlessly and I will not rehearse the argument because everyone, apart from the Tories, has made comments with which I agree. It was always the intention that this would be a temporary Chamber. Richard Rogers's design won the open competition and millions of pounds have already been spent. Let us move forward. Expressions of interest have been received and we should get on with the job.

The Penarth Society wrote to me this week urging me to do all I could to ensure that the new building is built. It feels that it is crucial, along with the Wales Millennium Centre, to the European Capital of Culture bid. The society's view is that we will not have any credibility if we do not go ahead with these projects. Let us not be sidelined by the Tories' mischief-making and hoodwinked by their sheer hypocrisy. They will relish bringing visitors to the new building, particularly David Davies when he brings Conservative ladies from Monmouth to the Assembly. They will tell visitors how lovely the building is and how Wales should be proud of it, even though they did not want the building in the first place and wasted so much Assembly time trying to stop it.

Do not forget that it is the Tories who are desperate for a room for reflection. Where would that room go even if we wanted one? There is no space for it in this building. How precious can they be, wanting a room for reflection? I would rather provide rooms for reflection to all the factory and shop workers, who would deserve it. This new building will be for everyone, not just Members, as would be their room for reflection. Ann already mentioned Peter Rogers's visitors. Around 50 farmers visited last week. I had 20 visitors from Penarth at the same time and there was congestion in the foyer. There must be a health and safety concern related to having dozens of visitors here at the same time. This Assembly has voted over and over again to continue with the construction of the new Chamber. Which part of 'yes' do the Tories not understand?

Peter Law: I did not support this new building originally, but we have had a democratic vote on it and it is a pity that the Conservatives—the barmy army—have to waste our time on this again. This matter should now be left to the Minister to deal with. She is working prudently and is taking a common-sense approach on behalf of all of us. It is good to hear support for her this afternoon. When farmer poll tax was speaking earlier on behalf of the Tories, the only comments that I agreed with were those on the Liberal Democrats—I wanted to compliment you on those. However, democracy has spoken, and we are where we are. We cannot simply leave a hole in the ground, although I would be tempted to use it for carcass burial—preferably Tory carcasses. We have spent around £8 million on that hole, therefore we need to provide the sort of building that is expected for this Assembly—a seat of Government. I do not like the design, I would prefer a more traditional building, but that is what it looks like and we need to get on with building it.

Jonathan Morgan: Peter, you often talk about your constituents in Blaenau Gwent in this Chamber and the fact that they cannot understand how much money is spent in Cardiff and in the Bay, in particular. You have remained consistent on that position. Are

you happy that the costs are rapidly approaching £40 million? Are you content with a £40 million project or would you be content with a £50 million or £100 million project? We do not know where the cost will end. Do you think that there should be an upper limit?

Peter Law: After such questions, I would question the judgment of the leader of the Welsh Conservatives in making you business manager. That is pure speculation. The Conservatives' approach is disingenuous. They talk of increasing costs and would prefer to spend the money on a children's hospital, the health budget or any other cheap shot on which they know they cannot win. At the same time they put their hands up—or they would have if there had been a debate—to support putting £25 million of public money into the Wales Millennium Centre. Such are their double standards. I am concerned about spending money on such projects, but I also recognise democracy, which they do not. We have had a vote on this, which is what they should recognise. We need to progress on this together to ensure that we get the best type of building for the Assembly, for the new political era. The sooner we get together and support the Minister, the better for us all, including the Conservatives.

The Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities (Edwina Hart): According to some Members' contributions I have been swinging in the wind today; somebody has been hiding behind my skirt and now I am supposed to be designing a tapestry—so we had better all start threading.

On the day when the Welsh Conservatives propose a motion to this Assembly that is interesting, positive and perhaps a little unexpected, I will cheer, but sadly, today is not that day. The hole in the ground does not embarrass me, Alun; your party and this continuous debate on the new building does. It is not a hole in the ground, it is work that has been undertaken and that will be of use when I decide who gets the contract to construct the new building and when we get on with building it next year. That is the end of the matter. The Assembly has spoken and we are having a new building.

The Conservatives have opposed a new Assembly building since the first day that they were elected to this institution. This Assembly has rejected the Tory view from day one and should do so again today. I sometimes ask myself what is the deep-seated opposition of the Welsh Conservatives to a new building for the National Assembly for Wales? Are the Tories against public investment in civic buildings as a point of principle? History suggests not, and Mike German mentioned that earlier.

5:20 p.m.

In 1840, the Tory Prime Minister, Robert Peel commissioned Charles Barry to construct the Palace of Westminster—determined to show that the rising barons of Victorian industry could be as opulent as any feudal lord. More recently, John Major authorised the large expenditure on Portcullis House—the new accommodation for Members of Parliament—which amounted to £200 million not £100 million. That is the same John Major who commissioned the Millennium Dome. The truth is that the Tory attitude to civic buildings is based entirely on their attitude to power and politics. If a building represents the union and the empire—the centralised power of privileged elites—the Tories will not spare a penny on extravagant luxury. If a building is to represent

devolution and democracy, the Tories turn their backs and want nothing to do with it.

They present their opposition to the building in terms of a concern for the health budget. That is rich. They know that the rate of growth of the health budget under my stewardship is greater than at any time under their administration. To introduce the matter of a children's hospital into the argument is emotive and crass. We should remember that this Labour administration allocated capital to that campaign. The Tories irresponsibly cut huge swathes through the capital programmes of all public services in Wales. They destroyed the seed corn. My problem now is not providing the money, but re-creating the capacity to deliver capital programmes. However, my commitment to that is reflected in the Porthmadog and Rhondda new hospital projects.

I am often asked whether a new building is consistent with our aim to create a more equal Wales in which we seek to remove the poverty that scars our country. Attacking poverty is my first priority. Our policies for Objective 1, Communities First, redistributing resources in local government and in the NHS, all support this priority.

Helen Mary Jones: I emphasise that it is not just the chattering classes that want a new Assembly building and I offer the support of some of my learning disabled constituents, who visited this Chamber and described it as being shabby and disappointing. They did not think that it was very posh. However, they looked at the new building design and said that that was beautiful. I get e-mails from them regularly asking when we are going to finish building it.

Edwina Hart: I will ensure that the limited finance to be invested in the new building will not detract from our policies to attack poverty. When the building adds to our confidence and prestige as a nation, it will contribute towards the economic development needs of our poorest communities. That is Peter Law's position. If we get this project right, we will improve communities in Wales. The Assembly building will be provided, and it will not be to the detriment of health expenditure or regeneration.

The Welsh Conservatives are opposed to this building because, in their gut they remain opposed to devolution. That is emphasised by the recent sentiments of the Conservative Party's spokesperson on Wales, Nigel Evans, as indicated by Richard Edwards. At a time when the whole world is struggling with huge tensions, seeking to balance so many rights and interests, Nigel Evans tells this Assembly and the people we represent—the people of Wales—that we do not deserve a say on this issue. He tells us that we do not have the right to an opinion. I was discussing with the Member for Swansea West how Swansea had benefited over the years from exports of copper, iron, tin, coal and much else. As he put it, rarely has Swansea benefited as much as it did from the export of Nigel Evans from Townhill, which is in his constituency.

I was pleased that the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, took a different view. He recognised our place in the world community and used this Assembly as a platform to address us and the world. He also recognised that at a time when we are increasingly influenced by global events, we can also devolve political power. He celebrated the achievement of devolution: our capacity to manage affairs, which are specific to Wales in Wales. He recognised that Wales was a place in which to consider world affairs.

The reporting of the London media, which was mentioned by Rhodri Glyn, was predictably self-serving. Taken away from their comfort zones of Islington, Putney and Notting Hill, the pundits patronised the locals in time-honoured fashion. Nevertheless, I challenge any Assembly Member, Conservative or otherwise, not to admit embarrassment on behalf of the people of Wales for the setting that we provided when the media of the world was focused upon us. It is clear to everyone in Wales, and everyone who looks in from elsewhere, that this chamber is not suitable for the National Assembly for Wales. Peter Rogers is out of touch with the majority of constituents that Helen Mary Jones mentioned. When children visit this Assembly, they look at it in disbelief. From the mouths of babes come some truths.

It is our role as national politicians to share a vision with the people of Wales. The vision that is offered by the Assembly Government, led by Rhodri Morgan, is of a confident nation, small but clever, proud of what it is and excited by what it can be. The First Minister has supported the new building and I am sick and tired of hearing such criticisms in this Chamber. The vision that we share with our nation needs to be expressed in the physical fabric of our building. This building, in its present form, fails dismally to achieve this purpose. The design provided by Richard Rogers provides the vision that the people of Wales need. I continue to be excited by the design: the scale is right, the location is right, the transparency is right and the vision is right.

It is therefore necessary that I explain once again why I cancelled the commission of the Richard Rogers Partnership. I stress that I am committed to the design and I state that I have always admired Lord Rogers as an architect. Glyn Davies's cheap jibes about the roof were not appropriate for this discussion. This is not about apportioning blame. I cancelled the commission only because I no longer trusted the partnership's ability to manage the costs and share with me its understanding of those costs. I did not cancel just because the costs were rising. People in Wales are not naïve; they know that the costs of a complex building project can rise. I cancelled because when my independent advisers tried to share an understanding of why the costs were rising, the partnership refused to accept responsibility and continued to claim the opposite of what was clearly the case. If the Richard Rogers Partnership had been able to work with my advisers to share that understanding of how the project was developing, I would have been willing to come back to the Assembly to consider the cost ceiling arrangement.

I am pleased to say that, within the past week, a significant number of highly reputable firms have expressed an interest in working with us to provide the new Assembly building. I say to Assembly Members, to the people of Wales and to those construction firms that the National Assembly for Wales will today recommit itself to providing the people of Wales with a building on the existing design. We are committed to the design and vision of the building, but we combine our vision with a sensible regard for value for money. I acknowledge Members' recognition of the cost ceiling. After I have assessed the expressions of interest and gone through the necessary process, I will report back to the Assembly on how matters are developing.

We look forward to entering into a partnership with an organisation that can build to the existing design and work with us to manage costs. We say to the construction industry

that Wales has proved itself to be a place to do business, to achieve visionary buildings with a people who can combine vision with good management. Dafydd Wigley's comments about financial matters were most welcome in that regard.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have about 15 seconds remaining.

Edwina Hart: I thank the Welsh Conservatives for providing the opportunity for us to restate our position, but I ask the Assembly to defeat their motion.

Nick Bourne: This debate is about three issues. I am surprised that some Members—Peter Law for one—suggest that it is undemocratic to propose such a motion for debate in the National Assembly. It is part of the Assembly's established tradition that Members can choose debates and invite Members to vote accordingly. We understand that the majority of Assembly Members want a new Assembly building. However, many Members have spoken today about a cost ceiling. Alison Halford and the leader of Plaid Cymru spoke about this—

Dafydd Wigley: The former leader of Plaid Cymru.

Nick Bourne: In the absence of the present leader it is easy to fall into that trap. Every Member has thought of a price at which they would say 'no further'. Therefore let us escape from the first illusion that Edwina Hart sought to create.

Rhodri Glyn Thomas: Will you give way?

Nick Bourne: There is not enough time, Rhodri. I am sorry.

It is an illusion that people who speak against a new Assembly building are somehow against devolution. When you say to people that they are speaking up for a privileged elite, speak to the people in Wales. In saying that we would rather invest the money in a children's hospital than in a palace for politicians, let us realise where the privileged elite lies. It would do some of you good to speak to electors in Alyn and Deeside and Blaenau Gwent; see what they think and then report back to the Assembly. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. I urge everyone to calm down. We should finish at 5.30 p.m. We will overrun by about four minutes at this rate. It will be longer if we have disorder in the Chamber.

Nick Bourne: There is no doubt that this project is unpopular with people throughout Wales. You know that very well, which is why you are uncomfortable with it. There has been much talk about a new democracy, but what matters is what takes place in the Assembly. I felt no sense of shame when the Prime Minister addressed the Assembly as it was an occasion for Wales. What he said mattered far more than the building in which he was saying it. I will not take lessons from London-based journalists, who came here on a cheap-day return from Paddington, about where we should hold debates. It is fine by me that we spend a lot of money on this building because this is where debates

should be conducted, on this issue and others. There is no reason why that cannot happen. We will take no lessons from the Labour Party on spending money sensibly. We would spend it on health, not on a new, expensive Assembly building.

5:30 p.m.

I will try to deal with some of the contributions. Mike German—part stand-up comedian, part Liberal politician, which is an easy transition—contributed a frolic of his own. I do not know to whom he has been speaking if he thinks that this is a popular policy throughout Wales, as he seemed to be suggesting. This is about more than cost. It is about establishing two things. First, not all Members want a new building. There is a conception that every time the Assembly announces something it is with the support of all parties. We do not want the building and have been consistent throughout. Others have also been consistent throughout.

However, that cannot be said of the First Minister. In 1998, he said that an Assembly building in Cardiff Bay would be ‘a dog’s breakfast’. He was right, but he has changed his mind several times since. He signed up to the policy of Alun Michael, who wanted the Assembly building in the Bay. He then put forward a compromise position. Edwina Hart then fired Richard Rogers after the costs began to escalate, but only after they really started to go through the roof. Sometimes she seemed quite happy to accept the extra costs. She was a good-time girl on some occasions, throwing money about as if it was going out of fashion, and exercising prudence on others. It has to be said that, all the while, we have not heard from the First Minister. The First Minister, as is so often the case when there is a difficult decision to be made, he ducks it and is nowhere to be seen. We have seen the ‘not me gov’ routine. Labour Members and others know that this is the case. We saw the routine during the fuel crisis, the foot and mouth disease crisis, last year’s floods and the Mike German crisis. We are now seeing it with the new Assembly building. Where does the First Minister stand on this?

We thought that he might speak in this debate. We challenged him to do so, but it has not happened. If he wants to get up now to say where he stands on this, I would be happy to give way for about 10 seconds or so. [Conservative Assembly Members: ‘Get up, Rhodri.’]

There is an apparent lack of interest. He is like T.S. Eliot’s mystery cat, Macavity, who ‘always has an alibi’ and is ‘not there’.

‘Macavity, Macavity, there’s no one like Macavity...
He always has an alibi, and one or two to spare:
At whatever time the deed took place—Macavity wasn’t there’.

That is how it was with the fuel crisis, foot and mouth disease, the floods and this is how it is now.

In proposing this motion we have no illusions that the majority of Members will vote against us. I do not know why. It is not because—[*Interruption.*]

There has been much talk of symbols. Edwina Hart said that she feels no embarrassment over the hole in the ground. If she is not embarrassed why did she put an expensive fence around it? Does that signal the new democracy—hiding things from the people of Wales? The costs will rise and there must come a time when we say ‘this far and no further’. We want the money spent on health. I agree with some of Dafydd Wigley’s sentiments and passion when he asked in a debate earlier this afternoon whether Members feel proud when they have to tell former miners that they will have to wait for compensation. A proper sense of priorities in our first term would mean putting the new building on hold, spending the money on public services, earning some respect and then considering a new building project. Putting the cart before the horse does not make sense.

Lorraine Barrett *rose*—

Nick Bourne: I can understand your interest, you are the Member for the area. I invite Members to support our motion, but I have no illusions. However, the people of Wales will make their judgement and I know where they will put their cross on this issue.

*Cynnig: O blaid 9, Ymatal 0, Yn erbyn 40.
Motion: For 9, Abstain 0, Against 40.*

Pleidleisiodd yr Aelodau canlynol o blaid:
The following Members voted for:

Bourne, Nick
Cairns, Alun
Davies, David
Davies, Glyn
Graham, William
Melding, David
Morgan, Jonathan
Richards, Rod
Rogers, Peter

Pleidleisiodd yr Aelodau canlynol yn erbyn:
The following Members voted against:

Barrett, Lorraine
Bates, Mick
Black, Peter
Burnham, Eleanor
Chapman, Christine
Davidson, Jane
Dafis, Cynog
Davies, Andrew
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Janet
Davies, Jocelyn
Edwards, Richard
Essex, Sue
Evans, Delyth
German, Michael
Gibbons, Brian
Gregory, Janice
Griffiths, John
Halford, Alison
Hart, Edwina
Hutt, Jane
Jarman, Pauline
Jones, Ann
Jones, Carwyn
Jones, Elin
Jones, Gareth
Jones, Helen Mary
Lloyd, David
Law, Peter
Middlehurst, Tom
Morgan, Rhodri
Neagle, Lynne
Pugh, Alun

Randerson, Jenny
Sinclair, Karen
Thomas, Gwenda
Thomas, Owen John
Thomas, Rhodri Glyn
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Phil

*Gwrthodwyd y cynnig.
Motion defeated.*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That brings today's proceedings to a close.
*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 5.33 p.m.
The session ended at 5.33 p.m.*