



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—*Neamhcheartaithe*
(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

Thursday, 9 October 2008.

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 9 Deireadh Fómhair 2008.
Thursday, 9 October 2008.

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

Requests to move Adjournment of Dáil under Standing Order 32.

An Ceann Comhairle: Anois, iarratais chun tairisceana a dhéanamh an Dáil a chur ar athló faoi Bhuan Ordú 32. Now we come to deal with requests to move the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 32.

Deputy James Bannon: I seek the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 32 to raise a matter of national importance, namely, the threat to the economic viability of the farming industry as a result of the Government's refusal to extend the deadline for the farm waste management scheme beyond 31 December 2008 or to engage in constructive negotiations with the European Commission, despite the fact that such a refusal will destroy the livelihoods of farmers, which have already been decimated by Government mismanagement of the sector, adverse weather conditions, bureaucracy and excessive red tape.

Deputy Enda Kenny: Good man, Deputy Bannon.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

An Ceann Comhairle: God loves a trier.

Deputy Dan Neville: I seek the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 32 to facilitate a debate on a matter of national importance, namely, the withdrawal of a grant of €8,500 to the Union of Students of Ireland for mental health awareness week, which takes place from 10 to 14 November and of which the Government has been aware for two years; it is planned for the awareness week to take place in 21 third level institutions throughout the country and this represents a great opportunity to present an audience with a single message regarding mental health; the theme of the week is "coping and well-being" and it aims to show students the benefits of an active lifestyle and destigmatise mental illness; the week is organised by students and aimed at them.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: Another cutback.

An Ceann Comhairle: Tar éis breithnithe a dhéanamh ar na nithe ardaithe, níl siad in ord faoi Bhuan Ordú 32. Having considered the matters fully, they are not in order under Standing Order 32.

Order of Business.

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): It is proposed to take No. *a12a*, motion re sittings and business of Dáil — on the Supplementary Order Paper — No. 12a, Supplementary Estimate for Public Services [Vote 40] back from committee, and No. 24, Broadcasting Bill 2008 [Seanad] Second Stage (resumed). It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that Nos. *a12a* and *12a* shall be decided without debate and, in the case of No. *12a*, any division demanded thereon shall be taken forthwith.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is one proposal to be put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with Nos. *a12a* and *12a* without debate agreed?

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: We are being asked to agree to a motion relating to the arrangements for next week's business. Yesterday, the Opposition parties were approached to agree a certain arrangement in respect of the ordering of business next week in order that the budget and the Government's scheme relating to the bail-out of the banks might be accommodated on Tuesday and Wednesday, respectively, of next week. We were subsequently informed that the scheme had been prepared and a briefing was arranged for my party's finance spokesperson. However, I am still unsure when the scheme will be brought before the House.

On Monday the Government of Denmark announced a scheme relating to the banks in that country and details of said scheme have been made available. On Wednesday the British Government did likewise and made available the essential details relating to its scheme. It is nine days since the Government introduced legislation relating to the bail-out of the banks in this country, but the details of the scheme relating to that bail-out have not yet been brought before the House. If a week is a long time in politics, it is an eternity when it comes to the banks and the financial markets. Before I agree to the proposal before the House, I wish the Minister for Health and Children to clarify when the scheme will be introduced.

Deputy Enda Kenny: I agree with Deputy Gilmore. The matter of parliamentary questions for written reply not being taken on Tuesday next was not discussed with the Whips. Perhaps the Minister will indicate if the position is different.

As the Taoiseach noted yesterday, there will be a defining moment next week. The budget will be introduced on Tuesday and the Taoiseach will be travelling to Brussels on Wednesday to engage in a softening up exercise in respect of the European governments regarding the aftermath of the referendum on the Lisbon treaty. We understand that it may be the Government's intention to introduce the scheme on Wednesday afternoon next. Clarification is required in respect of this matter. While it is absolutely necessary to bring the scheme before the House, Wednesday would be the wrong day on which to do so. I informed the Taoiseach yesterday that if the Government wants to arrange a sitting for Friday, Saturday or Monday, the Opposition parties will facilitate its wishes in that regard.

We recognise the importance of this matter. We also recognise the importance of our being in a position to ask the necessary questions so that the scheme might, in the national interest, be properly framed. We should be made aware of the Government's intentions. It would not be right to take this important legislation on the day following the introduction of the budget when the Taoiseach will be in Brussels. Will the Minister clarify the position and indicate why parliamentary questions for written reply will not be taken on Tuesday? I understand that the latter issue was not discussed at yesterday's meeting of the Whips.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The outworkings relating to the Credit Institutions (Financial Support) Act 2008 — one of the memoranda issued last week referred to it as “the Credit Institutions (Protection) Bill 2008” — must be presented in detail to the House. All the facts

pertaining to the Minister for Finance's intentions regarding the new powers vested in him must be set out. What is proposed in terms of time will not allow for the full scrutiny that is necessary. I support the case put by colleagues for an extension of the Dáil sitting during the coming week and I expect a positive response to that request. This is an extremely important issue and we must get down to properly debating and understanding the nitty-gritty of what is involved. I ask that additional time be provided.

Deputy Mary Harney: Parliamentary questions for written reply will be taken next week. Information in that regard is provided on the Supplementary Order Paper.

Intensive work is under way on the regulations to give effect to the Government's guarantee. The Government discussed the matter yesterday and it is clear that the regulations must meet with the approval of the European Central Bank and the European Commission. It would be pointless to discuss regulations that did not have the approval of both institutions. That is the current position.

The Minister for Finance met Opposition spokespersons last night. We had hoped to arrange for the Dáil to meet tomorrow to discuss the regulations, but I do not believe it will be possible to do so. It is the intention of the Government, particularly the Minister for Finance, to bring the regulations before the House as quickly as possible. The Minister has taken on board many of the suggestions made by members of the Opposition last week. As everyone is aware, we are in uncharted waters. The purpose of the intervention was to secure the stability of the Irish banking and financial system for the benefit of all the country's citizens. Given the complexity of what is involved, a significant effort has been made by those whose responsibility it is, namely, the Central Bank, the Department of Finance and the Attorney General, to draft these regulations for submission to the ECB and the Commission. I understand they were submitted yesterday after the Government had considered the matter. The Minister for Finance will stay in touch with Opposition spokespersons and the Dáil will discuss them at the earliest possible opportunity. We are all anxious to do that.

Deputy Enda Kenny: Might that possibly happen on Monday?

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal regarding Nos. a12a and 12a agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Enda Kenny: I was about to say it is great to see Minister Harney back. The only person missing in order to have matters as they used to be is the Taoiseach's predecessor.

When Deputy Harney says it is the Government's intention to bring the Bill forward as quickly as possible if it is cleared by the ECB and the Commission today or tomorrow, may we take it the Dáil might meet on Monday in order to devote proper and adequate time to deal with this matter separately from the budget and from the Taoiseach having to deal with heads of government in Brussels?

Will the Minister give us an update in regard to the fact that the ECB has reduced interest rates by 0.5%? We do not want a situation where Irish banks are profiteering on the backs of taxpayers. This affects tens of thousands of householders. Two banks have announced they will pass on the interest reduction to their mortgage payers. That is absolutely appropriate and welcome. However, it should be clear that this is the first test of the Government under the new regime and the legislation we passed last week. We are now deeply involved in the banking sector. We must see that the interests of taxpayers are protected. It should be made clear to the banks that this interest rate reduction must be passed on to those tens of thousands of extremely hard-pressed mortgage payers in the shortest possible time. When the Minister replies could she tell the House whether we know the extent of rolled-up interest there is in these banks?

[Deputy Enda Kenny.]

I welcome the publication of the Nursing Homes Support Scheme Bill or fair deal Bill. According to reports on the media this morning, this Bill might not become effective until the middle of next year. There are thousands of people who are exceptionally hard-pressed in terms of paying nursing home bills. Can the Minister advise the House when the Bill will be taken here? Can she guarantee there will be sufficient time allocated to debate it given that all Deputies in the House will want to have a say on it?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: On that point, may I speak after my party leader?

An Ceann Comhairle: I must call Deputy Gilmore first.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: There are two matters I want to raise. One relates to the matter Deputy Kenny raised, namely, the matter of the banks passing on the reduction in interest rates to their customers. There is a second matter I want to raise. What approach should I take?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy may ask both questions. We must deal with the scheme coming before the House.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I agree with Deputy Kenny regarding the reduction in interest rates. That all of the main central banks in the world co-operated yesterday is unprecedented. It is the first time we have seen major international regulation and control of banking. The mortgage holder, the business that has a loan from a bank, and the customers of banks should benefit from that. It would be unthinkable for the banks not to pass on that reduction in interest rates to their customers. The Government should direct the banks here to do so given that the relationship between Government and the banking system is entirely different from what it was.

An Ceann Comhairle: That will be before the House tomorrow. We cannot go into that now.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: The second matter that I want to raise relates to information of which we were made aware this morning. I refer to the Private Residential Tenancies Board and the fact that 100 cases have been struck down because the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government improperly, inappropriately and, as it turns out, illegally, appointed two county councillors to the board of the Private Residential Tenancies Board.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should ask questions on legislation.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: We are dealing with the Order of Business. I want to ask that the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government come into the House today to explain that decision. Cronyism is not new in Fianna Fáil but we now have incompetent cronyism—

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot go into that now. The Deputy knows very well that it is out of order.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I want to know whether the Minister will come to the House to explain why these appointments were made and account for something that has caused quite serious problems for the Private Residential Tenancies Board.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Minister to answer in regard to the matter raised by Deputy Kenny.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: A Cheann Comhairle——

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Deputy's question on legislation?

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: Yes. As my party leader pointed out this morning, two illegal appointments were made to the Private Residential Tenancies Board. One hundred cases which were under investigation must now be reviewed.

An Ceann Comhairle: I must move on.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: The Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill will be before the House soon.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy may ask about that.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: The Minister has made two illegal appointments. Who sanctioned those appointments?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should keep to questions on legislation. I must move on.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: The situation created by Ministers will affect legislation due to come before the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is out of order.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: Is the Minister going to put in place a situation whereby the monitoring of appointments——

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: A Cheann Comhairle——

An Ceann Comhairle: On which issue?

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The issue raised by Deputy Kenny.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is it the one that was in order?

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: That is correct.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I will call the Minister if the Deputy does not proceed.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: On the issue of the Government using its new-found leverage in regard to the banking sector, will the Government ensure that the Minister for Finance insists that the banks pass on the full 0.5% decrease in interest rates to customers? Further, will the Government insist that local authorities which are directly under the control of Government through the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government pass on the 0.5% decrease in interest rates to those who are dependent on local authority lending agents, corporations, county councils and so on for their mortgages to purchase their homes, recognising that those who are so dependent cannot get a mortgage in the commercial sector and need that decrease more than most?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has made his point, just as Deputies Kenny and Gilmore did, and neither of them were in order either. The Minister must deal with the matter now.

Deputy Mary Harney: In regard to the matter of passing on the interest rate cut, liquidity is important for banks and so too are customers. There is good competition in the banking sector for depositors and for mortgage holders and I expect the reduction will be passed on to the customers of banks. Two banks have already indicated that and I am certainly hopeful the others will do so.

In regard to the question of the Dáil meeting on Monday to discuss the issue, I do not want to give a commitment that the Dáil may meet on Monday and find we cannot meet that commitment. That would lead to confusion. It is the Government's intention that the Dáil will discuss this matter at the earliest possible opportunity. The Minister for Finance will be in touch with Deputies Bruton, Burton and other Deputies in regard to this matter over the next couple of days and as soon as he has had a response from the ECB and the Commission.

In regard to the appointments made in June, they are prohibited under section 169 of the relevant Act and were, therefore, *ultra vires*. That matter was brought to the attention of the Minister recently.

Deputy Joan Burton: Is he on the naughty step?

Deputy Mary Harney: In fairness, the Minister was not advised at the time of the appointments and corrective action is being taken.

On the fair deal legislation, it is the intention to have a thorough debate in this House. It is a major piece of legislation. It essentially deals with support for people in private and public nursing homes on an equal basis. It is also a mental capacity Bill. It takes on board the recommendations of the Law Reform Commission. It is modern legislation which is intended to deal with the issue of diminished capacity. That is why it has taken so long to draft. I will give it the time it requires in this House and the Seanad in order that we can have a good debate. I hope it will receive the support of all parties.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Will the Minister answer my question pertaining to county councils and the 0.5% decrease in interest rates?

An Ceann Comhairle: I cannot allow that to happen.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I wish to address the nursing homes issue.

Deputy Mary Harney: I think I have already dealt with it.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Minister has not dealt with the matter.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Bannon.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Minister spoke about the banks and other financial institutions—

Deputy James Bannon: I am glad the acting leader has cleared up the matter.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: —but has not addressed the sector which is fully under the Government's control.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please allow Deputy Bannon to speak.

Deputy James Bannon: The Greens are beginning to fade with regard to responsibility and accountability.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Will the Minister ensure the county councils will pass on the full 0.5% decrease to those who depend on local authority agents for their mortgages?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please allow Deputy Bannon to continue.

Deputy James Bannon: There was nothing in the last budget to protect or manage our heritage resources. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government seems to be unaware these are finite. Sadly, I do not anticipate much in next week's budget but ask the third-in-command when we can expect the heritage fund Bill to come before the House.

Deputy Mary Harney: I do not have a date at present.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: There are no funds.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: The Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2008 is before the Seanad. When can we expect it to come before the Dáil?

I have asked about the property services (regulatory authority) Bill on a number of occasions and believe the Attorney General still has to decide whether a single or an omnibus Bill will be brought before the House. Will the Minister indicate whether it will be a single or an omnibus Bill and, if she cannot, when does she expect the Attorney General to make his decision?

Deputy Mary Harney: I understand the property services Bill will come before the House this session. Obviously, the Seanad must conclude its deliberations on the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill before it can be discussed here. In regard to the Deputy's question on what is called the multi-units Bill, it has not yet been approved by the Government.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: While I welcome the fact that the Minister published the nursing home legislation and gave it to us before she held her press conference, this is not the Bill originally promised. Serious concerns have arisen and I fully support those who have called for a debate on the matter. In regard to constitutional problems and the issue of liens on family homes, does making it optional——

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy can raise that issue on Second Stage or table an amendment on Committee Stage.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: ——mean that if people do not apply for it, their loved ones will be thrown out of the nursing home?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy knows what to do. She is very experienced.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Serious concerns have arisen——

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy can discuss the matter on Second Stage and bring forward an amendment on Committee Stage or even Report Stage.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: ——that it will be resource capped, in other words, subject to the moneys available.

An Ceann Comhairle: Three options are open to the Deputy but this is not one of them.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: Serious issues have arisen.

Deputy Mary Harney: I do not want to be unhelpful when I say the Bill, as drafted, is exactly in line with the commitments made and that nobody can be adversely affected by it. In other words, nobody currently in nursing home care can have his or her contribution reduced as a result of the legislation.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: Currently, but what about the person who will go into care in the future? What about those who are now being forced to apply to avail of this family home exemption?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not in order.

Deputy Mary Harney: Nobody is being forced to do anything. It is optional.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: What if they cannot pay?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is my way or the highway.

An Ceann Comhairle: That matter can be discussed on Second Stage, Committee Stage or Report Stage.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: I welcome the publication of the Nursing Home Support Schemes Bill and hope it will be brought before us as quickly as possible.

I wish to raise several other issues of relevance to the Minister in charge today. When will the adoption Bill come before the House? Given the lack of information from the HSE, will the Minister tell us when the health information Bill, now in section C of the Government legislative programme, will be introduced? I cannot understand why it is being delayed. Similarly, when will the nurses and midwives Bill be introduced?

The Minister’s former leader gave us an absolute guarantee that legal costs would be controlled but the legal costs Bill remains far away. Is there any intention to bring it forward?

Deputy Mary Harney: The adoption Bill will be brought forward this session, as will the nurses and midwives Bill which will be sent to the Government shortly. The health information Bill will be brought forward during the latter half of next year at the earliest. The legal costs Bill will be brought forward next year.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: On promised legislation, we all agree with the Minister that we are in uncharted waters.

Deputy Tom Sheahan: Sinking.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: In the light of the forthcoming budget, where stands funding for the Disability Bill——

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot deal with the issue of funding for the Disability Bill.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: ——and the promised sectoral plans? Will the necessary funding be made available to put in place the sectoral plans?

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot discuss that matter now. I wish we could but we cannot. The Minister on the Disability Bill.

Deputy Mary Harney: The Disability Bill has been enacted. I think the Deputy is referring to the assessment of needs. We will have to await the Budget Statement from the Minister for Finance before we can comment any further on the issue.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: We will be waiting.

Deputy Mary Harney: Without breaching confidentiality, I can tell the House that additional resources will be made available in the budget for disability services.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: The Minister has told us that the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, did not receive the advice given in June to the effect that he was not entitled to appoint county councillors to the Private Residential Tenancies Board. I again ask if he will come before the House today to explain these appointments——

Deputy Micheál Martin: He is here but cannot be seen.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: ——and tell us what advice——

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy will have to find another way of raising that matter.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: ——caused him to appoint a Fianna Fáil councillor from County Donegal and a Green Party councillor from County Monaghan to the PRTB.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot go into that matter. In fairness, the Deputy has had a good innings and I must move on.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: Did he read the letter?

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: As Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh might say, there are big residential tenancies markets in both counties.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies will have to discuss the matter another time. They cannot raise it on the Order of Business. I am moving on.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: These were utterly improper appointments.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy, that is a matter for the Whips as he is well aware.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Will the Minister come before the House or will he make a statement now?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has had a good run and I must move on.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: He is too green to come before the House.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Will he make a statement?

Deputy Enda Kenny: He is afraid.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: We have a report on the PRTB.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am moving on.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: The Minister is too green to respond.

Deputy James Bannon: He is yellow.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Does he want to make a statement?

An Ceann Comhairle: There is no question of that happening.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: He wants to make a personal statement.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: On a point of order, it has been a long-standing practice that when a Minister does something improper, he makes a statement and answers questions in the House. This week we received a report from Threshold indicating a huge increase in the number of illegal evictions.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not in order.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: This is something which affects people. The PRTB made 100 decisions which have been struck down and I want the Minister to make a statement.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Whips to discuss the issue and take the heat out of it because it is not in order.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: This is not something——

Deputy Tom Sheahan: The Minister wants to respond.

An Ceann Comhairle: He will not do so.

Deputy James Bannon: He wants a chance to respond.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Why did the Minister appoint county councillors from County Donegal and County Monaghan——

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy wants to know if the Minister will address the House.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: ——to the Private Residential Tenancies Board, even though he had no authority to do so?

An Ceann Comhairle: The matter is not in order and I must move on.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: Jobs for the boys.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: Before the Minister responds, I wish to raise the issue of redress.

Deputy John Gormley: I am not responding.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: Some 100 cases have been suspended——

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not going into the matter.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: The Minister——

An Ceann Comhairle: May I explain something to Deputy Lynch?

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: ——is sitting over there, smiling.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will have to ask the Deputy to leave the House in one second.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: One hundred tenants do not know whether they will have a house next week——

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputy please allow me to explain something?

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: ——and the Minister is smiling.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please have the manners to allow me to explain something.

Deputy Joan Burton: Fianna Fáil is smiling even more broadly.

An Ceann Comhairle: Under Standing Orders of the House which are long-standing and I did not make, if a Minister is to make a statement, it is on his or her own initiative. That is clear and specific.

Deputy Enda Kenny: In his own time.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is the position. If Members wish to change Standing Orders——
(Interruptions).

Deputy Enda Kenny: Stand up and speak.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: That is putting it up to him.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: We can only laugh about it.

Deputy James Bannon: Come on.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: He lacks the courage.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gilmore is not in a position to force the Minister to speak.

Deputy James Bannon: He is too green.

Deputy Mary Harney: I want to be helpful.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: On a point of order——

An Ceann Comhairle: Please allow the Minister, Deputy Harney, to reply.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The Progressive Democrats are now the watchdogs for the Green Party, as well as Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I apologise. Is the Minister replying to the question I raised earlier?

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Mary Harney: It is a matter for the Ceann Comhairle to decide whether he will allow a question or a matter to be raised on the Adjournment. Otherwise, the Whips can meet to decide whether time should be devoted to this issue. The Minister made the appointments in good faith. I know from taking legislation through the other House, in particular, that every party campaigns to have councillors included in boards and feels sore when they are excluded.

Deputy Enda Kenny: That is not true.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: Last night, on the Harbours (Amendment) Bill 2008——

Deputy Enda Kenny: It is not true. Where did the Minister of State get that information?

A Deputy: It is true.

Deputy Enda Kenny: Really, where did the Minister of State get that information?

An Ceann Comhairle: I have to move on.

Deputy Mary Harney: If the Ceann Comhairle allows time or if the Whips agree, the Minister will deal with the issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Motion re sittings and business of the Dáil, a substitute motion on a supplementary Order Paper——

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: On a point of order——

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputy Gilmore to sit down.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: The Minister, Deputy Gormley, is moving away.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gilmore, it is a long-standing tradition of the House that when the Chair is standing you must sit down.

Deputy Enda Kenny: The Minister is in retreat.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I am raising a point——

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is out of order and I am moving on.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I am raising a point of order.

An Ceann Comhairle: I told the Deputy what the Standing Order is.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I am raising a point of order.

An Ceann Comhairle: Tell me what the point of order is. I doubt if it is one.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: You are pre-judging him, a Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: We will have to get to know each other a bit better, a Cheann Comhairle.

The Ceann Comhairle said that personal statements made by Ministers are at their initiative. I am saying this Minister did something that was illegal last June.

An Ceann Comhairle: Let me tell you about that as well.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: If that is not——

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy Gilmore. I have to stop you there. As you well know——

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputies to grant me the courtesy of allowing me to continue. The Deputy must know that allegations against any Member can only be made by substantive motion and not by innuendo or otherwise across the floor of the House.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: There is no innuendo.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: It is not innuendo. It was in the papers.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is the Standing Order. I did not make the Standing Orders. That is what it is.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: On a point of order——

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not a point of order, I imagine.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: It is very brief and entirely in order. The Minister for Health and Children has just said, with the authority of the leader of the Government today, that the Whips would meet to discuss a time for this matter.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am happy with that.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: Could I have some information on when we will meet? I suggest we agree a time for the Minister to come to the House immediately after the Order of Business.

Deputy Pat Carey: The Deputy should come to my office straight after this.

An Ceann Comhairle: Straight after this.

Sittings and Business of Dáil: Motion.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Pat Carey): I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, unless the Dáil shall otherwise order, the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the sittings of the Dáil on 14, 15 and 16 October 2008:

- (i) oral questions shall not be taken;
- (ii) Leaders' Questions shall be taken at 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday;
- (iii) the Order of Business shall be taken at the conclusion of Leaders' Questions on Tuesday;
- (iv) matters may not be raised under the provisions of Standing Order 21(3) or 32 on Tuesday; and
- (v) matters may not be raised under the provisions of Standing Order 32 on Wednesday.

Question put and agreed to.

Estimates for Public Services 2008.

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I move the following Supplementary Estimate:

Vote 40 — Health Service Executive (Supplementary).

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €77,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on 31 December 2008, for the salaries and expenses of the Health Service Executive and certain other services administered by the executive, including miscellaneous grants.

Vote put and agreed to.

Broadcasting Bill 2008 [Seanad]: Second Stage (Resumed).

Question again proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Pat Breen to resume. He is sharing time with Deputy Tom Hayes and there are 16 minutes left in this slot.

Deputy Pat Breen: I ask the Ceann Comhairle to notify me after six minutes.

This morning I will talk about the contribution of local radio, particularly in my constituency of County Clare. Clare FM has played a significant role in giving a local voice to communities, informing them about news and sports, and raising awareness of issues that affect all communities. It also gives a voice to us as politicians. Without independent radio it would be difficult for us to carry on with our work. The approach of local radio, particularly our own local radio station, is to celebrate what is local, and that is important also.

Clare FM has won many awards, including, this year, a gold medal in the ongoing news story category from the New York Festivals Radio Broadcasting Awards. It has also won several other awards for radio documentaries. I commend it highly on its initiatives. In this context, I welcome the acceptance in the Seanad of the Fine Gael amendment which provides that if a radio station applies to renew its licence and no other station applies for it, the station will receive a licence for seven years rather than five. I hope the Government will follow through on that proposal, which has been accepted in the Seanad, and perhaps consider extending the period to ten years rather than the seven years proposed, particularly if a radio station is doing a good job locally. I urge the Minister to consider this on Committee Stage.

In recent years there has also been significant growth in the area of community broadcasting. Again, I refer to my own constituency, in which two local radio stations are broadcasting to communities, including Radio Corca Baiscinn in Kilkee, which was set up in 1999 and is very successful. It pays particular attention to equality issues and social exclusion. I always make a point of visiting the community radio stations. Another community radio station is the former Shannon Community Radio, now renamed Jet FM, which broadcasts on Saturdays, covering a wide variety of subjects. Other community-based projects are in the pipeline. We must continue to support these community radio stations. They are important in terms of binding communities together and keeping them aware of what is happening locally. Often radio is the candle in the window for these communities.

Broadcasting is ever-evolving. The use of the Internet has also grown considerably in recent times. The growth in popularity of social networking sites on the Internet is something we must consider seriously, particularly with regard to suicide among young people. We need to develop Europe-wide media guidelines on the reporting of suicides. A total of 5% of suicides are estimated to be copycat suicides and while some social networking sites provide valuable help to young people, there are blogs and chat rooms that promote and glamorise suicide. I hope this matter will be considered in this Bill.

I had the opportunity 12 months ago, as a member of the Council of Europe, to visit Rome in the course of preparing a report on the media monopoly in Italy. As Deputies know, Mr. Berlusconi, the current Prime Minister, owns 65% of television stations in that country. If we add State television, this means he controlled 90% of stations. There would seem to be a conflict of interest there. RAI and Mediaset are the two main television stations. At the time we did our report Mr. Berlusconi had lost his position to Mr. Prodi, so we felt his control of the majority of television stations had not influenced the outcome of the election. We do not have that problem in this country, thank God.

I spoke last night about pay television channels and certain Irish sporting events which cannot be enjoyed on our national radio stations. This occurred last year when the Heineken Cup took place in Cardiff. Many people could not watch the match on their national stations but had to pay to watch it on a pay-per-view channel. This prohibits many people from watching such sports, although Munster has done so well in rugby. This is something we must consider. While certain sporting events have been ring-fenced, we should not be moving towards the day when the All-Ireland hurling and football finals and other major events cannot be viewed by adoring fans in the counties involved without having to pay for the privilege. We must legislate in this regard. I urge the Minister to sit down with the various sporting organisations and agree on this matter with a view to extending the number of Irish sporting events that will remain free to air for the Irish public to enjoy.

I am happy to see that two new television stations are proposed in the Bill, a film channel and the Oireachtas channel. It would be very entertaining for most people to see what went on in the House this morning, with arguments over appointments to the PRTB and the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government moving from one seat to the other. That would be as good as any soap opera for most viewers. I welcome the proposal for the Oireachtas channel. It will be worthwhile in terms of increasing understanding.

In the context of the Lisbon treaty we should also consider broadcasting more of what happens in the European Parliament and the Council of Europe. We should let people know what happens in Europe. Part of the reason for the problems with the Lisbon treaty is that people do not know what happens in Europe. We should consider broadcasting the work of our MEPs in the European Parliament and the procedures with regard to legislation and so on. The same can be said for the Council of Europe, of which I am a member. We are a long way from seeing county council meetings broadcast, but it might be as well if we did not see some of the work that goes on there. Some good work is being carried out in local authority chambers, which is covered by local radio.

I am sure RTE is tired of getting complaints about “Oireachtas Report” coming on at 12.15 a.m. Hopefully an Oireachtas channel will complement the work being done by Members in this House. Very important legislation is discussed here and it is important that people are kept up to date with what is happening. In the interim before the Oireachtas channel comes on air I hope RTE will consider broadcasting “Oireachtas Report” earlier in the evening so that people can familiarise themselves with what is happening in the Oireachtas and we are not just speaking to ourselves, but to the public.

I am delighted with the provision on junk food advertising in the legislation. This ban is a small but important step in changing attitudes to food. With the cap of 15% on advertising, perhaps the Minister would reconsider flexibility in terms of advertising on local radio. He should consider extending that for two hours rather than the one-hour period at the moment where they must have ten minutes advertising in one hour. Local radio stations carry some very interesting debates and constant advertising takes people away from the debate as other

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speakers have mentioned. I welcome the legislation and I hope it will be passed as quickly as possible.

Deputy Tom Hayes: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on this important Bill. I welcome the wide-ranging legislation, which will impact on the entire broadcasting sector. We live in an age when broadcasting has changed considerably. It was not so long ago that people were suggesting that radio stations had almost become a thing of the past, with television taking over. There may have been a period of time when that happened. However, local radio stations have been a great success in various parts of the country. Nothing has complemented the work of politicians more than local radio stations. Every morning Members raise important constituency issues here. The catalyst for getting those stories back to our constituency is the local radio station. Coverage is given to why we have raised it or what a Minister might say. It brings life in Parliament here very much closer to the people.

While everyone will talk about his or her own constituency, we are very pleased with the availability of local radio stations in County Tipperary. A commercial station like Tipp FM carries stories, including issues addressed in this House, throughout the county. The success of that station can be measured by the way it has built up its listenership. Many people are now listening to local radio stations like Tipp FM. On the other hand, we also have a community-based station, Tipp Mid West Community Radio. It started up as a small station many years ago and has built up into a station, broadcasting into a whole region of west Tipperary.

However, a community station is very limited in the funding it is permitted to raise to run the station. We need to review how community radio stations are being financed. It is very difficult for people to fundraise and also present programmes, and something needs to be done. I seek clarification as to whether the Bill contains any changes in this regard. It is vital that community radio stations are allowed access to funding that would cover their ongoing expenses. Presenters need to be paid and there are travel and other expenses. Tipp Mid West Community Radio has given great service to the community. Those are two examples from our county of very successful commercial and community stations. They need to be supported and developed in the long run.

I take the point Deputy Breen made about the broadcast rights for Heineken Cup rugby matches. It is sad that people, particularly in Munster, are unable to watch those matches because they are not carried live by RTE. That trend should not be allowed to continue. While the games need sponsorship, it is wrong for young people actively involved in rugby and other sport not to be able to watch live broadcasts of their heroes playing in another country in a great final which is a major occasion for the entire community. I do not know whether that issue is addressed in this legislation. However, it is a matter for debate at a later time.

A Cheann Comhairle, you are a great man for going to horseracing and I like a bit of it myself.

An Ceann Comhairle: It would be great if I could find a few winners.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: That would be the right channel.

An Ceann Comhairle: If there were a channel giving winners, we would all be watching it.

Deputy Tom Hayes: We would. There should be more opportunities for relaying the race meetings around the country. Everybody tunes in to see Galway Races and other top race meetings that RTE broadcasts from Leopardstown and other venues. There are some great racecourses, including Clonmel and Ballinrobe.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's race is nearly run. He has one minute remaining.

Deputy Tom Hayes: Some older people are very interested in having a bet in their own homes. The simple relaying of the race meetings would give them a great interest every afternoon as so many race meetings take place throughout the country.

I welcome the proposed Oireachtas television channel. Live broadcast of Oireachtas proceedings should be encouraged. The Ceann Comhairle and I are both members of the Oireachtas Commission. That commission is making headway in that regard. It will be good for the people out there looking in and seeing the work we are doing. It will get people, like the young people looking down at me from the Gallery today, talking about it. What is happening in the Oireachtas will get into every home and school and will bridge the gap. Much of what is contained in the media does not portray properly what is happening in this House and what people are saying. The Oireachtas channel will have a major impact in connecting people at home with us.

Deputy Charlie O'Connor: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Broadcasting Bill 2008. When dealing with Bills, you, a Cheann Comhairle, and other colleagues have often reminded me to stick with the business. However, having listened very carefully to the contributions to this debate, I have noticed that everything has been mentioned. I have heard people talk, as the previous speaker has just done, about horseracing, "Big Brother" and almost everything under the sun. I presume I will get the same courtesy and I am happy to try to stay within the remit of the Bill. My friend, Deputy Finian McGrath, asked me outside how I would weave Tallaght into the debate. I told him that was no problem because there was much to be said about Tallaght, local radio and the need for community broadcasting facilities there. I will deal with that shortly.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: Everybody loves the Deputy in Tallaght.

Deputy Charlie O'Connor: I do not know about that, but as long as 7,000 or so voters continue to give me their first preferences, that is all right by me. By the way, I welcome the attendance of the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Deputy Mary Hanifin. I took the opportunity last night to wish her well throughout the next demanding week. I have great confidence that she will do the job.

I am sure the young students from Cork and Belvedere College in the Visitors Gallery were fascinated by the last contributor. I am sure none of them is from Tallaght, but it is good to see such an interest in the debates. This particular debate interests everybody. Like it or not, television and broadcasting generally have become very much a part of our lives. I come from a generation that witnessed the early days of television. I can recall being in somebody's house and watching Floyd Patterson fight for the world heavyweight title in November 1956. I must have been very small at the time, but I remember it. Television and broadcasting impacts enormously, certainly in this modern generation.

The purpose of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill is to provide an up-to-date legislative framework for broadcasting in Ireland. Its aim is to establish a more flexible and market responsive model for digital terrestrial television and to facilitate the termination of the analogue service. The Bill has a number of key features which include the establishment of a single content regulator for all commercial, community and public service broadcasters in Ireland. The function will be performed by the new broadcasting authority of Ireland, BAI. Other colleagues have noted that additional features of the proposed legislation include further functions to be carried out by the BAI — regulations in respect of DTT multiplexes and the duty of the commission for communications regulation in respect of sound broadcasting multiplex

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and multiplex contracts, etc. Also addressed in the Bill is the right of reply mechanism, television licences and an extension of the public service remit of RTE and TG4.

A number of Deputies referred to TG4. I hope the other broadcasters are not over-sensitive about us mentioning TG4, but I can recall the work years ago of our former colleague, the late Deputy Jim Tunney. If they call me “Mr. Tallaght”, they called him “Mr. Finglas”. He was a renowned Minister and chairman of the Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party and he had a particular grá for the development of services in what was to become TG4. People such as the Minister, Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív, and others have done a great deal of work in that regard since. People might not believe that much of what TG4 does might prove attractive to me, but I spend a good deal of time watching it. I often joked in the early days that I was watching it to see the old John Wayne movies, but as the service has developed, so too has my interest in it. TG4 is particularly forceful in projecting the positive message of culture and sporting activities in Ireland. I have heard many people, certainly in the Dublin region, make the point in recent times that its sport coverage is second to none, although the coverage of sport on RTE has been very good. However, TG4 is getting right down to the ground as far as sports coverage is concerned and it should be applauded for it.

People in the know tell me the station is producing programmes cost effectively. This is an example to the rest of the broadcasting industry at a time when we are all talking about cost efficiency and value for money. I hope people in Montrose and at TV3 in Ballymount are watching these developments with interest. TG4 has made an enormous impression throughout the country and people such as the late Deputy Tunney fought the battle for its survival from the beginning. Sometimes the going was difficult because people had other priorities. However, he has been proved right and it is great credit to him and many others that this is the case.

Other speakers have dealt with the general sports coverage on all the stations. Such coverage has been very worthwhile in recent times. RTE is clearly doing a tremendous job. The coverage this year of GAA fixtures has been second to none. All the other sports coverage, including TV3's, has been excellent. While I have nothing against Sky and occasionally watch a premier league match on it — although I do not have the sports service in my house and must use other people's — a serious point must be made about support for the “free to view” concept as far as sporting fixtures are concerned. Deputy Pat Breen referred to the fact that Munster and rugby fans generally have to depend on different channels to see their heroes play. That is true of many sporting activities and has happened regarding the Irish international soccer team as well. We must continue to look at that and see whether the “free to view” concept can be maintained, regardless of the needs of the associations or the demands coming from Sky and other stations.

I hope we all support that view and I look forward to the time — just to be parochial again — when League of Ireland matches are televised live from Tallaght. The stadium there is progressing very well. I say this because I believe the Ceann Comhairle mentioned the fact, and I know I will be forgiven. The Ceann Comhairle is remembered with great affection in Tallaght for the work he did as Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism by those of us who wanted to strongly support and promote the idea of the Shamrock Rovers stadium. It is to his credit, and many others, that Shamrock Rovers will be playing in the new municipal stadium from next February. I hope the Ceann Comhairle takes the opportunity to come out because people appreciate the work he did in that regard.

As far as the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill is concerned, I encourage people to continue to watch the various sporting activities. The League of Ireland is going through a doldrum period at present and it is important that we promote what it is doing. Shamrock Rovers in Tallaght will be very much part of that.

I mentioned earlier that I wanted to talk about community radio. I often hear Deputies talk about the importance of local radio throughout the country. Developments in recent years have been particularly significant in that regard. All colleagues take advantage of local radio to get their message across and to answer questions that are posed. There is a very strong network in Dublin. I was on Newstalk last night and Q104 earlier in the day. Other stations such as Country FM and 98 provide excellent services, certainly in terms of news, and I am at an age when I like to listen to some of the music.

Tallaght is the third largest population centre in the country. We no longer have Tallaght Community Radio, however, and last night there was a meeting of the Tallaght Radio Forum which is seeking to have it reintroduced. Everybody in the House is conscious of the worth of local radio and supports the concept. It is a great shame that my town, with the third largest population in the country, does not have its own community broadcasting system. I appeal to everybody who has an interest in that regard to make an effort to bring back community radio to Tallaght. I hope there will be a great deal of support for that.

Colleagues have referred to the impact of television on all our lives over the past five decades. My 6-year old granddaughter was in my office in the House for a short while yesterday and she asked if she could watch television. This is the era we live in. Television was new to my generation. We watched a few news programmes and football matches on the BBC and, as television evolved, more attractive programmes were made. However, nowadays my television viewing is restricted not only by my workload, but because I do not feel the need to sit and watch programmes. I watch programmes I would be expected to watch such as “Prime Time”, “Questions and Answers”, news bulletins and “The Week on Politics”. I have never had the opportunity to appear on the programme but that might happen someday. I hope I will not get into trouble for saying I like watching Vincent Browne’s programme every night. I hope he will not be upset. The programme uses a different format and it is often entertaining. It has gained its own niche and many people watch it every night. For those of us interested in the political system, it makes for good television.

My constituency colleague, Deputy Rabbitte, once said the audience for “Oireachtas Report” was confined to insomniacs and drunks. I do not know whether that has changed but the programme should be broadcast at a different time because more people would watch it. I have an open mind about an Oireachtas television channel. I do not know whether people would watch proceedings all day. They would watch an Order of Business similar to this morning’s, which was exciting and where the Ceann Comhairle was a big star, as ever. The set pieces are always interesting and if they were broadcast, a positive message would be sent to the public but the remainder of the House’s proceedings would be challenging and demanding for viewers. For example, I watched Prime Minister’s Question Time from the House of Commons yesterday and it made for good television.

Many people are cynical about politicians and politics and we need to get a positive message across to them. There are many young people in the Visitors Gallery and when people visit the Parliament, they witness the good work that is going on and they are often impressed. Television has a role to play in that regard but, at the same time, I wonder about broadcasting coverage of Dáil proceeding from 10.30 a.m. to 10.30 p.m. and how that might evolve. That will be an interesting debate.

It is also important not to underestimate the value of radio, which has been part of all our lives for a long time. Significant numbers of people listen to radio and I have referred to the importance of community radio. I listen to talk radio in the morning. I always listen to “Morning Ireland” and Ryan Tubridy, if I have the opportunity. I do not have much opportunity to listen to Pat Kenny’s programme and I hope that does not upset him, but radio has an important

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role to play. The development of radio broadcasting must continue and I hope those who implement this legislation will take account of that.

I read reports earlier this week about the challenges presented by technology and how we must be careful about how technology impacts on young people, in particular. Intense challenges will be thrown up in future to control television content. While digital television is an exciting development and everyone supports it, sometimes I wonder where all these developments are headed. I often wonder how my grandmother might react to the types of programmes being beamed into homes, which have a negative potential. Television programmes are good when they deliver a positive message and help to educate viewers, but television can also be a dangerous medium and we must be careful about how it is controlled.

Television has also become very intrusive. Deputy Breen referred to John F. Kennedy's visit to Ireland in June 1963 and how television coverage generated great excitement. The Pope's visit to Ireland in 1979 was another milestone. When one turns on Sky News nowadays, one is almost taken into people's houses or war zones. Television has become an intrusive medium whereby one cannot sneeze without it being picked up by a camera. That presents its own challenges. Sky News uses a format where the same news stories are broadcast every 15 minutes, which is irritating, and it wrecks my head. I have time to watch a little television on the occasional night at the weekend. Sky News runs news off a machine and I do not like such news coverage. I often retreat to RTE to watch more newsy programmes and the station does a good job in that regard.

TV3 is running advertisements regarding its new midday programme. Television has taken on a new role by providing for different audiences. I try to watch a little television late at night whereas many others watch programmes in the morning. Recently I heard a woman say she puts "TV-AM" on in the background during breakfast because it cheers up everybody in the house and it can be interesting. However, I cannot get my head around the concept of people sitting down and watching television for the rest of day. They watch talk shows, followed by American courtroom series, adventure programmes and then soaps. On the other hand, these programmes provide entertainment for those who cannot leave their houses for whatever reason.

Broadcasters must take responsibility because they have a captive audience. Many people watch television all day and when schools finish for the day, many children want to watch television. Given the number of stations dedicated to children's programming, many parents try to limit the time their children can watch television. They encourage their children to do their homework before allowing them to watch television. Broadcasters must take responsibility for the programming they provide at a time many channels are beamed into homes, particularly in the Dublin region, to make sure people are not watching unsuitable programmes.

Broadcasting is regulated by a number of bodies — the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, the Broadcasting Complaints Commission and the RTE authority. The new organisation will encompass the functions of these bodies, operate independently and, for the most part, be funded by a sectoral levy applicable to all broadcasters.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle for giving me the opportunity to make my contribution on this important legislation which I look forward to supporting.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important Bill. Broadcasting is a wide canvas and, were one geared up and permitted, one could speak about it for three hours. While there are a number of major issues, the Bill in its entirety is welcome. It must be passed because there are significant external pressures which I shall address.

Unless the national broadcaster is able to keep up with fantastic, sensational changes, we will be left in a backwater. RTE, in terms of its television and sound elements, has had a public broadcasting remit for years. Given the annual levy of €160 and the responsibility placed on any governing authority to direct the affairs of RTE One, RTE Two, TG4, RTE's radio stations, the Houses of the Oireachtas channel and so on, it is important that RTE be seen to be a broadcaster for all of the people. By and large, it does a good job, although it would be easy to state the opposite, as many do. It stands up well against competition from around the world. Given the intrusion of Sky News, Fox News and so on — one can watch an African station at the touch of a button — we must remember that our national broadcaster and TV3, which is also useful, although not a part of this debate, are able to compete.

As Deputy O'Connor stated, everything, every minute of every day, on Sky News is sensational. I do not have many opportunities to watch television, but such sensationalism does not appeal to me. Balanced, fair and reasonable reporting of an incident as soon as humanly possible is vital and what our broadcasters try to do. While I am not saying that Sky News, Fox News and so on do not do so, many viewers watching the sensationalism get the impression that there is never another side to a story. Good, bad or indifferent, it was a remarkable red flash. Our broadcasters should not go down that road.

For many years I was critical of RTE in one respect. Anything concerning the regions was placed on the back burner until changes were made in recent years. Regional correspondents have made a considerable difference. For example, the programme "Nationwide" encompasses many of television's good aspects. It is predominantly a good news programme rooted in communities around Ireland to pick out the best actions that local communities take to better themselves. This is an important aspect of radio and television coverage that acknowledges the traditions and values of people across the country without being confined to a particular area. A sister programme is more or less engaging in the same type of reporting within Dublin city. It is important that we have more broadcasting of this kind.

None of us wants to be a harbinger of bad news, but sometimes there seems to be a bias in radio and television coverage towards bad news stories. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of bad news in this big, bad world, but there is also plenty of good news. There should be a balance and RTE is beginning to get it right. The viewership and listenership have as many choices as there are people. It must be difficult for the controller of programmes in any television network to always get the balance right. Obviously, it is not always right, but controllers are doing better than they have for a long time.

Television is a powerful medium. The new governing body will need to consider the question of images portrayed to children. I am long past the stage where my children watch programmes like "The Den" and so on, but my grandchildren are watching them. I cannot discuss too many of them because I do not watch them, but many of them are good. One can rest assured that "Bob the Builder" is entertaining, has an educational aspect and portrays the right image to young children. However, there are programmes on television at times when children can watch them that are not suitable for them. We must be careful to control such programmes in order that what children view is good, entertaining and educational, as much of what many children do is picked up from television.

Concerning advertising, I have a bee in my bonnet about all programmes that highlight the use of alcohol. I accept the principle that every mature adult should be able to act on his or her own behalf. I am not interested in censorship. However, the overly glamorous advertising of alcohol is playing holy hell. It now appears that one cannot have a social gathering without the most beautiful people drinking to their hearts' content and that everyone should aspire to be like them. Nothing could be further from the truth — if people could see how the advertise-

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ments are put together. During the coming years we must be vigilant in preventing such advertising from continuing.

In the past few days I heard some of my colleagues refer to the major problem of obesity. It is a greater problem than we thought it would be five or six years ago. Dubious food products which I will not name are being highlighted. These are extraordinarily fatty foods — rubbish and trash. We must have a leveller because if the advertising of these foods continues, we will have to place a health warning on them, similar to what is carried on cigarette packets. It could state that if one were to eat the particular food product, one would not be doing oneself any good. If it was practical to do so, I presume advertisers would want to change their ways.

I refer to the relationship between the national broadcaster and local television and radio stations. I am lucky to be in the House as long as anyone and have seen dramatic changes. I distinctly remember the night Teilifís Éireann came on the air, a momentous occasion in our house and I assure Members it was not our own television set. It meant a new step forward for Irish society. Ten or 15 years ago we had the advent of local radio services. I have heard no Member suggest this was a bad development. Local radio services have an outstanding connection with people within the franchise area. Irrespective of what happens, an accident, a funeral or the opening of a new library, the local radio station has the news in ten minutes, sometimes in ten seconds. Local radio stations have become very professional to the extent that most newscasters and public affairs debates are as good as any carried by the national broadcaster. The level of professionalism is significant; the same goes for local television services but these have not spread as far. It is a costly job.

It should be in the remit of the new broadcasting authority to strengthen ties. I understand some 5% of the television licence fee revenue will be made available for certain projects, an important development. No one likes paying a licence fee if one can get away without paying it and given the programming available, we hope the fee is value for money. It is important that local radio stations such as Galway Bay FM do not feel isolated. These local stations should receive help for certain projects under the national system. Whether we believe €160 per year is good or bad value, an issue on which everyone has a view, it should be paid and collected once it becomes law. I was a member of the Committee of Public Accounts and remember a number of debates during which we discovered that it was extraordinarily difficult to have a system of collection that was value for money. I do not think the current system does this but it is important that the message be communicated that those who do not pay the fee are spongers. In effect, by non-payment they ensure neighbours will have to pay more next time. This is an unfortunate development and the people concerned are nothing short of spongers.

I am not blessed by fluent in Irish but I am very impressed with TG4. From small beginnings the station has reached a level of professionalism that stands comparison with any station of its size and status elsewhere in Europe. One does not have to be fluent in Irish to enjoy TG4. When it started, it showed Gaelic football, hurling, camogie and ladies football matches which have brought a huge audience to the station.

Deputy Michael Creed: And westerns on Friday nights.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: Only for the fact that Deputy Creed watches them, he would not know they were on. I assume he has something in common with John Wayne.

“Ros na Rún” is an example of a programme shown by the station. It has a facility to ensure traditional ways in Gaeltacht areas and rural life are unlikely to be forgotten. These are shown in the best possible light.

The station has created a source of employment for the very best producers and researchers. Many can now be seen named in the credits on RTE, TV3 and the BBC. It is a major training ground for many highly skilled young men and women and provides an outlet for their professionalism.

It is incumbent on stations to carry as many high quality home produced programmes as possible. It is one thing to have a home produced programme but if it is trash, it is no good to anyone. Programmes such as “The Clinic” are of high quality. The more that are produced, the greater the grip on the people, irrespective of what is beamed in by Sky Television or the BBC. Irish people will see such programmes as reflecting their values and interests. As long as RTE continues with such programmes, it is the future in terms of competition. It does not always get it right but nobody does.

I may sound dated in referring to a programme that I love to watch, “Reeling in the Years”. I had the good fortune of being involved in many of the events covered, sometimes with a peripheral role. I do not know the ratings for that programme but they must be high because it is being re-run. The series dates back to 1962 or 1963 and progresses through the years. There is a major opening for nostalgia programmes.

A Fine Gael amendment to the Bill was tabled in the Seanad and, as far as I am aware, accepted by the Government. It stated that in cases where only one group was looking for a local radio licence and was successful, that group’s contract would not then be for five years but would run for seven years. It is a minor matter but is extremely important because in an area where there is not too much interest, the incumbents would have an opportunity over seven years to develop programming to its liking. Many others would wish to be involved thereafter. We will follow the Bill on Committee Stage.

Deputy John Browne: I wish to share time with Deputy Eamon Scanlon. I welcome the Bill which is very detailed and seeks to deal with virtually all aspects of broadcasting in this country. As Deputy Connaughton said, it is a return to 1960 when RTE was established. Much legislation passed down the years will be consolidated by this Bill. It has been a long time coming but is very welcome.

A new regulatory authority will replace the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, BCI, and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission, BCC. The broadcasting authority of Ireland, BAI, will consist of the authority and two independent statutory boards, a contracts award committee and a compliance committee. I am not sure that we need three committees to deal with the implementation of this legislation. Perhaps when the Minister responds he will explain why he devised this rather bureaucratic system of dealing with the Broadcasting Bill. One authority with all-embracing powers would be a more important body than an authority, a contracts committee and a compliance committee. This seems somewhat over-regulated.

I welcome the fact that the Joint Committee on Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, which deals with broadcasting matters, will have an input into future appointments to the boards. The members have relevant knowledge and will offer a major input into the new legislation. I welcome the fact that the Minister recognises the importance of the committee by consulting with it before the board is finalised.

There are also new codes and rules for broadcasters. I have a particular interest in the area of advertising for children. We must have a code of conduct in respect of the advertising of children’s toys, food, drinks and other things that can have a detrimental effect on the health of children. From time to time parents raise issues about advertising with me, as I am sure they do with other Deputies. Many consider its timing unsuitable for the programmes. It promotes

[Deputy John Browne.]

foodstuffs that are high in sugar content contributing to obesity, as mentioned by Deputy Connaughton. The advertising of children's toys is a bugbear of mine and of a number of people up and down the country. When it comes to the promotion of toys, Christmas has already started. This puts severe pressure on parents who want to buy toys at Christmas time when they have money to do so. They do not want their children to beg them to buy the toys now. The Minister must look seriously at this issue.

Part of the Bill deals with television licences and proposes a range of changes to the current arrangement of television licensing in Ireland I hope this will not be the end of An Post in the operation of television licensing because that organisation has given a good service in collecting television licences. Of course we have the defaulters, the people who, no matter what is done, will not want to pay for their television licence. The Minister's proposal stating that it will be at the discretion of An Post that television licence defaulters should pay a fine and buy a licence rather than proceed to court is a wise one. To introduce an on-the-spot fine for not having a licence followed by the purchase of the licence is a way around the problem. At present, by the time An Post takes the court action and gets the person into court, the court system is clogged up. Therefore, I welcome the fact that the Minister is considering having on-the-spot fines for defaulters combined with purchase of the licence. It is a good suggestion.

We get a good service from RTE 1 and 2 and TG4 and television in general offers good service in this country. RTE comes in for serious criticism from time to time about some of its programmes and about being politically biased. However, for the amount of money expended each year, RTE provides a very good service in this country. From time to time I might not be happy with some decisions the organisation might take or the political lines it might hold but I am a strong supporter of RTE, television and radio. We get good value for money in that area.

Deputy Connaughton mentioned TG4. The station has done tremendous work in promoting Gaelic games off-season. RTE covers these at the height of the season, and TV3 also covered some games this year. However, TG4 does a great job in promoting the club championships, the international rules games and Railway Cup games. Long may that continue. Some of the station's programmes are watched by people such as myself who are not good at the Gaelic. TG4 promotes Irish culture, Irish language, Irish song and music and that is important.

"Oireachtas Report" was mentioned earlier in respect of the time it is beamed out to the country, which is usually at midnight, 12.30 a.m. or 1 a.m. There is need for a change there but we also need our own channel. There is all-party agreement to examine how the Oireachtas might have its own channel and how it might operate. I know that much discussion is going on in the Ceann Comhairle's office, in the Commission and also in the committee that I chair concerning how we might implement an Oireachtas channel at a reasonable cost. Many new channels are costly but it is essential that we look at having an Oireachtas channel. We could thereby promote politics and bring politics out to the people. That is something all of us try to do in our own way at local level and a channel of our own would certainly help.

There is also an issue about the effects soaps may have. Parents talk about this and I have no answer as I do not watch soaps. Soaps are widely watched at peak time and people tell me that many of them feature cases of rape, murder and suicide from time to time. What effect is this having on young people? Organisations dealing with the welfare of children get very concerned about this issue and the Minister should examine it in terms of its effects on young people.

The advertising of alcohol has been mentioned. It would be hard to stop all such advertising although that decision could be taken. It could also be decided that television advertising should not glamorise drink but then one goes to Croke Park or Gaelic games parks up and down the

country, one attends Munster rugby or international matches, or soccer matches, where all the hoardings are advertising drink of every kind. That has an effect on the promotion of drink. I am not sure a total ban on alcohol from television screens will stop young people from drinking. Education is important and we should start with an education programme in our schools about the effects of drink. Although many people believe a complete ban would be a solution, I am unsure of this.

I wish to make a couple of points regarding the Independent Broadcasters of Ireland, IBI, representatives of which I met recently. While it welcomes the Bill in general, it seeks a number of changes to the fast-track application process for radio licences. It seeks to have the licence period changed from seven years. The initial proposal was for a five-year period but the Seanad suggested a seven-year period. However, the IBI suggests that the period should be changed to ten years and the Minister should consider this issue.

The IBI has concerns in respect of digital broadcasting. It has noted the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, BCI, has no policy at present regarding digital broadcasting for local, regional or national independent radios. Until such time as such a policy is developed, the IBI considers that including provisions in respect of digital broadcasting in the Bill may prove costly and may cause problems regarding adherence for local radio stations. Consequently, it also seeks some changes in this regard.

The IBI also seeks changes in the levy proposed by the Minister. While it is not opposed to the levy *per se*, it considers that the manner in which it will be implemented should be changed to allow for greater flexibility. Moreover, such a levy only should kick in when radio stations are making a profit. The former Taoiseach removed the 3% levy and the IBI now wonders why the present Government intends to reintroduce it. Apparently, the former Taoiseach, Deputy Bertie Ahern, gave a commitment that it would not be reintroduced. Perhaps the Minister also should consider this issue.

While one cannot legislate for a downturn in the economy, the IBI is highly concerned in this regard at present. It considers that as the economic downturn will lead to fewer advertisements and less income, the levy may not be the most practical measure to take at present. I now wish to give way to my colleague.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I am glad to have the opportunity to make a few comments on this Bill. The Bill is about how broadcasting will be defined and how the broadcasting industry will be organised and managed in Ireland. At a time of massive developments in the arena of communications, such a Bill is highly appropriate. The legislation deals with issues pertaining to the format, structure and model of broadcasting. It deals with publicly-funded broadcasters and those which are not funded directly by the licence fee but through commercial advertising. While a publicly-funded broadcaster is required, public funding brings with it real responsibilities regarding the approach such a broadcaster should take. Being funded by the public places an additional set of obligations upon a broadcaster and certain standards must be maintained. Moreover, a level of excellence that may not be expected of independent broadcasters may also be required. That constitutes the reality for organisations that are funded by the people.

I emphasise that a public broadcaster is not a State broadcaster. The public broadcaster should not be a direct extension of the State in its form and functions. I strongly believe that it also is appropriate to regulate RTE in the same way as other independent, commercial broadcasters, such as TV3. RTE is in a privileged position inasmuch as it has access to a licence fee. This advantage for the station cannot be underestimated. One of the best recent developments has been the introduction of competitors into the television market in Ireland.

[Deputy Eamon Scanlon.]

I still can recall when there was only one television channel in Ireland. I also can recall that there were no televisions in the street on which I was reared. However, we were fortunate to have access to a shop that sold televisions. It was operated by a decent man and more children would gather outside his shop window to watch “The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin” and a few similar programmes that I remember vaguely than would go to the cinema. He placed a small speaker outside the shop to enable everyone to hear what was going on. Things certainly have changed since then as practically every room in every house has a television, which is to be welcomed in certain circumstances. We have come a long way since then and have further to go.

TV3 has been a welcome addition to the market. This was seen most recently in respect of coverage of the All-Ireland championships matches. In the most recent season, TV3 showed live coverage of some major matches and did a good job of that. Competition is a good thing, which RTE should welcome, rather than fear. It should consider it as an incentive to maintain and improve its standards. Everyone experiences competition, be it in business, politics or whatever walk of life, and it keeps everyone focused.

I support the Bill’s overall approach. While other Members have referred to it as being cautious rather than radical, it will ensure that we have adequate regulation over the broadcasting sector. We must never underestimate the importance of the broadcasting sector in people’s lives. Many older people, who may be living alone, rely on television or radio as their main source of keeping in touch with the outside world. Whether by listening to Joe Duffy on “Liveline”, although Members may not always agree with what he says, or by watching “The Late Late Show” on Friday nights, people rely on such programmes to inform their opinions. Consequently, it is important to put in place relevant regulation as the broadcasting sector has great influence on people’s lives.

The Bill will lead to the establishment of a new broadcasting authority. It is crucial that it will not simply be the current Broadcasting Commission of Ireland in a new guise. The proposed Broadcasting Authority of Ireland will assume the functions of the existing Broadcasting Commission of Ireland and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission and will take on a number of new roles and responsibilities. It will have two statutory boards, namely, the contracts award committee and the compliance committee. The authority will have overall responsibility for the organisation with regard to preparing codes and rules for broadcasters.

This is an important Bill. It is a detailed and comprehensive legislative proposal that seeks to deal with virtually all aspects of regulation and the provision of broadcasting content in Ireland. It introduces many new concepts, grants a range of new functions to broadcasters and regulators and sets the framework for new activities and services, especially in light of technological developments.

The Broadcasting Bill consolidates and revises almost 50 years of Irish broadcasting legislation, which I welcome. It repeals the Broadcasting Authority Act 1960, which established RTE, and the Radio and Television Act 1988, which allowed for independent commercial broadcasting for the first time. Under this Bill, the entire body of broadcasting legislation now is presented in a single, consolidated Bill. This is a more efficient model and is necessary at this time of advancement in modern communications.

I also welcome the contribution of local radio stations. Given the geographical position of my constituency, it is covered by two radio stations, namely, Mid West Radio and Ocean FM and I acknowledge the contributions they make to the lives of elderly people, many of whom live alone in isolated places. The stations schedule programming to facilitate those people in the form of sport, local issues, farming matters, current affairs and death notices. The latter is

a highly important part of radio programming for many people who wish to keep informed in respect of their local community.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: I wish to share time with Deputies Creed and Doyle. I intend to take ten minutes, if that is all right.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Do both Deputies intend to speak in the same slot?

Deputy Andrew Doyle: Yes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is it agreed that Deputy Terence Flanagan should take ten minutes and Deputies Creed and Doyle five minutes each? Agreed.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: I also welcome the opportunity to comment on the Broadcasting Bill 2008. The Bill as passed by Seanad Éireann is comprehensive in that it consolidates five or six other Acts. It is 167 pages long, contains 181 detailed sections and 13 parts. Overall, while the Bill contains some very good aspects, Fine Gael will seek to amend others on Committee Stage. The Bill seeks to establish the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, BAI, which will take over the functions of the existing Broadcasting Commission of Ireland and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission, as well as receiving some other new functions.

I am aware of the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland's existence mainly because in my previous employment I used to pass its offices on a daily basis. I entered the office and had a chat with its staff to ascertain what are its functions. I am aware of their existence. It is welcome, particularly in the current economic climate, that a levy will be put on broadcasters so taxpayers will not have to fund these new authorities, except in the first year of establishment.

Section 8 relates to the appointment of members to the broadcasting authority of Ireland, BAI. It indicates that five members will be appointed by the Government on the nomination of the Minister, with four members to be appointed on the advice of the relevant joint Oireachtas committee. That is a welcome development which means members of a committee will have much more power in ensuring people with the proper qualifications and who are experienced in the areas will be appointed to the broadcasting authority of Ireland. Such oversight will mean there will be no political appointments or cronyism, which will improve public accountability.

On this side of the House we wish to ensure all members are vetted by the joint Oireachtas committee rather than just half of them. Five members will be appointed by the Minister and just four will be appointed by the committee.

With regard to the statutory committees, half the appointments will be made by the Government on the nomination of the Minister and the other half will be made by the BAI from its own staff and membership. The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Communications, Energy and Natural Resources should have more of a role in this. I welcome that the chief executive officer of the BAI will have to attend the Committee of Public Accounts and will have to account, in particular, for the level of expenditure. He or she will also be answerable to the other Oireachtas committees.

I see deadlines and timelines will have to be adhered to by the BAI in dealing with complaints brought forward by people who feel their reputation has been hurt or incorrect facts have been given out. For broadcasters in breach of the terms of their contract, the compliance committee may recommend to the High Court that a fine of up to €250,000 be imposed. That is significant punishment for anybody seen to be making deliberate attempts to injure people's reputations and names.

Section 81 deals with the appointment to the boards of both RTE and TG4, with each of the boards containing 12 people and an equal gender balance. That is welcome and we could learn

[Deputy Terence Flanagan.]

from that in this House in ensuring we improve our gender balance. Six members are to be nominated by the Minister, with four nominated by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. This is very innovative and seems to be the way forward. We must ensure that in future nomination processes, people have the relevant experience and qualification before appointment to boards. It should happen in this instance so that politics and politicians can be protected.

The legislation deals with the directors general and chairpersons of RTE and TG4 having to attend committee meetings in the Houses of the Oireachtas, which is also necessary. The Bill will ensure RTE will provide a television service to Irish communities abroad. We are all aware of the Irish communities, particularly in England and the undocumented in America, and these issues must be aired on RTE's broadcasts outside the country. They will give a better understanding of the problems experienced by the Irish. I am sure we are all very aware of the plight of the Irish in England who have hit on hard times.

The decision to cover proceedings of the Houses of the Oireachtas through a free-to-air service is a welcome development. It will inform the public to a greater degree as to what goes on here in the Houses, particularly in committees. People will have more of an understanding of the process, know what Deputies do when they come to the House and what the job of a Deputy involves.

The Irish Film Board will be provided with its own dedicated channel, which is also to be welcomed. The Irish film industry enjoyed some great years but over the past few years it has not been as great as it once was. There have been more Irish productions recently, notably "The Tudors", a series made in Ardmore Studios. Some members of the Joint Committee on Communications, Energy and Natural Resources visited that location. We must protect the Irish film industry and particularly the tax reliefs and incentives which exist. They must continue.

Section 159 deals with the major sporting events. Perhaps the Minister will provide some more information as to which major sporting events are in mind, as the Bill does not specify. Will it relate to the all-Ireland finals and ensure they will be provided on a free basis? Will it apply to Irish soccer matches?

The manner in which the television licence is collected is very outdated and costly. The process should be greatly improved upon and perhaps when somebody purchases a television, the levy should be paid up front and once only, especially for new customers.

Local radio and television services clearly provide a terrific service to local communities in various parts of the country which would not be informed of local events, news and current affairs issues otherwise. Independent television and radio stations must be protected and the Government must ensure adequate funding remains so the service can be provided. They provide great opportunities for volunteers or those interested in presenting on radio stations to get involved, learn how programmes are put together and the various skills used in making programmes. That would give people great confidence. Many people working in these radio stations are volunteers and do not get paid. They should be commended for the good work they do.

The restriction on junk food advertising is an excellent development and the area of obesity has been covered by other Deputies. The Minister is aware it is a significant issue. There has been information in the media recently about the content of cereals — there is more sugar in Irish cereals than in their counterparts in Australia or other countries, for example, and that should be examined.

There are many positive developments in the Bill. We would like to see alcohol advertisement banned completely. Regarding changes, our party will table amendments on Committee Stage.

Deputy Michael Creed: I welcome the opportunity to say a few brief words. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle might let me know when I have a minute remaining as I will share time with Deputy Andrew Doyle.

The landscape for broadcasting has changed very significantly over recent years. When I entered this House initially, most households throughout the country only had terrestrial television but in the last 20 years, the international reach of broadcasting corporations has become truly global, particularly with the advent of the Internet. At a more local level there has been the successful explosion in popularity of local radio stations. Broadcasting has changed very significantly and in that context, the legislation is welcome.

Some people have argued, with regard to some provisions in the Bill, that because of our inability to police non-terrestrial broadcasters from outside the country, we should sit and do nothing. I do not accept this argument. On the contrary, it is a reason to take an initiative at European Union level, where Ireland has the capacity to pursue these matters, or at a global level. If, in choosing to restrict the reach of advertising for children it transpires that children continue to have access to advertisements prohibited under the legislation on other broadcasters such as Sky television, it will make a strong case for having an international code of conduct. We should not take a “do nothing” approach. In any case, the non-terrestrial broadcasters tend to construct their advertising in compliance with national legislation.

I propose to focus on the legislation’s provisions on junk food advertising by the food industry. While an initiative is needed on this issue, it must be developed in consultation with the food industry. A legitimate criticism has been made that consultation on the Bill has been insufficient. I hope further consultation will take place with the food industry before Committee Stage. While I support in principle the decision to include in the legislation the ultimate sanction — a ban on advertising — the codes of conduct provided for should be devised in consultation with the food industry.

My colleague, Deputy Terence Flanagan, referred to an interesting recent report which showed that sugar and salt levels in certain cereals are significantly higher in Ireland than in the same branded products in New Zealand and Australia. This appears to be due to a perception that awareness of dietary and healthy living issues is greater in New Zealand and Australia than in Ireland. The House has a role to play in ensuring that products for which advertisements targeted at children are broadcast on television are healthy in the wider sense. There is no appetite, if I may be pardoned the pun, to take a big brother approach by arguing that children should never go to McDonalds or eat pizza or the sugary cereals to which they are inclined to gravitate. A balance must be struck.

I have raised previously in the House the failure to target sufficiently sports funding at activity for all and the focus on the development of niche sports. While I support the Bill in principle, healthy foods produced by the dairy and meat industries must not be categorised as unhealthy by those who police the legislation. These products form the backbone of the Irish food industry and are worth approximately €20 billion to the economy every year. The food sector directly employs 48,000 people with as many as 50,000 others employed indirectly.

Television has an enormous reach and exercises a disproportionate influence on children. Anyone with children will be aware of the impact of television advertising on children. For this reason, the Bill should include the ultimate sanction. I hope the codes of conduct will be framed in consultation with the industry in a manner that recognises the challenges we face in respect

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of issues such as childhood obesity. It is impossible not to acknowledge the extent of this problem. However, the new codes must also be balanced, fair and reasonable and the industry must be able to live with them.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I thank Deputy Terence Flanagan for his generosity in sharing time.

The Broadcasting Bill 2008, which consolidates, revises or repeals various Acts dating back to the Broadcasting Act 1960 which established RTE and created a basis for public service broadcasting, is welcome. Television is probably the most useful but dangerous device in any household. As Deputies indicated, with the advent of digital transmission we will soon be able to watch radio and television programmes, play DVDs, PlayStation, the X-box and music and access practically all other forms of media on our television sets. The legislation arms the State and Oireachtas with the ability to deal with this development.

Given the speed with which advances are being made in the media, it will be necessary to ensure the Bill has an inbuilt capacity to evolve to deal with the evolution of the media, specifically television. Until now, we have constantly been in catch-up mode.

It is hard to believe it is 20 years since the Independent Radio and Television Commission, IRTC, was established. Community radio has been important for local communities, providing, for example, access to training in radio and communications which had not previously been available.

The rationalisation of a number of State agencies in the legislation is welcome in the current economic climate. The board of the proposed broadcasting authority of Ireland has the responsibility to ensure the authority moves with advancing technology and is in a position to respond, react and, if necessary, control the medium of television.

Deputy Creed addressed the issue of advertisements for food products. The food and drinks industry will make the case that it will face a distinct disadvantage until such time as international agreement is reached on the standards to apply to the content of food advertisements transmitted on television. In fairness to the industry, it has provided guideline daily allowances on packaging. Clearer labelling will be needed and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland will have a role to play in this regard. We should expect food advertisements to feature similar information and standards as are available on other forms of advertisement. For example, we often hear the words “Enjoy alcohol responsibly” at the end of advertisements for alcoholic drinks. Food advertisements should feature words to the effect that people should consult the recommended daily allowance for the relevant products.

In recent days, the issue of religion has been discussed. In the United States one cannot use the words “Happy Christmas”. Instead, one must say “Happy Holidays”. On the other hand, the country has many commercial television channels dedicated to bible belt preaching. We should not muddy the waters and become excessively politically correct. Religions which do not promote themselves as superior or practice discrimination against other races, colours or creeds should not be precluded from advertising. Common sense must prevail.

I note Deputy Peter Kelly who is seated opposite was photographed on the set of “The Tudors”. As a Deputy from County Wicklow, it would remiss of me not to welcome the provision on establishing an Irish film channel. The broadcasting fund’s remit should be extended to include the promotion of Irish culture through film.

The Minister for Finance should extend section 4(3)(1), which deals with tax breaks in the film industry, to include film editing. Once films are shot, the editing takes place in the United States where the big money is spent. While film editing may not provide as much employment as the set and production side, it is a high cost element of film production.

Deputy Peter Kelly: The Broadcasting Bill 2008 published on 14 May has been passed by Seanad Éireann. Broadcasting is an issue which covers many areas. In today's technologically advanced world the term "broadcasting" can mean many things, whether television, radio, the Internet or other means of communication. Broadcasting contributes greatly to all our lives, informing us of everyday events and ensuring we are in touch with the world around us. I hazard a guess that every Deputy present encountered some form of broadcasting almost as soon as he or she woke this morning. One of the first things we do is switch on the radio to listen to the news, get the weather forecast or hear the traffic information.

Broadcasting affects most aspects of our lives. It covers a wide range of topics: entertainment, education, news, music and sport. The fact that it is so all-encompassing means that this legislation is important. It is an interesting and varied topic for discussion and I am sure every Member will have his or her own take on it.

Broadcasting has made our world a smaller and more intimate place. Due to its importance in our everyday lives, it is important we have certain regulations in place and certain boundaries that cannot be broken. I am not talking about a Big Brother style of regulation, but we must have some regulations in place. This legislation deals with issues around the format, structure and model of broadcasting, dealing with publicly funded broadcasters and those not funded directly by the licence fee but through commercial advertising. We need a public broadcaster, but there is a difference between a public broadcaster and a State broadcaster. A point that must be made is that a public broadcaster in receiving a licence fee has an extra duty or obligation to the viewing public. This is only fair and as it should be.

By and large, RTE does a good job and fulfils its public broadcast remit in most cases. One particular area where it excels is in its coverage of sport. It keeps the nation in touch with the GAA championships, our soccer and rugby teams to name but a few. Viewers look forward to watching "The Sunday Game" every week. Sport is an important aspect of all our lives and the more sport we play and the more our young people engage in it, the better for the people and the country. Playing sport, as the saying goes, keeps one "healthy in mind and spirit".

RTE, TG4 and TV3, the television stations based in Ireland, are probably among the best there is. I find that in most places I go invariably it is one of these channels that tends to be on. People seldom switch to outside broadcasting channels from anywhere else in Europe because there is no need to do so with the standard and quality of the broadcasters and programming provided by RTE, TG4 and TV3. Furthermore, most people tell me that the soccer coverage on RTE consists of analysis that is second to none on these islands.

Similar to points previously mentioned in this debate, I do not believe the public broadcaster should be a direct extension of the State in its form and functions. It is appropriate that the public broadcaster is regulated in the same way as other independent commercial broadcasters which also should have a clear public service remit. The advent of commercial broadcasters is to be welcomed, as they provide competition, but I would be wary of certain commercial broadcasters transmitting content that is largely imported. They may argue that they are not privy to a licence fee and that is a fair point, but some commercial channel content is not up to the required standard we expect in Ireland.

I welcome what the Bill is trying to achieve. It will ensure regulation of the broadcasting industry which is growing year by year. We need to ensure broadcasting can flourish and that there is regulation to ensure quality and access across the spectrum of public, private, independent and community broadcasting. Effectiveness of regulation is an important issue. The Bill will lead to the establishment of a new broadcasting authority, with which I will deal shortly.

I take the opportunity to make the point that the news and entertainment content of the national radio stations is second to none. We have independent radio stations in the Longford-

[Deputy Peter Kelly.]

Westmeath region that do an excellent job. Shannonside Radio, an independent radio station, is based in Longford town. It has a large listenership. It transmits “The JF Show” presented by Joe Finnegan every morning. He is known the length and breadth of the region. The station’s news staff provide comprehensive, factual news coverage on an hourly basis. If people want to know what is happening in my constituency, they listen to Shannonside Radio. I pay tribute to Maryclaire Greally and her staff in the station’s newsroom because if there is a tragic event, they know how to handle it sympathetically and are very understanding. The station provides a great service. At the press of a button people in the region can find out everything that is happening around them.

This is important legislation that will affect people culturally. Television is a medium used by them every day to access news and views from around the world. What they see on the box in the corner heavily influences them and what they hear debated on radio shows every day will form the opinions they express in the pub that night. We cannot underestimate the importance of broadcasting. When I spoke to people and was told about some news story, on asking if it was true, they responded, “Yes, that is true.” On asking them how they had come to know about it, they responded, “I saw it on television or I heard it on radio.” People believe what they see on television and what they hear on radio. Broadcasters have a responsibility, as we do in our jobs and professions, to be truthful, honest and factual. Some say that at times what is broadcast is fiction. If that happens, perhaps the broadcaster should indicate at the start of the following show that the item broadcast was fiction.

This legislation is modernising. It establishes the broadcasting authority of Ireland which will assume the functions of the existing Broadcasting Commission of Ireland and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission and take on a number of new roles and responsibilities. It will have two statutory boards, the contracts award committee and the compliance committee. It will have overall responsibility for the organisation in preparing codes and rules for broadcasters. The compliance committee will be responsible for ensuring that all broadcasters, whether public or private, comply with the conditions of their licences and with the standards set down in the broadcasting codes.

The differing views regarding the Bill should be taken on board. Society in 21st century Ireland is evolving. Broadcasting is one of the most changeable aspects of that society and the Bill reflects that reality.

The views of all players in the broadcasting sector, particularly Screen Producers Ireland, should be taken into account. I visited Ardmore Studios on Tuesday last and one could not but be impressed by the fact that it is a hive of activity. I was struck by the high standard and variety of the sets in use there. Ardmore Studios, which is involved in both film and television production, is a great advertisement for Ireland. Morgan O’Sullivan, the legendary broadcaster, gave us a tour of the studios and we visited the set of “The Tudors”, a programme which is currently showing in 70 countries and which is a great advertisement for Ireland. The market is out there and it is merely a matter for us to advertise Ireland as a centre of film, television and radio production. In the past, many of the best people in the world have worked in this business in Ireland.

The programme for Government agreed in June 2007 contains a range of commitments in respect of broadcasting. Of those commitments, the following will be delivered upon or facilitated through the Bill before the House: the Broadcasting Bill will be enacted to ensure a comprehensive, modern framework of law for the sector; the broadcasting authority of Ireland will be established; there will be a speedy right to reply to those who have been defamed in radio or television programmes; and work will be carried out in conjunction with the various

broadcasting organisations and interested parties to review rules relating to the advertising of junk food aimed at young people, with a view to phasing out such advertising.

Difficulties may arise in respect of the latter commitment, particularly in the context of people watching television channels over which we have no control. Irish television stations should come together with Screen Producers Ireland to develop and produce more programmes for children which can be broadcast at times when they watch television. Screen Producers Ireland is extremely enthusiastic in this regard, particularly as it possesses the relevant expertise. I encourage the television stations to contact them to see whether it might be possible to produce more children's programmes. I did not use the word "better" when referring to such programmes because I know, following my visit to Ardmore Studios, that there can be no doubt about the high standard of production which takes place there.

Under its programme, the Government is also committed to placing reviews of the licence fee on a statutory basis and ensuring that RTE supports broadcasting to the Irish community abroad, which is extremely important. When I visited London, Birmingham and Manchester in the past to attend annual Longford association dinner dances and other functions, I discovered that even though many Irish people live in England, they leave their hearts, souls and people back in Ireland. All these individuals indicated their desire to watch Irish television or listen to Irish radio. It is not the case that RTE should support broadcasting to the Irish community abroad merely for the sake of doing so, it should also do so in order that these people will not be deprived of seeing and hearing the best television and radio programmes produced anywhere in the world.

The Government is also committed to ensuring a fair and competitive environment for the independent TV and radio sector and working with the Houses of the Oireachtas and other local authorities to introduce programming that will carry live feeds of Oireachtas business and local council meetings, where practicable.

In April 1999, Ireland received notification from the European Commission that it had received a complaint relating to grant aid paid to RTE and TG4. The matter was discussed with the Commission and the Government gave certain commitments which are to be implemented by way of the Broadcasting Bill. These commitments relate to proposed changes in the supervisory framework for public service broadcasting in particular. They include the provision of independent advice to the Minister on the funding of public service broadcasting on an annual and five-year basis by the BAI, sectoral impact and public value tests for certain new public service broadcasting activities, clarity in Irish law around the remit and entrustment of public service broadcasters and various other oversight matters to be dealt with by the BAI. Ireland also committed to endeavour to enact the Broadcasting Bill 2008 by the end of the year.

The BAI will be a new regulatory authority and will replace the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission. It will assume responsibility for the key existing roles of the BCI and the BCC and will take on a range of new functions. In particular, it will have new functions in respect of public service broadcasters. The BAI will consist of the authority and two independent statutory boards, namely, the contracts award committee and the compliance committee. The authority will have overall responsibility for the strategic direction of the organisation, as well as tasks such as preparing codes and rules for broadcasters, administering the broadcasting fund, certain oversights in respect of public service broadcasters and the setting and collection of a levy on the sector to fund its costs. The contracts award committee will have the role of licensing independent commercial and community broadcasters, such as local radio stations or digital television providers. The compliance committee will have the separate role of ensuring that all broadcasters, public or private, com-

[Deputy Peter Kelly.]

ply with their licence conditions and with the standards set out in the broadcasting codes and rules.

The BAI will have nine board members, five of whom will be appointed by the Government after nomination by the Minister and four will be appointed by Government after nomination by the Minister on the advice of the joint Oireachtas committee which deals with broadcasting matters. The joint committee may appoint a panel for the purposes of such appointments. The joint committee is comprised of members from all sides. Great interest is always shown when we appoint boards or reappoint people to them. As a member of the relevant committee, I assure the House that everything will be transparent and above board. Members are welcome to attend our meetings at any time and if they wish to make nominations, they should do so at their convenience.

Deputy Damien English: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this important Bill, which will bring about a number of changes. I wish to focus on advertising relating to religious orders, churches etc. This matter has been touched upon by previous speakers but I wish to comment on it in detail. The Bill represents an opportunity for the Minister to deal with this matter once and for all.

Deputy Doyle and others referred to the importance of broadcasting, the media and so forth. As politicians, we often miss out and do not get to watch enough television or keep up to date with the various programmes that are shown. We are often out of touch with what is happening.

1 o'clock Television is an education because there is so much on it. When I was on holidays with a few friends they were chatting about different television programmes. I was out of the conversation because I did not know what was going on. One of my friends told me to go away for a week and watch television and come back and we would have a conversation. That is how important it is. They were all talking about television and I could not join in because we do not get to watch enough of it here. That can be good, but we miss out on certain educational programmes. There is a lot on television, not only on radio and in the newspapers. It is important to monitor and keep a close eye on the whole area.

This Bill also deals with the independence and licensing of local radio stations and will help speed up the process of re-licensing in respect of which there were lengthy delays for some stations. Politicians, particularly those from rural or semi-rural areas, know perhaps more than anybody else the importance of local radio stations. The service they provide, often on low budgets, is unbelievable, although some of them have been sold for high prices lately. The staff are not paid the top wages they might get elsewhere but they provide an excellent service reporting on a wide range of subjects including sports, community events, politics, deaths and so on. All areas are covered and it is an excellent service to the community at a time when life is so fast-moving and we spend so much time in our cars that radio is probably the best way we have of keeping in touch with local events and what is going on around us. The real benefit of local radio is in keeping the community spirit alive. The radio station in my area is LMFm. Shannonside also covers part of my area. Along with many others they do an excellent job. Ministers and Deputies get to speak on many different local radio stations which are to be commended, protected and encouraged.

In the debate over the past couple of days we have discussed the issue of Dáil TV. I am a member of the committee which has been discussing that with the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who has done much work in this area and is very genuine about it and wants it to work. There is merit in the idea. We should examine what is happening in other countries. Our near neighbour televises its Parliament on

a regular basis in an interesting way. That is a standard to which we should aspire. Perhaps when we go digital in 2012 or 2013 Dáil TV can be part of the changeover.

In the meantime we must work with our national stations, TV3, RTE and so on, to try to produce a different type of political programme that might be more interesting. People are interested in politics. It is part of their everyday lives. It must, however, be presented in an interesting way that will keep them awake. Putting a programme on at midnight in a not very exciting format will not keep people's interest. They will not stay up to watch a 40 minute programme, which itself gives a good summary of what happens here, when they must get up at 5.30 a.m. or 6.30 a.m. to drive for hours in traffic. Midnight is too late. I do not understand why broadcasters do that. Perhaps they do not realise just how interested people are in politics. It is not just that politicians believe people are interested in them. People are genuinely interested in politics. The proof of this is shown by the fact that when we go down the country every year for our party meeting to discuss various issues, telephone calls to my office drop by approximately 80%. People know we are away because they are tuned in, listening to various programmes. Likewise when we were cooped up here for a couple of days discussing the economic situation and the new regulations for banks, telephone calls to my office dropped by nearly 90%. Again people knew we were busy. They knew that because they were following events on radio, television and the media. They are interested in following what is going on. However, it must be presented succinctly, in a way they can absorb it, and at a suitable time. We should work on that over the next couple of years before we commit to spending a massive amount of money on Dáil TV. When I say a massive amount of money, the figure is probably not that high. It is approximately €1 million, not as high as one might expect, because much good work was done to try to get a good price. We should examine the issue over a couple of years and try to address it through getting good programmes. The debate between the American Presidential candidates was a good example of such programming. People seem to like interactive programmes such as "Questions and Answers" with somebody guiding the debate. The Minister is considering that approach in regard to Dáil TV but we must work with existing television programmes at the moment.

I will turn to advertising. I want to deal mainly with what has happened here over the past couple of years in the context of religion. I do not believe it is what people wanted to happen. In 1999 *The Irish Catholic* newspaper had an advertisement banned from the airwaves for stating that it connects the teaching of the Church with the issues of the day. It did not state what those teachings were or whether they were good, bad or indifferent. In 2000 there was legislation that was meant to address the issue. It was simply a statement of what *The Irish Catholic* does and what anyone would expect a newspaper of this sort to do.

As a result of that ban the Oireachtas, partly at the behest of Deputy Enda Kenny, amended the broadcasting legislation to permit the advertising of religious publications or the holding of religious events. However, the amendment did not work as intended because in 2002 *The Irish Catholic* had another advertisement banned, this time for mentioning a feature series entitled "The Good the Church Does". It was about the work of organisations such as Crosscare, a Dublin diocesan welfare agency. Ireland is among the most restrictive regimes in the Western world with regard to religious advertising whereas in the US there is a free-for-all. Even in secular-minded Britain the legal environment in which religious advertisers operate is more liberal and more reasonable than it is here. Northern Ireland is governed by UK legislation in this regard. In 2003 our regulator saw fit to ban an advertisement from an interdenominational group called Power to Change. It was about the power of Jesus to change one's life. The message was overtly religious but UTV allowed it to air while we did not.

Our legislation and the way in which it is interpreted by organisations such as the Broadcasting Complaints Commission are to blame for this state of affairs. The legislation is too strict

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and is made worse by being interpreted too strictly. For evidence of this we should note that the legislation prevents both advertisements directed towards a religious end and advertisements directed towards a political end. I will return shortly to the issue of advertisements directed towards a political end. The ban on advertisements directed towards a political end is not used by the BCC to prevent secular newspapers from advertising either their sale or their content, and this content is often highly political. Why this double standard? One reason may be that we have become unduly suspicious of religion, regarding it as a likely cause of sectarianism and division. Politics can also be divisive, but we do not seem to regard it with the same suspicion. Is there a prejudice at work here. Is this why we strictly interpret legislation with regard to religious publications but not with regard to publications with religious content. Perhaps the attitude of suspicion which we bring to religion stems partly from the history of Northern Ireland which, of course, has been scarred by sectarianism. If that is so, why did the Northern Ireland authorities permit the Power to Change advertisements and we did not? They would have reason to be much more sensitive in these matters than us and yet they were more liberal and more reasonable in this regard than we were. It is worth stressing again that the advertisement for the Power to Change was much more overtly religious than either of the advertisements from *The Irish Catholic* which were banned, yet UTV allowed it to air.

It seems we have attached an unreasonable fear to the matter of religious advertising in Ireland. We seem to believe that if we allow one religious advertisement to air, no matter how innocent, we will have opened Pandora's box wide and will have to allow much more harmful advertisements on air. This is why the recent Veritas advertisements for Holy Communion gifts such as rosary beads were banned even though their offence was simply to describe those gifts as spiritual gifts and to refer people to the Veritas website, which mentions the Catholic hierarchy.

The attitude of some people, including the Minister, seems to be that there is a straight line from this kind of advertisement to advertisements by cults and religious fanatics. We seem not to have the same fear in that regard to secular newspapers advertising their contents. No one suggests that if we allow one of our recognised mainstream newspapers to advertise its political content, which we do, we will then be faced with advertisements for neo-Nazi publications. The Minister needs to ease the extreme restrictions on advertising. The fears that seem to motivate our current approach are unrealistic. It is certainly unfair to ban mainstream organisations and publications from the airwaves out of fear of extremists gaining access to the airwaves as a result. This draconian approach, which is not based on experience, means too many perfectly respectable organisations, which are and have been part of the fabric of our society for a very long time, are being hurt unnecessarily. In the case of Veritas and *The Irish Catholic*, this almost amounts to a restraint on trade. They are not given the same chance as everyone else to sell their wares. It is reasonable to ask the Minister to ease the current restrictions on broadcasting religious advertisements. If extremists thereby gain access to the airwaves, the legislation can be revisited. This would be an innocent until proven guilty approach, as distinct from the current guilty until proven innocent attitude. The Minister needs to set aside the unreasonable fears that motivate this attitude and give religious organisations the same freedom we offer other organisations.

This is an open and multicultural country and we need to allow space for diverse religious beliefs. We cannot control or fear everything. Other speakers referred to Christmas and cribs. We are taking a step too far. Advertising merely gives people the opportunity to make choices. Nothing is being forced on them. We need to grow up and deal with this multicultural and religiously diverse environment like mature adults. We should be proud of our backgrounds

but draconian legislative measures can spoil that by fostering resentment. As legislators, we have a duty to make this grey area more straightforward.

It is a shame that we do not allow more extensive political advertising on television broadcasts because this could increase people's interest in politics. Last Christmas, I spent some time in America, where I saw a wide variety of fun and interesting political broadcasts. Some people might believe everything they see but that applies in respect of all advertising. On Committee Stage we might discuss the possibility of opening up our rules on political advertising. I am aware of the danger that people with money might take over but, as modern politicians, that is a risk we have to take. Libertas spent a lot of money on the Lisbon referendum but we could also have availed of broadcasting opportunities. It was difficult to get our points across on the treaty. The best way of disseminating information would have been by means of radio and television rather than the print media. With the exception of one or two programmes each week, we were unable to get our message across.

Changes in this regard would not necessarily result in an increase in party politics because we could also educate people on politics in general. We often assume that people know how political processes work but many of us here did not have a clue about political issues at local, national or European level before we got involved in politics. I used to think councillors were paper figures because I was not involved in local politics before running for office. I did not study local governance in school, although that subject is now touched upon. Many people who came through our educational system never had an opportunity to learn about local, national or European politics. We have a duty to give them such an opportunity. If we give them the information they need, they will be better able to engage with politicians of all parties. They need to learn why certain decisions are made because we often appear to decide incorrectly. If people understood the system, however, they would better understand our decisions.

I wish to speak about programming aimed at children and, specifically, advertisements for junk food and alcohol. Those involved in the drinks industry have begun to work with the Government on bringing change to this area but problems remain. I acknowledge that we can only control stations broadcasting from Ireland and cannot deal with Sky or other stations. The simplest way to address this issue would be to advertise the dangers of alcohol as a counterbalance to pushing how wonderful it is or the nights out that can be had. An equal amount of money should be spent on showing both negative and positive effects. I am aware that the drinks industry pays a small levy into a fund which deals with alcohol problems. This may represent a quick way to deal with the issue rather than introducing complicated legislation which might be difficult to monitor.

I support the provisions for addressing the issue of junk food. We should use the media to reach out to parents, who need help and advice on raising children. It is difficult to do everything right by children in today's climate, whether in terms of food, drugs or alcohol, and the Government's help is needed. A number of programmes currently broadcast deal with parenting, including one I watched this morning which offered advice from a parenting coach. These programmes are useful and perhaps we need more of them. Rather than trying to control advertisements, we should have a say in the dissemination of positive information that helps parents to raise children. We cannot and should not force parenting courses upon them. Many schools and communities offer such courses and the television offers similar opportunities in regard to eating and drugs. We could use Irish made programmes to reach out to parents and, through cartoons, to children.

I welcome the provision for a dedicated film channel. Over the past several years, a number of excellent films have been produced with the support of the Irish Film Board. Many of these were made with low budgets and deal with serious issues such as racism, drugs, illness and

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disabilities. They have touched raw nerves. They do not reach the audience they deserve, however, so I look forward to the establishment of this channel. Films present further opportunities for disseminating messages. I accept that films and programmes are made that do not give good messages but it is a matter of choice. We should do everything we can to encourage our film industry.

I welcome the many positive measures contained in this Bill. However, we need to expand broadcasting in order to educate people and to develop the systems which Government and Opposition politicians and parents want. Let us take advantage of this opportunity. I encourage all those who are involved in the media to take the next step. From speaking to people on the doorsteps, we get a good feeling for what they want and need. Programming does not have to be flashy or colourful to be of good quality.

Deputy David Stanton: I welcome the opportunity to speak about this important Bill. While driving one evening, I listened to a radio programme on the use of debate by the ancient Greeks, who formulated their thoughts in their heads until the advent of writing. Socrates maintained that the act of writing changed the way he formulated his thoughts. This argument developed further with the invention of the printing press, the typewriter and the computer. All these developments help to change the way in which we formulate our thoughts and thus how we think. Broadcasting is changing as we speak, with the advent of digital platforms and so on. We are absolutely bombarded with information from all sides: television, radio, the Internet, iPhones and so on. Technology is advancing by the day. Somebody told me recently that there were only two types of computer: prototype and obsolete. Things are moving that fast. It is the same for all technology. We are talking about a very powerful medium which has the ability to influence our culture and how we think. It also has the power to change our outlook on life. Many now depend on the media, television and radio broadcasting in particular, in forming their views of the world.

More and more younger people are using websites such as Bebo and Facebook. I have children who are very adept at this, although we monitor their use as best we can. It is amazing that young people nowadays can communicate with each other in so many ways. In the past parents knew where their children were, who they were with and so forth, but now they are in their bedrooms and with their mobile phones could be talking to anybody anywhere in the world. It is similar for Bebo, Facebook, YouTube and other technologies. Because of this we face major challenges. It is not just television — there are other media too.

Almost every Deputy who has spoken so far in the debate and whose contribution I have read or listened to has alluded to the power of advertising where children are concerned. Advertising to children is a sensitive issue. In some countries there are codes for such advertising. This is something we need to debate in the House. In Australia matters are very advanced. There is a code called the Children's Code which states:

Advertisements to children must not mislead or deceive children; must not be ambiguous; and must fairly represent, in a manner that is clearly understood by children: the advertised product; any features that are described or depicted in the advertisement and the need for any accessory parts. Advertisements must not portray images or events which depict unsafe uses of a product ... [They] must not portray images or events in a way that is unduly frightening ... to children; and must not demean any person or group on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, age, sexual preference, religion or mental or physical disability.

In addition, under the code, advertisements may not undermine parental authority and prices, if mentioned, must be presented in an accurate way which can be clearly understood. If the

advertisement is for a competition, it must contain a summary of the basic rules. The code also states:

Advertisements must not be for, or relate in any way to, alcoholic drinks or draw any association with companies that supply alcoholic drinks . . . [They] should not encourage or promote an inactive lifestyle ...

We need to discuss such issues in the House.

It is interesting to note that in the United States the Children's Television Act was passed in 1990 with the aim of enhancing television's potential to teach the nation's children. This brings me back to the influence of television. The Act requires each television station that offers children's television programming in the United States to serve the educational and informational needs of children through its overall programming, including programming specifically designed to serve these needs, or core educational programming. A central goal is to provide parents and other members of the public with greater information on educational television programmes. Television stations should be mandated to show a certain number of educational programmes specifically geared towards children. We all remember "Sesame Street" which was designed to help children who had problems with reading, letters and so on and was very entertaining, as well as educational.

There are a few provisions in the Bill that I welcome, including those dealing with community radio. There is a distinction between community radio and local radio. Community radio is important from the point of view of citizenship. We have heard a lot of talk from the Government and others on all sides of the House about active citizenship. Community radio is a fantastic example of this. It plays an essential part in generating interest and providing information on local events. It is not for profit — it is run by local people for local people. In my own area of Youghal, if I may be parochial, we have a fantastic community radio station on which many of us are asked to speak. People really enjoy this. I notice that 14 community radio stations are currently licensed in the State. I call on the Minister to encourage and support these radio stations. Part of the problem they have is finding a premises from which to broadcast. CRAOL, the community radio forum, plays an important role by providing advice and support and as a forum for community radio. However, I would like to see the Government take a far more active role in supporting community radio. I am not speaking of local radio which is a commercial venture. Community radio is run by local people for local people and is about local events.

Part 6 of the Bill revises the mechanisms governing the award of contracts and provides for a new definition of community broadcasting. It makes provision for temporary 100-day licences to be awarded to community radio stations. The problem is how to fund a premises from which to broadcast. This must be examined. If this help and support could be provided — it would take very little — we would see an explosion in the number of community radio stations across the country, especially in view of the 100-day broadcasting licences. The Minister has said this is designed to encourage the development of a much wider plurality of broadcasters, often working on a non-commercial community basis, which would be a major new step in broadcasting on this island. I welcome this and encourage the Government to move on with it.

Another welcome feature of the Bill is that the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland will be charged with preparing rules for broadcasters in respect of access to broadcasting services by persons with a hearing or sight impairment. The Disability Act 2005 contains annual incremental targets for such content which public broadcasters must meet. Targets, however, are still relatively low as, unfortunately, television services here are not very advanced in these areas. I would like to see improvements in levels of accessibility, including subtitles, audio scripting,

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signing and so on. I know it is expensive and difficult, but it is very important for the people concerned. I encourage the Government to move on with this.

As I said, the Bill maintains the current system whereby television sets are licensed. As broadcasting technology advances on an almost daily basis, we are moving towards an age in which many people use PCs, laptops, mobile phones and other devices to watch television and there does not seem to be any consideration of this in the Bill. I am not saying there should or should not be, but we have had very little debate on the issue.

When we were dealing with the Copyright and Related Rights Bill in 2000, there was an issue to do with televisions in hotels. The question was whether royalties should be charged in respect of each television set in a hotel. A decision was taken at the time that this would not happen and it was written into the legislation. I note, however, that the Bill allows for a separate regime for television sets held at commercial premises to be set out in regulations. I read the Minister's speech and many others by Members opposite and do not think anyone alluded to this. My impression is that a television licence will be required for all devices capable of receiving a television signal. Thus, if one has a guesthouse or hotel with a television set in each room, is it the case that from now on one will have to have a licence for each one? That is how it appears. I ask the Minister to make this clear in his response, because it is not clear at the moment. Strangely, he did not allude to it in his speech.

I welcome section 39 which requires all stations to broadcast a minimum level of news and current affairs programmes. This is important.

The provisions for redress in Part 4 are crucial. The public complaints procedure avoids the courts, which is important.

I also welcome the provisions encouraging the production of home produced programmes by RTE and local radio stations. I stress that quality is important. Some colleagues have mentioned some excellent home-produced programmes. One person mentioned "The Clinic", which is aired on Sunday evenings. It is a way of highlighting many issues through drama. At the end of the programme a message is broadcast stating that if people are concerned about an issue raised in the programme they can contact a specified body for advice and support, which is interesting. I also welcome the establishment of audience councils.

I have often said that the establishment of an Oireachtas channel will not work unless we change procedures here. Yesterday we had the first meeting of the sub-committee dealing with Dáil reform. It was a positive meeting and I congratulate the Chief Whip on convening the meeting and being very positive and open. I encourage all colleagues to have an open mind on how we might change the way we do business in the House. While many things have been discussed over the years, very little has happened. With the advent of digital television we will be able to present ourselves possibly 24 hours a day to the people. The proceedings in committees, the Dáil and Seanad Chambers, and possibly local authorities, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the European Parliament will be available to citizens at the touch of a button. What they should see is interactive logical debate and discussion. If a Member on this side of the House asks a Minister to give way for a question, the Minister should not see it as a personal attack but rather should welcome such an intervention and answer it if he or she can. That is the kind of mindset we need to develop in the House. It would make it far more interesting and interactive for everybody.

I was very taken by Deputy Higgins's contribution. He is always very informative and entertaining. He said that the purpose of television is to educate, inform and entertain. He made the distinction between those who watch television as consumers and those who watch as citizens. There is a danger of broadcasting becoming very commercial. There is no definition

of public service broadcasting in the Bill. I ask what is public service broadcasting. It is crucial to write that down. I return to what I said initially about the ancient Greeks. We should think about it first and then write down what public service broadcasting is. Many of us have an image that it is something good and wholesome and we should all have it. I would like to see a written definition included in the Bill.

I agree with what many colleagues have said about religious broadcasting. It is important to have freedom on the airwaves. However, as mentioned by Deputy English, there are many bodies that are dangerous, including various cults etc. We need to be careful not to open the door for those people. I also have concerns about tarot cards etc. Many people spend money on these so-called services and we need to be very careful in this regard.

There will be a cost involved in establishing an Oireachtas channel. Deputy Coveney mentioned a figure of €750,000 per annum for broadcasting alone, which is sizeable. In this day and age we need to be cognisant of costs. People are asking whether it will be worth it and whether we can afford to spend that much money on it. I understand a feasibility study is ongoing and we will have the report soon, shortly after which the decision will be made. It is important to have a dedicated Oireachtas channel. We need to engage with RTE in this regard. When we visited the BBC and reviewed what is done there we discovered that it cross-advertises the BBC parliamentary channel. The news programmes on BBC1 and BBC2 often remind viewers they can view the proceedings of parliament on the BBC parliamentary channel.

Full broadcasts are different from edited highlights, about which we would all be very sensitive to ensure everybody gets fair play. We need an editorial structure that is fair and it needs to be broadcast so that as many people as possible can receive it. While the digital platform should allow that to be done, the cost will need to be reviewed. Returning to what public service broadcasting is, I maintain that broadcasting the Oireachtas proceedings and local authority meetings is a public service and part of the licence fee should be ring-fenced for that purpose, otherwise it might be difficult to do.

How we think, see the world and formulate our thoughts is influenced by the broadcast media and the newer technologies that are gaining momentum all the time. Mention has been made of opinion polls. If opinion polls are published close to an election it can influence people who might believe that if that is the way it is going they should also go that way.

Bad news is always featured and good news is not highlighted so much. When we see pictures and hear stories of drug taking and violence among young people, the impression might be given that everyone is taking drugs and abusing alcohol, but that is not the case. The majority of young people do not misbehave. However, the impression could be given that they do and that the country has gone to ruin. There is a responsibility on broadcasters to ensure that in their code of conduct they reflect what is happening and show that the majority of young people are very responsible, good citizens, very bright, highly educated and know what is going on and are fantastic to engage with. We need more of that portrayed in the media in the hope that that role model can be taken on by more young people and not the opposite, which seems to be the case. Research from other countries indicates that if the negative is portrayed perpetually, people tend to go that way and believe that is the norm when it is not the case.

I wish the Bill well through its Remaining Stages. It is a very important and complicated Bill covering many important issues for us all.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Seamus Kirk): I call Deputy P. J. Sheehan.

Deputy Seán Power: Cork is very well represented today.

Acting Chairman: We note that.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: I welcome this opportunity to debate the role of broadcasting. Ireland has a proud history in broadcasting here and in every corner of the world. Some of the developments we have seen in recent years have been good and some not so good. One of the best developments has been the creation of local radio stations. In particular I mention my local radio station, Cork 103 FM. It is an outstanding radio station and every citizen in County Cork as well as many in Kerry, Waterford and Tipperary tune into Cork 103 FM. It has certainly served the people of the south west in an excellent fashion since it was formed. It provides an excellent service to all the villages in the south-west region.

When I started my political crusade in 1960, I relied chiefly on after-Mass church-gate meetings. What a change has occurred in those 48 years. All election campaigns are now aired on local radio, some on television and of course there is still the art of personal canvassing. I am disappointed that the Bill does not propose to amend existing legislation to allow for responsible religious advertising or take account of the Private Members' Bill published by my colleagues, Deputy Simon Coveney and Gay Mitchell, MEP. I will be supporting amendments to be tabled on Committee Stage to remedy this situation and I hope the Minister of State has the common sense to table such amendments.

Ireland has a proud history in broadcasting. Independent broadcasting has never been as strong as it is today. More than 63% of the population, or 2.208 million, tune into independent radio on a daily basis. This indicates the number of people independent broadcasters connect with daily. Given these figures, no one can disagree that independent radio is providing an invaluable public service for the people.

The independent sector is growing. There is at present one national television station, two national radio stations, three regional stations and 27 local stations throughout the country. Added to these is a regional radio station preparing for its initial broadcasting date and multi-city licence and an easy listening service has been advertised. This is before we begin to focus on digital radio. The Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill launched by the Minister, Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív on Wednesday, 14 May, and passed by Seanad Éireann on 25 June is broadly welcome. There are, however, a few areas of concern.

At present, independent commercial radio stations operate under a ten-year licence which is subject to open competition at the end of that period. Section 67 of the Bill allows for the fast-tracking of radio licences, where the incumbent is the only group interested in broadcasting to the chosen franchise area. Fast-tracking of an unchallenged licence is welcome as it reduces the radio station's costs of applying for a new licence and the regulatory costs involved in awarding it. The fast-tracking system proposed under section 67(9) allows for a new licence which would not exceed seven years, rather than the normal ten-year term. I welcome the amendment passed in the Seanad which increased the term of the fast-track licence from the originally proposed five years to seven. However, there is a sound business and broadcasting case to be made for giving a licence for ten years, as usual, and not the seven years as proposed. I appeal to the Minister of State to restore that seven year provision to ten.

By significantly reducing the term of a licence, radio stations will not be able to run their businesses on a strategic long-term plan. That will make it difficult to attract and retain talented staff or justify major long-term investments such as the acquisition of premises and equipment and staff training. In essence, this is to punish the existing radio station for the lack of competition for its licence by significantly reducing the most valuable asset any broadcaster has, its licence. It will serve to undermine certainty in future investment and broadcasting quality.

Section 66 of the Bill properly makes fulsome provision to enable the new Broadcasting Authority of Ireland to satisfy itself as to the suitability of an incumbent licence holder before it awards a licence under the fast-track provision in section 67. The clear and unaccepted logic

of a ten-year term for a radio licence should not be upturned simply because there is no competitor. I would like the term of an independent radio licence to remain at ten years, regardless of the number of groups which declare an interest in the licence. The same widely accepted logic for a ten-year licence term applies, regardless of the fact that in some instances there may be no competition.

Digital radio broadcasting will result in greater station choice for consumers, with an increase in the amount of available spectrum. Digital broadcasting is in its infancy in Ireland. Work is being done on the introduction of digital television on foot of the analogue switch off that has been mooted for 2012. There is no talk of FM radio being switched off and as a result digital radio broadcasting for commercial stations has been put on the long finger. In order for digital radio to be successful in Ireland it is vital that all radio broadcasters buy into the format, both independent and public service. For commercial radio stations the most powerful form of encouragement is an extension of their broadcasting contracts, a fact that is recognised in the Bill. A significant amount of financial and human resources will be required for the development of digital broadcasting. Given that a return on this investment is not guaranteed, the contract extension of four years proposed in the Bill is insufficient to ensure that independent broadcasters will take the very significant risks involved and invest in the development of digital radio. I would like to see a contract extension of not more than seven years for any radio station that invests in and gets involved with the development and potential implementation of digital radio broadcasting.

The television station, Channel South, will commence broadcasting in November and will be available to homes in Cork city and county, Limerick city and county and areas of the Munster region, including parts of Kerry, Waterford, Clare and south Tipperary. The channel will operate 24 hours a day and will have a range of locally focused programming at the heart of its schedule. Central to this will be hourly news bulletins, the first time that television news will be focused exclusively in my south-western area. The news bulletins may also be seen on websites once broadcasting begins. This is significant progress as far as television is concerned.

Local radio stations play an excellent role in conveying local news every morning from 8 a.m. until 12 o'clock. The public is very pleased with the service it is getting and I hope that any sinister parts of the Bill will be overruled and fine-combed. I am sure the Minister of State, Deputy Power, will do his best to ensure that happens. Freedom of speech and freedom of news is essential for every individual. It is a concept that must be maintained as long as there is demand for it in Ireland. The Minister of State does not have a big mountain to climb. He must only accept a few amendments. I have noted his wisdom, tenacity and courage since he entered the House in 1981. He will rise to the occasion and deliver the goods I have advocated.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this important legislation which primarily sets up and gives power to a new body called the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. This was first proposed by Deputy Michael D. Higgins when he was in Cabinet in the 1990s and it has taken a long time to introduce this legislation. The authority will be run by a new board comprising nine members. Four of the appointments will be scrutinised by an Oireachtas committee. While that is welcome, I fail to understand why all nine appointments should not be scrutinised. However, that at least four will be scrutinised to ensure they comply with proper structures and have something to offer to the broadcasting system is a breakthrough. Two statutory committees will also be appointed and a number of their members will also have to appear before the Oireachtas committee, which is positive. However, I urge the Minister to re-examine this provision during the passage to the Bill to consider properly scrutinising all nine members of the authority's board. I do not suggest people

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nominated by the Minister for political reasons lack ability but the operation of the authority is of extreme importance and must be seen to be above politics and properly scrutinised.

The broadcasting codes will be extremely important and the legislation provides for codes that will ensure news and other reports are done properly. It also makes clear that broadcasters must present news in an objective and impartial manner without any expression of its own views. It provides for a minimum period to be allocated for news and current affairs programming.

Northern Sound, my local radio station, was taken over by Radio Kerry recently and, as a result, did not retain the local board of management structure. For commercial reasons, the new management has curtailed the local news content in the early morning. With my constituency colleagues from all parties, I used the early morning programme to discuss issues and people listened during their breakfast or on their way to work. However, that facility is no longer available and is a major fault. I do not take away from the personnel in the newsroom at the station because this was an administrative decision which curtails the value of the new structure. Most local people listen to programmes on other radio stations now. A cost may attach to the new structure but it does not provide a benefit. I will meet senior station executives next Monday when they will officially open new state-of-the-art studios in Monaghan town.

The Bill will deal with the restriction of junk food advertising. I cannot say too much about this because, unfortunately, in my younger days I consumed as much junk food as anybody and that did not pay off in the long term because I have health problems such as diabetes that I may not have had if I had not been so fond of chip shops and other outlets. I am extremely disturbed that the legislation does not contain a provision to curtail the advertising of alcohol. I have raised the issue umpteen times in the House and the previous Taoiseach made many promises in this regard. He said the industry had guaranteed it would act on the issue and that he would monitor what was happening. However, the abuse of alcohol by young people is a major issue. Alcohol is a drug and consumption leads to abuse of other drugs. I urge the Minister to make an amendment to the legislation before it is too late to make sure the advertising of alcohol is addressed. Such a provision has been promised for years in intoxicating liquor legislation and so on. Since the Minister has decided to deal with the junk food issue, he should also address the abuse of alcohol.

I welcome the redress provisions in the legislation. The right to reply is important and my local radio station is extremely good in this regard. Recently, an individual, without knowing fully what he was dealing with, accused me on that station of not understanding an issue in this House and talked about codswallop. Many of my constituents went wild about the comments made but I was given the right to reply, which I appreciated. It is important that a right of reply be provided. A number of years ago another individual went on local radio and made various accusations against me without foundation. I did not pursue it further at the time, which I rued afterwards, but it is important that this provision be stitched into the legislation. Ordinary viewers and listeners should have the right to reply. This should not be similar to the provision applying to newspapers which sometimes print an apology in the corner of the fourth page relating to a front page story a few weeks earlier. On radio and television the right to reply should be provided during the same programme and for the same duration as the original accusation broadcast.

Community and commercial broadcasting is important. Northern Sound started off very much as a community-based organisation. The churches, the GAA, the co-operatives and others owned a share in it. However, broadcasting is not simple and, as time passed, they found that an organisation such as this must be run on a commercial basis. Good community radio structures are in place in other parts of the country, which I encourage. It is important that

young people in particular have the opportunity to speak their minds on their local radio stations. Local radio, the Joe Duffy show and others have a significant role to play in how people's rights are brought forward in a constructive way. At times, some believe that they go over the top, but they give locals and people with problems the opportunity to have issues dealt with at other levels.

In this context, I welcome the Bill's proposal of an Oireachtas broadcasting structure. Years ago, it was stated that only those who could not sleep — other problems were mentioned — watched "Oireachtas Report", itself structured on what a single individual in the media believed was important on that day. It is good that people, particularly the elderly and those with disabilities, can see something of the House's workings on Wednesday and Thursday mornings. Had this debate appeared live on television, more people would have been involved. Broadcasting would force our organisation to become more relevant and to change the procedures for matters on the Adjournment, Standing Order 32 notices and so on, allowing for more interaction between Ministers and ordinary Members. As Deputy Stanton stated, it is important to put a direct Oireachtas channel in place and to have continual comments concerning it on the main stations so as to encourage people to tune into debates.

Last week showed people the House's relevance. When matters are going well, ordinary people make out that the Houses are irrelevant. When the banking crisis arose, however, we were the only people who could make decisions that would make a difference to living standards. We might not have been very good in this regard previously.

While I welcome the establishment of a new channel, it is vital that our debates become more relevant, lively and participative. Question Time is staid. A Minister speaks for a certain number of minutes while the questioner gets scarce opportunity to ask a supplementary question. Such times should be better structured with quicker, sharper, more relevant and more realistic answers.

The proposal for a film channel is important. Recently, the Minister of State, Deputy Mansergh, was a guest of honour at Annaghmakerrig. During his visit to Annaghmakerrig House, I sat beside some of the people who write the storylines for RTE television programmes and others. It was good that he had the opportunity to meet such people and to learn of their interests and backgrounds. It was equally good that we in County Monaghan, through the generosity of the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, provided the house for the arts and the industry in general, allowing people to relax and to do great work there.

Like those who attended the house, I welcome the inclusion of the arts and films in the Bill. It is a concern that, in the current economic situation, the arts might suffer. Annaghmakerrig House, the theatre in Castleblayney and so on are working on tight budgets. I hope that they will not be the victims of a difficult situation. How much time have I remaining?

Acting Chairman: In excess of four minutes.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: I will conclude on my local radio stations, in particular the one close to the Acting Chairman's heart, LFMFM. It covers the south of my constituency in County Monaghan. Northern Sound, linked with ShannonSide, covers the rest of the county. These stations have been invaluable in providing everyone with an opportunity to have a say. ShannonSide-Northern Sound has the "Joe Finnegan Show", which addresses all sorts of issues from 9 a.m. until midday or so. Noel Walsh and others are on later in the afternoon and J. P. Graham leads the sports team. It is fantastic that club games are covered on local radio. Older people who have been interested in sports for all of their lives can sit in their corner chairs and hear about what has happened to the clubs they love so much or listen to games minute-by-minute.

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Regarding religious broadcasting, the Reverend Jean Mackerel runs a programme on Northern Sound late on Sunday nights and there is a religious service in the morning. This also occurs on national radio stations and so on. Religious broadcasting is vital. People in cars, homes and hospitals and elderly people who cannot go to church services, masses or so on have the opportunity to spend a quiet hour with their religions. Given the importance of this situation continuing, we should not be shy about it. Religion is important, although it has suffered from problems in recent years. Due to religious scandals in all churches, young people saw an excuse not to attend. Perhaps for this reason there is so much suicide and so on. The Bill should ensure that religious broadcasting of all churches gets priority and is assured. We should not apologise for the right to broadcast for our religious groups and to ensure that they get their fair share.

I welcome the Bill in general. As Deputy Sheehan stated, amendments will be tabled to it. I hope that our amendments will be considered constructively and, where possible, accepted during the debate. I also hope that the Bill emerges as the best possible legislation, as it has been awaited for a long time. It should serve to better broadcasting for many years. The television licence and other issues will be dealt with by our spokesperson and I will not address the technical details of that. The station cannot live without funding and neither can the smaller broadcasting stations. They should all get a fair crack of the whip. I support the Bill.

Deputy Martin Mansergh: I register agreement with three points made by Deputy Crawford. This is legislation that should be matured rather than rushed through the House. That would allow us to take on board the different points made and a really good Bill will result. I endorse Deputy Crawford's praise of LFM. I was interviewed on the station two or three times even though it is far removed from the part of the country I represent. I have fond memories of the visit to Annaghmakerrig House. It is an exceptionally fine facility that does a real service to the artistic and writing community in a wonderful setting. I will do my best to protect it in the coming years from any harsh economic winds that may blow.

The context of my contribution is one of deep appreciation of the service that our national and local stations provide. By and large I regard them as excellent. When discussing topics foreign, they mediate the outside world through Irish eyes. One of the relatively recent innovations was the introduction of Lyric FM. I am not sure what I would do without it on long journeys around the country. Public service broadcasting is a concept I warmly support and believe has its place, complemented by commercial broadcasting but not displaced by it. It plays a major role in supporting arts and culture in terms of publicity and discussing exhibitions, books and broadcasting concert performances. Arts and culture would be in a poorer place if there was no public service broadcasting.

I pay tribute to the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, which is to be replaced by a more comprehensive authority under this Bill, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. This has been helpful in my area in respect of strengthening community radio. When I came into electoral politics in 2002, the community radio station in Tipperary was in a difficult situation, with an uncertain future. The commission helped it, putting it back on its feet and it is a thriving station, amalgamated with Cashel Community Radio by consent. The regime now operating is beneficial to community radio. Many people rely on local radio.

There were worries in Northern Ireland that listeners might no longer be able to receive RTE when medium wave was phased out. There has not been a peep out of anyone since the change was made. Long wave radio provides very good coverage, as far as I can tell, over the island of Britain and in Northern Ireland. I was on holiday in the west highlands of Scotland and for the first time in my life I could hear RTE clearly without having to juggle the radio

and put it close to my ear. The change has improved the coverage and dissemination of RTE rather than diminishing it.

When I was a member of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission we discussed an Oireachtas channel. I would welcome a broadly based channel that would cover Oireachtas proceedings as well as those of other elected assemblies or quasi-parliamentary fora. On days the Dáil and Seanad are not sitting, for example, it could broadcast bodies such as the National Forum on Europe or the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body public sessions. There are many people, though I am not saying a majority or anything remotely like it, who take an interest in our parliamentary and political life and they would like to have far more access than is possible at present when there are only news broadcasts of something particularly politically newsworthy or “Oireachtas Report” very late at night. An Orangeman said to me that he liked watching “Oireachtas Report” and found it the best cure for insomnia.

There are serious gaps in the coverage possible under the present arrangements. When I was in the Seanad, nine times out of ten the only material covered was the Order of Business. There are some very good debates in the Seanad but none was covered, except rarely. Adjournment debates in this House, such as those last night, often cover matters of considerable topical interest. The two matters to which I replied last night were flooding in Newcastle West and the future of Malin and Valentia stations. These would be of interest to the public but there is no possibility of them being shown on “Oireachtas Report” because the debate takes place too late. A parliamentary channel could also cover the UN General Assembly on occasion. Four committees cannot be shown so they would have to be staggered in some way. The channel should be broadly conceived.

I express disappointment, probably felt by all Members, at the way a few journalists and broadcasters systematically denigrate this House and its proceedings on a generalised basis. A very well known columnist and broadcaster yesterday wrote in *The Irish Times*:

The Dáil has relevance only in the election of a Taoiseach — after that it is a waste of time. No debates of any consequence, no decision of any consequence, no input of any consequence. No accountability of any consequence. No scrutiny of a Bill that could destroy the country. For the reality is the legislative branch of Government is a failure.

Deputy Ulick Burke: Did the Minister of State ring him?

Deputy Martin Mansergh: I regard those sentiments as untrue and deplorable but, alas, not totally untypical of one or two commentators. One would think they might pay closer attention to what goes on in this House but they obviously do not as they are so dismissive. I often have the feeling that these comments are made by people who are, no doubt, brilliant journalists but they have a side that shows politicians *manqués*. Obviously, if they were elected to this House they would have a less dismissive attitude to what goes on here.

We do not have in this country, or in any other country that I can observe, government by assembly. The only experiment in government by assembly was in the early years of the French Revolution when there was no government, only opposition, and that was fairly disastrous. A lot of the business may be dull from a general point of view, particularly for those who live or die by TAM ratings, who need something that is relatively sensational, who like to be perverse and in a minority of one. What is the alternative to some variation on a parliamentary system of democracy? Presumably, it is some form of enlightened despotism or dictatorship. To paraphrase Churchill, the system of democracy is bad but every other system is worse. There may be a lot in that.

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There is also a denigration of politics by some people, in particular those with a right wing agenda. That agenda goes roughly “the less government, the less regulation, the better”. The events of the past few weeks have demonstrated that the State has a vital protective role in providing a safety net and that exaggerated market philosophy has proved to be a disaster. We should stand up for the notion of public service and not always take the view that it is inferior, inefficient and incompetent and that private provision is always better or best. Some of those who denigrate the State do it because they want to grab a share of quasi-monopoly profits.

It is important that there is an arm’s length relationship between the broadcasters and Government. In case I sound as if I blame the journalistic profession, there is also the type of politician in all parties who essentially wants to suppress criticism by the media, who takes the view that the Government should take in hand RTE or this or that organ of opinion and ruthlessly sort them out. I see absolutely no merit in that philosophy. We live in a democracy of argument and debate. To be fair, one of the good things about RTE, though perhaps some colleagues may disagree, is that nobody could say it is like some of the Italian broadcast media, for instance, under the thumb of the Government, or that it is Radio or TV Fianna Fáil on all channels.

Deputy Ulick Burke: The Minister of State’s party made a fair try at it.

Deputy Martin Mansergh: No Opposition has ever alleged that, as far as I am aware.

Deputy Ulick Burke: The Minister of State should just wait.

Deputy Martin Mansergh: It was once said about a small party that no longer exists in this House.

Deputy Ulick Burke: Into that matter the Minister of State should not go.

Deputy Martin Mansergh: The other issue I wish to discuss is the question of balance. It is primarily for the RTE Authority and, beyond that, the new broadcasting authority to ensure that balance is provided. Generally speaking, this should not be the role of Governments or politicians or parties. There are people who ring journalists and broadcasting channels regularly to complain of bias of this or that sort. I have always tried to restrain myself from the temptation to do that. I do not like the idea of pressure on broadcasters but I believe that in certain situations there is a need for responsibility. One can argue in the case of popular phone-in shows that they give people the chance to let off a lot of steam and that they provide a valuable safety valve in a democracy. In the type of financial situation that we have been in over the past few weeks I believe it is important that the broadcast media are not used to spread what may be a self-fulfilling panic. If one broadcasts the fears of somebody who says he or she is taking money out of this place or that place and afterwards many other people go and do just that, it can be said that the person was right because of subsequent actions. There is a serious danger of exacerbating a situation. We all know cases——

Deputy Ulick Burke: Was that the man the Minister phoned?

Deputy Martin Mansergh: ——where we have to be restrained in commentary. It is as if a person used freedom of speech to shout in this House or in a crowded place, “Fire, fire.”

The question of balance also cropped up in reference to the referendum on the Lisbon treaty. Obviously, I cannot fault in any way RTE or other broadcasting stations for fulfilling their statutory responsibilities. I have serious reservations, however, concerning the McKenna

judgment. As somebody from the party opposite put it to me, the leader of Fine Gael got only as much coverage in that debate as a spokesperson from Sinn Féin, despite the vast disproportion between party strengths. It seems that an inherent weakness in that judgment, abstracting from it the question of the Lisbon treaty, is that it means that no matter how universal the consensus is on a topic, anyone who is against it is entitled to equal coverage, even if that person does not represent many people. It is, in other words, a golden opportunity for relatively small groups or parties to gain a higher profile. I suspect that in some cases this is done somewhat cynically, that the judgment is seen as an opening and an opportunity.

After the Lisbon treaty referendum most of us wanted, in principle, to have a referendum on children's rights. I am not surprised there was a pause for thought on the grounds that it would greatly amplify the position of those who would have a minority view. I consider that while respecting the voice and decision of the people, the price is considerable and there has been considerable damage to our interests as a result. I do not believe that being in that position has made the last few weeks any easier.

I will conclude by making two or three points on religious broadcasting. I fully endorse Deputy Crawford's comments on the value and importance of religious broadcasting both at national and local community levels. Second — I speak from a minority point of view — I wish people would leave the Angelus alone. A former archbishop of the Church of Ireland stated that he had no problem whatsoever with it and that is the authoritative view. While we might not necessarily understand its full religious significance, that does not matter as there must be an attitude of live and let live.

I may depart from consensus in respect of my final point. I have reservations about unrestricted religious advertising. In the past, Ireland had problems of proselytism and people should not underestimate the attractiveness a wide open system would have for proselytisers of a particular evangelical type. I have no problem with noticeboard-type bulletins.

While this may simply be my personal perspective, religion is not a soap powder and consequently I dislike the idea of it being placed at the level of other consumer products. While I accept the converse point that churches must use modern methods of communication like anyone else, I would like to think the churches are a little way above the marketplace.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: It is important for Ireland to have a strong national broadcaster. It should be well resourced and should have a well-regulated and modern regulatory framework. In addition, the emphasis should be on excellence in production, scriptwriting and diversity. Diversity is highly important because there is a great deal of competition from other channels and people enjoy wide choices. If Irish national television is boring and lacks a variety of programmes, people simply will not tune into it and consequently will be exposed to other cultures, a different broadcasting ethos and so on.

In addition, one consideration I am sure already has been mentioned pertains to the arrival of so many new Irish. I am unsure whether this Bill addresses the issues of diversity and the provision of programming that would attract the interest of the large communities of people in Ireland from Poland, China or the African nations. Perhaps this issue will be referred to subsequently.

From the outset, RTE has made an immense contribution. Although Ireland is a small country, RTE competes with and measures up to larger television networks throughout the world in respect of quality. Ireland has produced some great producers and technical personnel such as camera people and so on, over the years. As times are changing, Members must consider many new approaches to television and to getting across one's message to the nation. Hopefully

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this Bill will respond to those challenges. As there have been lengthy debates on this Bill in the Seanad and in this House to date, I will pick a few sections on which I wish to comment.

Section 42, for example, empowers the broadcasting authority to create additional broadcasting codes, including codes covering objectivity and impartiality in news and current affairs, as well as encroachments on privacy. This is a highly important section. Members should cast their minds back to the 2002 election, to what was one of RTE's dark days. It broadcast a television programme, "No Tears" just before the election, which featured as a central character the then leader of Fine Gael, Deputy Noonan. It did a great deal of damage to Deputy Noonan and to Fine Gael in the subsequent election.

Deputy Ulick Burke: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: People on the other side of the House accepted and agreed that this was completely unfair. Had a code been in operation at that time, I am certain the programme would not have been broadcast before the election. While the programme doubtless was made with RTE's support, it was one of the first Irish political events to be dramatised since I entered this House. It pertained to a highly sensitive subject about which the man in question, Deputy Noonan, had apologised to the McCole family several times, having made a comment in the Dáil that really was directed against the barristers representing Mrs. McCole at that time. However, Deputy Noonan accepted the comment should not have been made. It was a dark day for RTE when it dramatised the event and broadcast it in a very unbalanced fashion before the election. Hopefully this Bill will ensure that will never happen again to any party in this House.

I will turn to section 42(4), which provides that the BAI will prepare and regularly update an advertising code pertaining to matters likely to be of direct or indirect interest to children, having particular regard to children's general public health interests. This relates in particular to the question of obesity and advertising that might encourage youngsters to eat energy-dense foods that lead to obesity. I wish to raise a few issues regarding this section. I have been highlighting the issue of obesity in this House for years and did so at a time when the subject was rarely mentioned in the media. As a former teacher I had noted the profile of youngsters growing heavier, which evidently was due to a lack of exercise and eating too much food. However, I am unsure whether this provision will have the desired effect. Much food that is advertised to young people is necessary. Moreover, the industry should be aware that it can advertise healthy food to young people. It should be acceptable for companies to advertise food with a high nutritional element, the use of fruit in the diet, for example, or what we consider to be essential healthy foods such as vegetables, milk, fish or chicken. On the one hand we have the HSE and others promoting the food pyramid and on the other, even foods recommended in the pyramid will not be advertised. I remember reading an article some time ago in the *Irish Farmers' Journal* which indicated cheese got the red light in England because of the level of salt in it. It was argued that cheese is bad for a person. Parents in this country would not advise their children that cheese was bad for them and it is generally highly recommended in the diets of youngsters.

According to criteria that may be set out in this, cheese could be a food whose advertising would be prohibited. I urge much caution on this. From speaking to people in the industry, there appears to have been very little consultation with the food industry in the development of this section of the Bill. Its representatives feel there should certainly have been more consultation. The food industry in Ireland is worth approximately €20 billion and over 48,000 people are directly employed in the sector. Although this provision will not affect all those people, it is of major importance.

The industry should have at least been consulted on this provision but apparently it was not. Will the Minister of State refer to this in his response? I am sure his adviser will know if these people were consulted. Some of the groups mentioned this in contact with me and I am sure we all got the same information.

There is a point that if advertisers cannot advertise locally and nationally, they will do so through Sky and other media channels outside our jurisdiction and which we cannot control. This section should be considered again and the people writing the code should be careful of the types of food they proscribe. They should also be aware that advertisers will probably go elsewhere.

The banning of advertising of certain food items while leaving the advertising of alcohol untouched has been mentioned by many other speakers. As far as I am concerned, alcohol is far more damaging and threatening to the health of young people than certain foods.

The issue of obesity takes in much more than just food, as young people should be encouraged to eat smaller portions. There is also the issue of exercise and several agencies have been set up to consider inactivity and obesity across the country. It is kind of a buzz word and the HSE is putting out regular bulletins on it.

Young people are doing less exercise and, for example, they do not walk or cycle to school any more. Young people rarely cycle to school because parents drop them off for various reasons. The element of physical activity in their daily life is getting smaller. At one time many youngsters in this country lived on farms in the country and their daily chores involved lifting water buckets, bringing in turf or going to the meadow or garden during the summer. All of that has now been taken from people's lives.

Addressing the issue of obesity in this section by making a song and dance about it will not significantly reduce the levels of obesity. Research by the Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance indicates that the main drivers of obesity in children are consumption of inappropriate portion sizes — they are too big — and lack of physical activity.

I did a survey across the country a few years ago which found that only 28% of primary and secondary schools from a sample of approximately 1,500 had indoor physical education facilities suitable for class. In the bad weather we get most of the time, this means no physical education is possible in some schools. As a result, if the young people are not elite athletes involved in the local club, they do no exercise. I agree with the research carried out by the Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance and wish to emphasise the point.

In France there is a general ban on the televising of alcohol products, which is broadly seen as successful. In Norway and Sweden, advertising to the public of all alcoholic beverages above a particular alcohol content is completely prohibited, with a similar ban in Italy. There was a proposal to ban alcohol advertising by a previous Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Micheál Martin, but this was subsequently abandoned because of the apparent pressure put on him from the alcohol industry. Perhaps the Minister will look at the code and consider including alcohol.

The advertising of alcohol products is quite effective — there is a current advertisement using the term “cáca milis” — and it can connect with young people even more than food advertising. From that point of view, drink is a bigger threat in many ways than food advertising.

Another issue brought to my attention is the use of Irish bands, folk groups and performers on national television shows, radio stations and so on. There are some very angry people out there in the folk and Irish country scene at this time. I do not meet too many of them but I have met some. People have contacted us on this issue, such as Danny McCarthy, whom the

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Minister of State may know. These people are very disappointed with the level of coverage they get from RTE which, for example, controls four radio stations and provides a wide spectrum of music cover. These people feel they are not getting a look in, although they may use harder language. They feel that they entertain people across the length and breadth of the country, providing entertainment for people in the 32 counties. They play small and large venues and people listen to them. They would not be on the road unless they attracted audiences and it paid them. The national broadcaster will not play their music. If people are out there listening to these performers and enjoying the music, surely they would enjoy the music on radio as well. A music forum should be set up or perhaps there should be some provision in this Bill for some kind of a consultative group. I do not know if such a provision exists in the Bill. If a group was established it could listen to the concerns of these people, who are in ways the heartbeat of this country. At times they represent a certain type of Irishness that still has a big audience. These people are major contributors to the Irish economy, whereas much of the material played on RTE's 2FM, for example, could be from artists not from this country at all and who may make no contribution. Will the Minister address some of these points?

Speaking to some presenters on RTE about the Brendan Shines of this country, they might tell us they are old hat and people turn that music off. The population, particularly the older population, does not switch it off. This is the type of material older people like. I hope this issue will be addressed as a result of the proposed extension of the public service remit of RTE and TG4 and the provision of proper resources.

The funding available to Lyric FM was recently reduced and the station is strapped for cash. This year marks the bicentenary of the birth of Michael William Balfe. Unfortunately, Lyric FM's outside broadcasting unit is unable, for financial reasons, to record a number of major events which have been arranged to celebrate the occasion. This will be a major loss in terms of making programmes which could be archived and stored for posterity.

This year also marks the bicentenary of the publication of Moore's melodies. Thomas Moore, through his poetry and ballads, probably did more for the Irish emigrant than any other Irish composer or writer of ballads. Written in the early part of the 19th century, his songs were sung in America and elsewhere. However, funding is not available to arrange an event in the National Concert Hall to mark the occasion. In addition, those who are visiting various parts of the country to promote the bicentenary have not received funding.

I welcome the provision to increase funding for independent broadcasting, with €40 million the minimum amount RTE must spend on independent production. As someone who has benefited considerably under RTE's independent production unit, IPU, having been involved in the production of eight documentaries on Kerry writers and one documentary on Kerry football, I thank the IPU and specifically Claire Duignan for being so receptive, helpful and encouraging when approached with solid proposals. Without support from the IPU, important documentaries would never have been made on Kerry football and writers such as George Fitzmaurice featuring people who knew him, including Bryan McMahon, John B. Keane, Tom McGreevy, Con Houlihan and one or two others.

Deputy Seán Power: The Deputy is being selective.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I make no apology for referring to north Kerry writers. I am in favour of strengthening the budget available to RTE's independent production unit, for which I have great admiration. The provision of funding to the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland for similar productions has not worked out very well, whereas the IPU has done an excellent

job in that respect. The increase in funding for the latter body will enable it to do more good work.

I support the proposal for an Irish film channel, although I am not certain televising the proceedings of the Houses of the Oireachtas would attract many viewers. The business of the House is arranged in a manner that would not attract much interest. It could be described as boring or seldom exciting. In addition, Members let themselves down at times and would not like members of the public to see their behaviour. Nevertheless, I would support the establishment of a new channel. Deputy Coveney raised issues about its funding.

There are so many stories to be told, particularly by a large number of elderly people who can go back to the 19th century through their parents and grandparents but will soon move on. If their stories are not collected or recorded, they will be lost forever. I hope the new channel will provide an opportunity to make many more programmes on important items and issues of local history because many such programmes cannot be made currently owing to a lack of capacity.

I was involved with a several other people in trying to make a documentary about Annie Moore, the first woman to go through Ellis Island. Incidentally, she was a native of County Cork rather than Kerry. As part of a celebration of Annie Moore's life, a headstone will be erected on her grave in New York tomorrow. I assisted a number of people who wished to make a documentary on the topic. While we received a commitment for funding in New York, we were unable to secure funding in Ireland, including from RTE. This is wrong as the programme would have been worth making. Not only was Annie Moore the first girl to pass through Ellis Island, but the programme could also have focused on the many other people who passed through Ellis Island.

I have raised a number of the deficiencies in the legislation. With increased funding and in the event that a new television channel is established, we should be able to see more local history programmes. I am pleased to have had this opportunity to raise a few issues which I hope the Minister will address. The Bill can be amended and improved in all our interests.

Deputy Ulick Burke: I am pleased to have an opportunity to comment on this welcome Bill. Prior to the establishment of many local radio stations, RTE and its predecessor, Radio Éireann, had sole responsibility for providing broadcasting services. Both organisations operated on shoestring budgets as they set out to establish proper broadcasting services and deserve great credit for the service they provided.

I understood the Bill was intended to review the functions of RTE, establish a broadcasting authority of Ireland and give both bodies greater independence to develop and expand. I was, therefore, disappointed to read in the legislation repeated references to the Minister and his role in controlling broadcasting. Will the legislation result in further intrusion by the Minister on the new regulatory authority, for example, in the selection of its members? The legislation requires that those appointed to the authority must have experience in areas such as media affairs, public service broadcasting, broadcast content production, digital media technologies, trade union affairs, business or commercial affairs and matters pertaining to the development of the Irish language. If those appointed have expertise in all the areas cited in section 9, we will have an active, constructive authority. I am concerned that the Government will appoint the nine members of the authority. Nevertheless, I welcome the new role of the joint Oireachtas Committee in this regard. That change will provide an element of transparency in the appointment of members. At least their characteristics and the background they may have in broadcasting will be scrutinised and their names laid before the House, which is welcome. I am not sure if the Minister of the day will be magnanimous and will move away, once and for all, from the idea of politically motivated reasons for appoint-

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[Deputy Ulick Burke.]

ments. That has been the case with many boards in the past, although not necessarily with the board or authority with which we are dealing. It is positive that we might hear of the demise of many boards and quangos next week and that those appointed to boards in any area of Government responsibility in the future will be selected on the basis of merit and expertise. If the Minister does that, it will be a first, a welcome step forward. I am not convinced, given the provisions of the Bill and the reference to the controls the Minister will have, that this will be done.

In the recent past, at the start of the current financial crisis a fortnight ago, the Minister immediately contacted the director general of RTE and is supposed to have given him a dressing down, although that has been denied, about the contents of a radio programme that started what might have been a panic reaction among people to move their finances between, or withdraw them from, the banking institutions. People do not change their ways that quickly. I would welcome being proven wrong about this.

The Bill introduces many new concepts. It will grant a range of new functions to broadcasters and regulators and will set a framework for new activities and services, particularly in the light of technology, and at the same time it will liberalise and streamline the regulatory burden placed on broadcasters. If that is to be the case, section 32 clearly indicates there will be an imposition and a burden on broadcasters in regard to the way they present their programmes and the balance and fairness in them. Those two proposals are not reconcilable.

Presenters of RTE radio programmes and television programmes in particular, who are household names, have dominated certain programmes over the years. While they have been entertaining, no effort has been made by RTE to give the new talent of professionals in this field, whom we have in abundance, an opportunity to work in this sector. They have had to leave to work in the media across the water or elsewhere. These young professionals have not been given a chance to work in the broadcasting media here because of the dominance of presenters who have continued to work on shows, the ratings of which have declined over the years. These presenters have been given selected high exposure time slots and demand not to be shifted out of those time slots which attract high audience participation, listeners and viewers. Not only do they demand particular time slots during which they will be available to present, they receive unbelievably high remuneration.

It is sad that RTE management does not provide more opportunities and exposure for our young talented people who are professionally trained in all aspects of the media. Perhaps in the past programme presenters did not have the required training, expertise or professionalism, but they were balanced in their presentation and provided a good service, having regard to the requirements of the day, but this is 2008. Some individuals have been successful having exercised great determination and grit to break the stranglehold many of the old hands had over certain areas. I hope this Bill and the new authority will recognise this issue and give those young people an opportunity to work in broadcasting.

RTE has been generous in its support of Raidió na Gaeltachta and TG4 down the years. There is no doubt that the stations were a burden following their establishment, but they were supported by various Ministers, two of whom I single out for mention, the former Minister, Deputy Michael D. Higgins, representing a Gaeltacht area in Connemara, and the Minister, Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív, who identified the function of TG4 and Raidió na Gaeltachta in representing RTE's cultural obligation in recognising our language. It has supported the Irish language and, as a result of the nature of the programming provided by Raidió na Gaeltachta and TG4, has put life back into it and people have recognised its importance as a language. Were it not for RTE, Raidió na Gaeltachta and their work, Gaeilge would not be recognised as an official European language. It is important to recognise RTE's input and, given the

restricted finance available to it relative to the service it provides, it has stretched the contributions of TG4 and Raidió na Gaeltachta, so to speak, in terms of continuing to provide programmes.

On the question of income derived from advertising, the danger of allowing an over-dependence on some major advertisers to develop will be evident to many people who watch NBC, Fox News or other such channels, having regard to the restrictions on which they can insist in return for advertising revenue, the slant that can be put on even the news, the presentation, focus or highlighting of particular aspects of policy they may favour or, as is becoming prevalent now with the pending presidential election in the US, putting forward their political views.

We have a restricted capacity for advertising in Ireland. If the Government gave a commitment, once and for all, to respond to the difficulties in certain areas, particularly that of alcoholism, it would recognise that this legislation presents an opportunity not previously presented to ban or severely restrict alcohol advertising to very late hours during programming. If we add up the cost of dealing with the downside of the abuse of alcohol, whether in the area of health, education or insurance, and divert some of the resources spent on advertising of alcohol to other areas, this legislation will have done a good job. I hope the Minister will give serious examination to this issue and will ignore the powerful lobbies dedicated to the promotion and sale of alcohol. I urge him to make a clear and sensible response in respect of the need that exists.

When one compares the resources available to RTE 1, RTE 2, TV3, Raidió na Gaeltachta etc., to those that are available to BSkyB, one can see how difficult it is for Irish broadcasters to compete in order to win the right to cover major sporting events, both domestic and international. BSkyB and other sports broadcasters are in a position to monopolise particular events. RTE can rarely compete at that level. However, it tries its best to do so within the limited resources available to it. During the Olympic Games, it was unfortunate that we could not watch Irish athletes perform as a result of certain restrictions that were put in place. That was terribly unfair to those who wanted to follow our the progress of those competing at the Olympics on behalf of Ireland.

Many people cannot afford to pay the contributions required by BSkyB to watch football matches at weekends. They are obliged to go to the local pub or hotel to watch and are presented with the opportunity to indulge in imbibing alcohol. I accept that everyone might not partake of a drink, but the opportunity to do so exists. People's need to go to pubs and hotels to watch sporting events dictates the content of advertising on television. Many of these sports networks carry large amounts of alcohol-related advertising.

The Bill places a burden on broadcasters to ensure that there is balance and impartiality in the context of advertising and in the way in which shows are presented. Deputy Deenihan referred to an event that happened prior to the 2002 general election. I agree with him but I will not repeat what he said. I recall many other instances where it was not as glaring but where a similar political bias or slant occurred. There are those who will observe: "He would say that, wouldn't he?" However, a certain party has dominated the Government for the past decade.

If one considers a list of presenters of various programmes and compares it to a list of the names of candidates who put themselves forward for election, one will discover an extremely close connection. I will say no more than that. However, this matter must be examined. I am delighted the Bill—

Deputy Seán Power: What point is the Deputy making?

Deputy Ulick Burke: I will clarify it for the Minister of State. I am sure he is aware that I am hinting at something. I do not want to be any more blatant than I have been so far but I will be if the Minister of State so desires.

When one considers a list of candidates' names and then examines the content, method of presentation and personalities — one might go so far as to discover who are their siblings or what are their party politics — involved in programmes on which they appeared, one will be able to identify connections to the major party in government. One need not dig too deep in order to uncover that fact. A bias has been displayed in the presentation of certain programmes, particularly in the lead up to elections. I hope the Minister will impose in respect of broadcasters the necessary mechanisms to prevent such bias being displayed in the future. I will say no more on the matter.

“Oireachtas Report”, the programme on which the proceedings of these Houses are shown, is one of the greatest examples of fair and balanced presentation and it allows the views of people across the wider political spectrum to be shown on national television. The programme is a credit to those involved in its production.

The Minister should consider certain aspects of the Bill, particularly those relating to advertising. I welcome what he is doing in respect of the licence and the collection of the fee. I hope we will avoid the disasters which occurred in the past. There are many people who receive television signals but who do not pay for the privilege. I hope the mechanism included in the Bill in this regard will bring an end to their behaviour, once and for all.

Deputy Noel Treacy: Is cúis áthais é dom deis a bheith agam chun páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht an-tábhachtach seo ar an mBille Craolacháin 2008. Is reachtaíocht an-tábhachtach é. Tá 165 leathanach, thar 13 páirt nó 181 roinn, sa Bhille. Tá Sceideal amháin ag baint leis an mBille freisin. Aontaím le mórán den méid a dúirt mo chomhghleacaí ón Dáilcheantar Gaillimh Thoir, an Teachta de Búrca. Ní aontaím le gach rud, áfach. Aontaím freisin leis an ráiteas iontach a thug mo chomhghleacaí ón Dáilcheantar Gaillimh Thiar, an Teachta Ó hUiginn, inniu faoi craolacháin RTE. Ar nós leis an Teachta de Búrca, bhí sé ag plé le cúrsaí raidió agus rudaí eile.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Bill, which is extremely important for the country and its people. The Bill is also important for the Legislature, which is being given the opportunity to put in place clearly defined rules and regulations that will define public service broadcasting and, it is hoped, broadcasting in general in Ireland for many years.

Raidió Éireann commenced operations in the 1930s and RTE began broadcasting television pictures in the early 1960s. The latter was a major breakthrough for the country, which was presented with an opportunity to expose all that is good and great about its people, traditions, culture and value system and its uniqueness as a nation. If one were to carry out a critical analysis, however, one would discover that our traditional value system and the great culture of our nation have not always been exposed in the way that they should.

I hope the new broadcasting authority of Ireland will interpret the provisions of the Bill in a way that reflects the views of those in this House who, in turn, reflect the views of the people they represent. When the relevant structures and parameters are put in place, I hope a level playing field will be put in place in respect of all broadcasting systems, corporations and agencies that are indigenous to the island of Ireland.

It is critically important that we go forward given that we live in a global age of mass communication, of instant opportunity to change systems and channels, to exploit the mindset of our children, young people, students and others. Through this Bill we have transferred to the

Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, the editors, sub-editors, broadcasters and presenters the serious responsibility to ensure that we purvey and convey by way of broadcasting communication and technological devices only the best for our country and for future generations, and that reflects all that is good about our nation since its evolution over the ages, taking into account our heritage and the unique culture we are proud to espouse and that has had a major impact across the world.

This is a small country with an open economy, an island on the western edge of Europe at the fringe of the Atlantic Ocean. There are only 5 million people on the entire island of Ireland but across the world we have an Irish diaspora of 100 million who love Ireland, its traditions and its value systems and who are proud to carry the flag of Ireland in everything they do. Wherever our emigrants find themselves, there is an Irish nucleus and it is critically important that it is reflected in our broadcasting system as part of the enhanced and enlarged Irish nation whose emigrants have brought us great credit internationally in industry, sport, judiciaries and parliaments in different parts of the world. It is important, therefore, that we should have a broader vision of the responsibility broadcasting has in conveying to the masses across the world, in so far as it can be transferred with modern communications — there is no barrier now to communication from this Chamber or from any part of this country — the activities of our nation in all their diversity, its successes and challenges and the opportunities that present themselves that make us proud of our nation. It is not just for the people on this island, but more particularly our brightest and best who had to leave to sustain themselves and make their homes on foreign shores. They too should be able to have that broad vision and lateral communication that is so important for them. We can use broadcasting on television and radio as a medium that gives them a home from home atmosphere wherever they find themselves and whatever challenges they meet.

We need a new Bill. We need to reflect on the changes that have taken place in society and in our country. We need to take into account the diversity of our people, the multicultural society that now prevails, the dramatic increase in population. Twenty years ago we had a productive sector of approximately three quarters of a million people and the rest of the nation were dependent on those people to create the wherewithal and the resources to run this nation. That situation has been transformed as a result of economic success over the past 20 years. Today 2 million people are gainfully employed on this island. We hope that broadcasting and communication will continue to make an even greater contribution towards the sustainability to our country and pride in our nation, fulfilling patriotism in all its ramifications.

People have a duty not just to themselves, their families, communities and traditions but above all to this nation and this country. Broadcasting has a major role to play and it has not fully discharged that role. There are many challenges ahead. It is my hope that when this Bill comes before us and we tease it out during the five Stages of parliamentary debate, the Minister will be open to suggestions from all sides of the House so that we can pass a strong, well worded, textually correct, legally powerful instrument that will assist the broadcasting industry and assist us as legislators and citizens as we go forward together in the knowledge that we have the confidence as a nation to carry ourselves at the highest level of international opportunity and international challenge, and that we have the confidence as a people to face any challenges there may be, financial or otherwise, irrespective of whether they are on this island or elsewhere. Together, with good leadership, consolidation, coherence, focus, and positive communication from all our broadcasting organs, we can build a nation not just for this generation but for many future generations, and discharge our responsibilities as Members of Parliament so as to leave a better country when we leave Parliament than we inherited when we entered. That is the duty of every generation, not only in politics but in society.

[Deputy Noel Treacy.]

The broadcasting industry and the broadcasting organs have a serious responsibility to ensure they are inclusive, that they take into account diversity and different interests. It must also take into account the common good and ensure balance in society and in communication and a reflection of our sporting, industrial, urban, rural and other traditions. It must reflect the views and wishes of all our people, taking into account strong interests in particular sectors of society, particularly aspects of culture. I do not believe that balance has been properly struck. I hope this Bill will ensure balance in the future and that as we go forward together we will discharge our responsibilities as legislators, taking into account the advice that is available, our experience and collective wisdom gained in this House from representing the people in our constituencies, constantly inspired to serve them with the knowledge that is transferred to us by those people, by our experience as individuals, family members and citizens, and by the experience we have gained as Members of this House, whether in Parliament on Oireachtas committees or in Ministries in which we have been privileged to serve over the years.

Tá sé an-tábhachtach go gcuirfimid an-bhéim ar an Ghaeilge, ár teanga náisiúnta. Is í an Ghaeilge an seod is luachmhara atá ag an tír seo. Molaim an Teachta Ó hUiginn as ucht an éacht iontach a rinne sé nuair a bhunaigh sé TG4. Chuir sé airgead ar fáil don staisiún. Rinne a chomhghleacaí as iarthar na Gaillimhe, an iar-Theachta Máire Nic Eochagáin Uí Chuinn, an-obair freisin chun na saoráidí sin a fhorbairt sular ainmníodh an Teachta Ó hUiginn mar Aire. Mar Aire, chabhraigh an Teachta Ó hUiginn go mór leis an ealaíon. Tá sé tábhachtach seans a thabhairt do daoine éagsúla, daoine óga ina measc, a bhfuil scileanna speisialta acu. Ba cheart dúinn béim speisialta a chur ar an ealaíon. Ba chóir dos na craoltóirí éagsúla seans a thabhairt do ealaíontóirí óga a chuid oibre a chur os comhair an phobail. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go mbeidís in ann na scileanna, nósanna agus intinneacha iontacha atá acu a chur faoi bhráid na daoine. Tá súil agam, mar thoradh ar an reachtaíocht seo, go gcuirfí béim níos fearr ar an ealaíon sna blianta atá os ár gcomhair amach, pé deacrachtaí a bheidh i gceist. Tarlóidh sé sin nuair atá an Bhille sínithe ag an Uachtarán agus i ngníomh mar dlí na tíre.

Debate adjourned.

Ceisteanna — Questions.

Priority Questions.

International Agreements.

1. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the details of the recently signed agreement with respect to visas between Ireland and the USA; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34092/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): At a meeting in Washington on 24 September, the United States Deputy Secretary of State, John Negroponte, and I signed a memorandum of understanding establishing a new working holiday programme between our two countries. The agreement represents a significant and positive development in our migration arrangements with the United States and will help foster the growth of new and lasting contacts between young people from both countries. It represents an important investment in the long-term health of this vital bilateral relationship.

I am pleased to report that the agreement has been warmly welcomed by community, sporting and business organisations in Ireland and the US, including the GAA, the Ireland-US

Council and representatives of the Coalition of Irish Immigration Centres and the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform.

The new agreement contains the following key elements: the United States Government will make available as many as 20,000 visas for Irish citizens each year, which will permit them to work and travel in the US for a period of 12 months; the Irish Government will reciprocate and allow up to 5,000 US citizens to work in Ireland for a period of 12 months; and both US and Irish citizens will be free to secure employment on arrival in each country. It will not be necessary to arrange employment prior to departure. In order to qualify for the programme, participants must hold an Irish or US passport, as the case may be, and should be in post-secondary education or have graduated within the preceding 12 months. The agreement will come into effect on 1 November 2008 and we hope to see the first visas issued shortly thereafter. Further details about the scheme and how to apply are available on the website of my Department at *www.dfa.ie*.

The new working holiday programme represents an important contribution towards securing greater migration opportunities between this country and the United States, an approach endorsed strongly by the Dáil in an all-party resolution passed on 6 November 2007. At the same time, the Government is also actively pursuing the two other elements of our three pronged approach to this area, namely, a solution for our undocumented citizens and new reciprocal arrangements to provide long-term visas for Irish people wishing to work in the United States and US citizens interested in working here. Finding a solution for our undocumented citizens remains a key priority. In my meetings in Washington last month with US political leaders, I stressed the importance which the Government continues to attach to this issue. I also held a meeting with the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform, ILIR, in New York, at which I announced the allocation of an additional \$50,000 to that organisation, bringing total Government funding for the ILIR to \$235,000 since 2006.

Deputy Billy Timmins: This side of the House welcomes arrangements with any country for the exchange of citizens. Can the Minister confirm whether applicants need a post-secondary qualification? I may have misinterpreted his comments, so I would appreciate clarification.

When does he anticipate the exchanges to commence and how can one apply for a visa? Will advertisements be placed in newspapers? Will the visas be valid on a 12 month basis from the date of application or will they all commence on a certain date? Will individuals be able to renew their visas or reapply after an interim period?

Deputy Micheál Martin: As I stated in my earlier reply, we expect the agreement to come into effect in November. People will be able to seek details of the programme from my Department. Initial applications may have to be sent through the US Embassy in Dublin.

The definition of “post-secondary student” encompasses all those currently enrolled in a recognised third level degree programme. Students at vocational colleges, including institutes of technology, will also be eligible to apply if they can demonstrate that their studies will ultimately lead to a degree from a full-time post-secondary academic institution. In other words, the student must be able to demonstrate that his or her diploma is intended to lead towards enrolment in a degree programme. That creates possibilities for HETAC and FETAC in terms of the national qualifications framework.

In an exchange of correspondence between myself and the Deputy Secretary of State, the latter has indicated that the US State Department will apply flexibility to the administration of the scheme. Those engaged in trade apprenticeships will have to demonstrate that their vocational studies could in time lead to the awarding of a degree in, for example, construction

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studies. Those who have graduated more than 12 months prior to their application will not be considered eligible.

Deputy Billy Timmins: It is important that the Minister ensures the details of this scheme are published as soon as possible. I am concerned the programme may be somewhat exclusive in that someone who wants to take a year out after completing his or her leaving certificate will not be able to apply for a visa.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is the case.

Deputy Billy Timmins: That is regrettable because students often prefer to take a year out after secondary school to travel abroad.

If US exchange students cannot find employment, will they be entitled to benefits in this State? If they have prearranged employment but this ceases during the 12 month period, what will happen?

Has any progress been made in regard to the undocumented Irish? Do we know the number involved and is there hope for their families? Deputy McGinley and others have raised this issue on many occasions.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is widening the scope of his question.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I am responding to the issues raised by the Minister. I am anxious to remain in order but I wish to facilitate the Minister.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I appreciate that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is his military background.

Deputy Billy Timmins: Is there hope for these people?

Deputy Micheál Martin: Ireland is the first country to achieve a working holiday agreement with the US. I do not want to understate the significance of that. Negotiations were held over several years and the scheme is not open ended in the sense that it is available only to those who are in post-secondary education or within 12 months of graduation from third level education.

A similar agreement has been in place with Australia since 1985. Approximately 17,000 Irish people went to Australia last year and 13,000 travelled the previous year. The J1 working holiday scheme, which is valid for the summer months, was taken up by approximately 6,000 Irish citizens last year, whereas only 290 US citizens came to Ireland on the programme.

In our view, this is just the first step of a wider approach. Our intention is to develop strong bilateral frameworks with the United States, a country with which we have strong historical ties. Having dealt with work permits in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, I found it strange that we did not have reciprocal arrangements with the United States from a cultural, social or employment perspective. Given that generations of Irish people have emigrated to America since before the Famine, some sort of bilateral framework should be put in place.

We are pursuing the idea of a renewable work visa arrangement with the US. To that end I met with senior Senators and Congressmen on my visit to increase the prospects of their arriving at such a conclusion. However, that would not include the undocumented Irish, who represent the third prong of our approach. This will await the outcome of the presidential election in the US. We have continued to lobby in this regard. I met with the Congressional Friends of

Ireland, the Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Pat Leahy, the Chairman of the relevant House sub-committee, Zoe Lofgren, and many others to try to get consensus on this issue.

2. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reason for the Government's change of policy and facilitation of the US-India nuclear agreement at the Nuclear Suppliers Group; the implications for the future of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty; and the discussions which preceded the Government's decision to abandon the view on this issue which it possessed. [34248/08]

Deputy Micheál Martin: When the US-India civil nuclear co-operation deal was originally agreed in principle between President Bush and Prime Minister Singh in 2005, and during the lengthy and complex process which followed, Ireland was to the fore in raising concerns and asking questions in regard to its impact on the global disarmament and non-proliferation regime. However, we noted that the deal would extend the scope of IAEA safeguards over Indian nuclear facilities, and also made clear that we understood the strong reasons which led the Indian Government to seek a secure and plentiful supply of energy to address poverty, promote development and combat climate change. It was the consistent policy of the Government, reiterated several times in this House by my predecessor, not to make any final decision until all elements were on the table. We also made clear that we would take into account the range of views among other Nuclear Suppliers Group, NSG, members, in particular those with a similar approach to disarmament and non-proliferation issues.

After a lengthy delay due to domestic Indian political factors, the issue finally came to a head in the late summer, with meetings of the IAEA board of governors on 1 August and of the NSG on 21 to 22 August and 4 to 6 September. At the NSG, Ireland, which played a leading role among a group of like-minded countries, was active from the outset in seeking clarifications and conveying concerns about the proposed exemption of India from the NSG's guidelines on civilian nuclear trade. We put forward an extensive series of proposals aimed at improving the text and meeting our concerns. During this period, we had extensive contacts inside and outside the NSG at both political and official level with the United States, India and numerous other states. It became increasingly clear that a large majority of NSG member states, including several countries whose concerns are usually similar to those of Ireland, were in favour of granting the exemption. I recall that the Nobel Prize-winning director general of the IAEA, Dr. ElBaradei, also strongly supported the deal.

On 5 September, in response to demands within the NSG from Ireland and a few other states, India issued a significant statement reiterating its key positions on disarmament and non-proliferation. These include a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing and strong safeguards against nuclear proliferation in third countries. On this basis, and following a number of further changes to the text of the NSG decision, Ireland reluctantly joined the consensus in the NSG on 6 September. Ireland and several other states made it clear that we expect India to honour all of its commitments, and that any breach of them would require the NSG to review its decision. We will continue to work to strengthen the non-proliferation treaty in the lead-up to the next review conference in 2010.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: If I might deconstruct that reply, I will put my questions simply. Will the Minister give details of who precisely contacted the Irish Government, as is reported in *The Irish Times* today, and at what level, with the aim of taking away one of the building blocks of Irish foreign policy? The Minister mentioned Dr. ElBaradei, but Dr. ElBaradei's predecessor Dr. Blix, in visiting the Minister's predecessor at the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, clearly stated that the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty was very important. Those of

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us who are interested in the international significance of this responded to his suggestion that a secretariat be appointed for the treaty. On several occasions at Question Time I have asked the Minister's predecessors about the implications for Ireland's non-proliferation treaty of agreeing to the US-India nuclear agreement, and at every occasion the Minister's predecessors have said they have the gravest concerns. What the Minister is really saying now is that because only two countries supported him in the late stages, possibly Austria and New Zealand, he decided it was best to roll over.

What is the difference between India and the five existing nuclear powers — those countries that regularly breach Article VI of the non-proliferation treaty? The discipline they have with regard to the IAEA is exactly what is on offer from India. A sixth nuclear power has been created and the non-proliferation treaty has been abandoned, or crucially weakened. As well as that, the Minister must remember the review conferences in 1995 and 2000, when we joined with other countries to create the New Agenda Coalition. The 2005 review conference was not a success, but we continued working on. Now the Minister has thrown in the towel. Could he give the reasons for this to the House? What pressure was applied by Condoleezza Rice? Did President Bush phone the Taoiseach? The Minister's predecessor will remember that the Indian Prime Minister sent a special delegate here to pressurise people into saying "Yes". Finally, perhaps the Minister will give details of the multi-billion-dollar arms contract between the US and India which followed within days of the agreement.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is not fair to use pejorative language such as "you have done this or that", "you have thrown in the towel", or "rolled over".

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: No, I am giving the facts.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Those are not the facts.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: They are the facts.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Deputy talks about Hans Blix, for example.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: Yes.

Deputy Micheál Martin: As Dr. Blix said when interviewed in 2006, there are several aspects to the US-India deal. There is the non-proliferation aspect, the environmental aspect, and the energy security aspect, the latter two of which the Deputy has completely ignored in his commentary. These are legitimate issues that we can no longer ignore in the global climate in which we live. He said the rule was adopted in the NSG in order to induce states such as Israel, India and Pakistan to give up their nuclear weapons status——

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: And why did the Government not hold that line?

Deputy Micheál Martin: ——or deter others from seeking nuclear weapons. In return, they would have access to the most advanced civilian technology. He went on to say it has been clear for many years that neither India nor Pakistan, nor Israel would walk away from their nuclear status and that under these circumstances the NSG rule has become a punishment instead of an inducement. The question, then, is whether anything can be gained by getting away from this rule in terms of keeping the lid on proliferation, and Dr. Blix's answer to this was "Yes". This is the person the Deputy quoted. He stated: "It is true that India, with a billion people, can reduce the pressure for oil and gas consumption by expanding its nuclear industry".

That is good for India's energy security and good for the environment, as it will help stem global warming. These are positive aspects of the deal.

What did Ireland try to do, as one small country among many others? The Deputy mentioned the New Agenda Coalition. Where was the New Agenda Coalition?

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: This is not one small country. We are coequal with 44 others.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Where was the New Agenda Coalition, of which the Deputy spoke earlier? I will tell the Deputy. Of the seven members, only two — Ireland and New Zealand — worked hard to improve the deal. Two — Brazil and South Africa — were strong supporters on the basis of their overall relationships with India; Sweden and Mexico were broadly neutral and made clear they would not block a deal; and Egypt is not a member of the NSG. Prior to the deal, six Indian nuclear reactors were under the IAEA safeguards. Under the deal an additional eight will be covered——

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: What about all the others?

Deputy Micheál Martin: ——bringing the total to 14.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: Out of 22.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Yes, and all future civilian reactors will also be covered. We said reluctantly that these are demonstrable improvements in terms of bringing plants under civilian safeguards.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: However, they breach the non-proliferation treaty. The Deputy knows that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will call the Deputy briefly again.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I accept the Deputy's disappointment that a consensus was arrived at, but we worked to achieve discernible improvements to the agreement. The final text will help ensure that the non-proliferation treaty remains the cornerstone of disarmament and non-proliferation and that India is held to its commitments, with observation and monitoring on an ongoing basis. The transfer of sensitive technologies will be ruled out entirely once negotiations are concluded on the provisions of paragraphs 6 and 7 of the NSG guidelines, including a provision that all states engaging in nuclear commerce with India must notify other NSG members of each and every transfer. These are improvements we brought to the text.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: Everyone knows that under Article VI of the non-proliferation treaty, as the Minister's predecessors agreed, there was supposed to be nuclear disarmament. Countries ignored that. The Minister has now added a sixth country to the five who are free to abuse the treaty. What credibility does he now have? He is allowing, for example, eight nuclear installations in India not to be under anybody's control. He tells the House that monitoring of 14 out of 22 installations is better than nothing. His predecessor, Frank Aiken, would not be satisfied with something that is better than nothing. What credibility does he have now when facing the Iranian question? He will take up a strong position on a country that has not demonstrably breached any of its obligations with regard to international treaties.

I am sorry the Minister does not like the phrase "rolling over".

Deputy Micheál Martin: Let me quote Daryl G. Kimball, for example, who is one of the major opponents of this treaty. He said: "The Irish Government did all it could. In my view

[Deputy Micheál Martin.]

no other country played a more energetic role in identifying the problems with this deal.” That is not capitulation. It may be fanciful for Deputy Higgins to engage in that kind of hyperbole and rhetoric.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: It is not hyperbole.

Deputy Micheál Martin: However, it does not really add anything to the debate.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: The Minister abandoned the treaty.

Departmental Staff.

3. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of public servants in his Department as of 1 January 2000; the number as of 1 October 2008; the reason for the increase or decrease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34359/08]

Deputy Micheál Martin: The number of staff employed by my Department on 1 October 2008 is 1,545. This includes 320 permanent staff who are working in the Passport Office in Ireland and approximately 300 local staff currently employed at missions abroad. The equivalent figure as of 1 January 2000 was 1,385. The increase of 160 staff during the intervening period was focused on two main areas: the Passport Office and Ireland’s development aid programme, Irish Aid.

In the case of the Passport Office, a total of 120 additional staff were recruited since 2006 in response to significant annual increases in the demand for passports over recent years and the introduction of the new e-passport, featuring a biometric chip. This increase in the permanent staff enabled the Passport Office to maintain a high level of customer service while also significantly reducing the number of temporary clerical staff engaged in the lead up to and during the busy summer period, as well as its reliance on overtime during this peak season.

The recruitment of additional staff for Irish Aid was directly related to the rapid expansion in the scale and scope of the development assistance programme which has seen the aid budget increase from €255 million in 2000 to €769 million in 2008.

It should also be noted that, since 2000, my Department has overseen the opening of 19 new missions overseas. These included embassies in the capitals of nine member states who have joined the European Union since 2004 and four missions linked to the expansion of the aid programme. The establishment of these new missions was achieved in large measure from within existing staffing resources.

Deputy Billy Timmins: Can the Minister give the number for the staff increase in Irish aid for the period? He gave the monetary increase but not the staff increase.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The budget increased from €255 million in 2000 to €769 million in 2008.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I am asking about the number of personnel in Irish Aid.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I did not give that figure.

Deputy Billy Timmins: Even if the Minister cannot give the figure for the increased staff, irrespective of how the budget increases, it should not lead to a substantial increase in personnel. How many people are working for Irish Aid in Limerick? How does this compare to the figures before it was decentralised? I have also looked at the numbers of staff working in the Minister’s office. I know it is populist to attack Ministers for the staff numbers in their own

offices. The Minister has approximately 15. The Minister of State, Deputy Roche has 13.3. The Minister of State, Deputy Peter Power, has——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The idea is to ask questions, not answer them.

Deputy Billy Timmins: In order to ask the question I need to give the Minister the figures in case he does not have them. What do the people in his office do? How many of them are involved in working on constituency matters as opposed to departmental matters? While I do not expect him to answer for the two Ministers of State, I am sure it is similar for them.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Since 2000, some 76 additional posts have been sanctioned for Irish Aid. A total of 16 posts previously attached to the National Committee for Development Education and APSO were integrated into the Department. Given the scale of the increase, 76 additional posts in Irish Aid——

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: It is understaffed.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: The Minister is very worried. He should not let the economy dislodge him so badly.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is good to have a countervailing view to the right wing orthodoxy that is emerging from the Fine Gael Party. It is always nice to have such a palliative intervention. There are some issues in terms of value for money, accountability and managing an expanded programme.

I do not know where Deputy Timmins got his figure for staff numbers, which obviously embraces the broader office.

Deputy Billy Timmins: The figure is 15.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There are not 15 people in my constituency office. There are three and while they largely deal with constituency issues, they also deal with non-constituency items.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: They take calls from the US Secretary of State, Dr. Condoleezza Rice.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We do have a relationship with the United States and it would be odd if they did not take calls from its Secretary of State, Dr. Condoleezza Rice.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Timmins asked the question.

Deputy Billy Timmins: Is there liaison between the Minister and Deputy Higgins?

Deputy Micheál Martin: Last night, a private secretary in my private office worked until 11 p.m. Opposition Members never refer to that. It is all very well to publish figures about numbers of staff. Many people in the public service work late hours, above and beyond the call of duty, and do not get the acknowledgement for that kind of engagement.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I appreciate that the public service can be an easy target. I am simply affording the Minister an opportunity to explain to the public. I have a response to a parliamentary question, which refers to 16 people in the Minister's own office. I do not doubt the work they do. I take exception to the Minister's reference to the new right wing orthodoxy in Fine

[Deputy Billy Timmins.]

Gael. We continually get lambasted over the fact that we are beginning to ape Fianna Fáil. I do not know where we should go.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Billy Timmins: Obviously the US-India civil nuclear co-operation deal is contentious.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: They needed to work very late.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We did actually.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: While this is all very collegiate, these are Priority Questions and the only person who may ask questions is the person in whose name they are placed on the Order Paper.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The question related to staffing generally. The Department has shown a commendable efficiency in how it has expanded its work and in reducing overtime and temporary workers. The vast majority of increased staff actually effected a significant reduction in temporary contracted staff in the Passport Office. The number of passport applications has greatly increased owing to additional applications from Northern Ireland and for children etc. The queries we get from all over the country that my private office needs to attend to on an ongoing basis are very fundamental ones relating to people who are abroad facing various challenges and difficulties. We are often the first port of call to help our citizens overseas. After approximately six months in the job, my observation is that the majority of calls relate to those kinds of inquiries.

Overseas Development Aid.

4. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his plans to make further cuts in the overseas aid budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34225/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): It is estimated that Ireland's spending on official development assistance, ODA, for 2008 will reach 0.54% of GNP. The Government is committed to reaching the UN target of spending 0.7% of GNP on ODA by 2012. We remain on course to meet that objective. I am confident that this year Ireland will also maintain its position as the sixth most generous *per capita* donor in the world, which was confirmed by the OECD for 2007.

During the 2008 Estimates process, the Government allocated €914 million to ODA. Some €814 million was allocated to Vote 29 — international co-operation — of the Department of Foreign Affairs and an estimated €100 million to other Departments and through Ireland's allocation to the EU development co-operation budget. This allocation, based on the then estimated GNP, was made to achieve a target of 0.54% of GNP in 2008.

As the House is aware, in light of the changed economic situation, the Government reviewed current expenditure allocations across all Departments in July. The overall ODA allocation for 2008 was revised to €899 million, which continued to ensure that the ODA target as a percentage of GNP would be met. Adjustments of €45 million were identified which brought the revised allocation managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs, through Irish Aid, to €769 million.

The Government's priorities remain as set out in the White Paper on Irish Aid. Assistance to sub-Saharan Africa will continue to be the top priority, as will measures to counter climate change and rising food prices, investment in education, health, the fight against HIV-AIDS,

good governance and efforts to promote gender equality. These are the issues that have the most impact on those least able to cope.

The Government is now at an advanced stage in preparing the budget for 2009. The Deputy will be aware that all public expenditure allocations for 2009 are subject to decisions taken in this process and that the Minister for Finance will present the budget to the House on 14 October.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I am delighted to hear the Minister of State say we shall be on target for the 0.7% of GNP in 2012, if I heard him correctly. Does he have any projected figures as to what the funding might be for 2009 and 2010? I have seen figures in the past for those years based on certain growth rates. I acknowledge that the economy has contracted and the figure will decrease. However, he might be able to give the House some indication.

Bearing in mind that the economy will contract, where will the cutbacks fall as regards the granting of aid? Will it affect the NGOs or the programme countries and how does he envisage doing that? Also, I am sure the Minister of State will be very anxious to deal with some of the recommendations in the Hunger Task Force report. Does he see movement towards aid for food production and the World Food Programme, in compliance with one of the report's recommendations?

Deputy Peter Power: The Deputy will find out almost exactly at the same time I do what the budget allocation will be for 2009. As he well knows, nobody can predict what that will be until it is published by the Minister for Finance on that particular day. It is, however, important to know that the overarching target of 0.7% is expressed as a percentage of GNP.

4 o'clock That obviously translates, on a year by year basis, into real terms and real money, but because it is expressed as a percentage of GNP the figure alters, accordingly. The reality is that GNP, far from being a projected 3.5% for this year, will be somewhere in the region of -0.1% and the budget is altered, accordingly. We have allocated the adjustments in 2008 equally right across the programme with the exception of missionaries and NGOs to whom we had made specific commitments at the start of the year.

Deputy Billy Timmins: One of the recommendations of the audit report of the Committee of Public Accounts was that NGOs and missionaries needed to be given a formal role in the deployment of aid. That would be a very good development. Will the Minister of State say whether there have been proposals to do that? Also, will he look at the concept of setting up an umbrella group whereby there may be some mechanism or filter body for streamlining small projects, say, where individuals are running modest projects on their own — where someone can make a small application for funding without thousands of people arriving at the Minister of State's door? How are such projects being dealt with at present?

Deputy Peter Power: The Deputy mentioned the Hunger Task Force report. That is the subject of a separate question and we shall delve into that shortly. NGOs have an enormous role as regards delivery. They deliver more than €100 million of overseas development aid on behalf of the Irish taxpayer.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I understood their former role involved the programme countries.

Deputy Peter Power: They are involved in all of our programme countries in their own right and——

Deputy Billy Timmins: I am aware of that.

Deputy Peter Power: —they are very much engaged in delivering their own programmes. As I said, they deliver an enormous percentage of the overall Irish Aid budget on the ground. Indeed they are one of the key delivery mechanisms on behalf of the taxpayer.

As regards small projects, a system is in place for micro-funding, up to a limit of €20,000. The application process is relatively simple. They are considered every couple of months and decisions are made on them. I do not see any deficiency in the system, as I understand it. Certainly, for very small NGOs comprising one or two people, the system may be difficult and we can have a look at that.

Overseas Missions.

5. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Defence Force participation in peacekeeping in Chad will continue in the event that EU forces are replaced by a UN mission in March 2009; his views on the UN replacing the EU; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34247/08]

Deputy Micheál Martin: The European Union operation in Chad and the Central African Republic, EUFOR Tchad/RCA, was established for a period of one year from March 2008. It is playing a key role in ensuring the security of refugees and displaced persons living in camps along the eastern border of Chad, and in facilitating the provision of humanitarian relief, as well as in protecting the UN policing mission in the area. I pay tribute to the success of EUFOR and to the professionalism of the members of the Irish Defence Forces participating in the mission. In my recent meeting at the United Nations with Lynn Pascoe, the Under Secretary General for Political Affairs, he spoke very warmly of the positive contribution they are making.

Despite the success of EUFOR, it is clear that an international presence will continue to be required in the region for some time. In this context, I welcome the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1834 which expresses the intention of authorising a UN military mission to follow on from EUFOR after 15 March 2009, when its current mandate expires.

It is expected the UN will, in due course, issue a formal request to Ireland to provide a contingent for this operation, and I would view such a request favourably in principle. However, a decision to participate will need to await the outcome of ongoing discussions on the size, composition and mandate of the follow-on operation. Account will also be taken of the intentions of other current EUFOR participants and the support they would provide. It is worth noting in this regard that logistical support from non-EU partners, including Ukraine and Russia which are both providing helicopters, has been vital for EUFOR. This underlines the issues the EU has regarding the military capabilities available to it for important missions of this kind.

Irish participation in a UN follow-on operation will, of course, be subject to the triple lock of UN mandate and Government and Dáil approval. My colleague, the Minister for Defence, has indicated he would be positively disposed to participation by the Defence Forces in the follow-on mission subject to the above issues being addressed.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: I thank the Minister. Will he clarify that the Security Council resolution has been formally adopted so that there is no likelihood of a security vacuum when the troops withdraw from Chad, which is enormously important? I understand that Ban Ki-moon has expressed the intention to increase the personnel deployed when the EUFOR mission is taken over, essentially, by the UN, from the current figure of approximately 3,300 to

around 6,000 at that stage, at some point in 2009. When will the Minister consider — I hope, favourably — the application of the UN for Irish troops to remain as part of its mission? Does he envisage a scenario whereby there will be potential to increase the number of troops deployed from Ireland as part of that ongoing mission?

Deputy Micheál Martin: We abhor and are very determined to avoid a vacuum or any uncertainty arising. We shall be pressing very hard for clear decisions, not just a resolution but actually a clear pathway for the UN force coming in on the button, so to speak, so there is a seamless transition from EUFOR. However, there are issues to be considered and obviously the Minister for Defence will take the lead in terms of requirements of our Army. The Deputy has alluded to the size, composition, balance of forces, logistical support and so forth and these are questions we obviously want ironed out before finally agreeing to participate in the force. However, we have put a good deal of investment into our existing presence there and our desire is to continue it. Obviously, there are always issues in situations such as this that need to be teased out with the UN.

On the Deputy's second question, our presence is quite substantial in Chad, with more than 450 troops. It is the largest of any presence we have globally at present. That in itself is significant and if we can maintain this level of operation we shall be doing very well because this is a very challenging mission.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Further to that, the Minister has mentioned some of the logistical issues and the support that has been forthcoming from Russia, Ukraine and so on, which is badly needed. I echo and support his viewpoint as regards the need for greater capabilities within the European Union. On a related issue, our troops will undoubtedly be there until March and possibly beyond that date. I understand from media reports that one agency withdrew from that region in Chad just within the last few days. Is the Minister aware of that? Perhaps he will comment.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The security situation in eastern Chad is relatively peaceful. However, the rainy season will end in the coming weeks and that could bring about increased rebel activity, banditry and criminality, which has implications for safety and security and the overall secure environment EUFOR is seeking to develop. Operational Commander Nash is confident EUFOR is in a position of strength to continue to ensure a safe and secure environment in which humanitarian actors can operate effectively.

Two Médecins Sans Frontières health facilities in Adé and Goz Beïda in eastern Chad were robbed by armed personnel last weekend and, as a consequence, the NGO withdrew from the area. The attacks involved roaming bandits and criminals rather than organised rebel activity. EUFOR is clearly mandated to protect refugees and internally displaced persons to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid and to protect UN personnel. Activity by rebel forces as well as criminality and banditry are matters for the Chadian authorities as well as MINURCAT.

We regret what happened but the Irish battalion did not receive a request from Médecins Sans Frontières for assistance over the past two months. Irish personnel will continue their operations but will co-operate with and support the NGOs throughout the Defence Forces deployment with EUFOR. Assistance has been provided to NGOs in the past, including the evacuation of NGO personnel to the Irish battalion's camp and so forth at Goz Beïda but many NGOs face ongoing challenges. Our people intervene where they can on request but Médecins Sans Frontières did not make such a request. The organisation, however, is vulnerable to attack from criminal elements.

Other Questions.

Northern Ireland Issues.

6. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position in Northern Ireland; when the Northern Executive will be in a position to fully resume its work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34187/08]

30. **Deputy Seymour Crawford** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has had recent meetings with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly; if such a meeting discussed the ongoing impasse between the two major parties in Northern Ireland; his views on whether it is vital that the Assembly gets on with its job on behalf of all the people of Northern Ireland and through the cross-Border bodies, all the people of this island; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33994/08]

Deputy Micheál Martin: I propose to take Questions Nos. 6 and 30 together.

The Government is committed to the full implementation of all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement and the St. Andrews Agreement, including the effective operation of all the Institutions — the Northern Ireland Executive, the North-South Ministerial Council and the British Irish Council. The Taoiseach and I have conveyed that message to the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and all the parties in recent meetings and conversations, including during my visit to Stormont on 18 September.

The Government is disappointed the Executive did not meet on Thursday, 2 October, and that this led to the postponement of the scheduled plenary meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council the following day. A number of challenging issues face the Northern Ireland Executive, including the central question of devolution of policing and justice powers. It is the shared view of the Irish and British Governments that the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly should take on this responsibility, as set out in the St. Andrews Agreement, and I look forward to an early agreement between the parties on this question. We believe it is time to complete the process of devolution.

The Government remains in close contact with the British Government and the parties in the Northern Ireland Executive and will continue to offer support and assistance to the parties as they work to find solutions to their current difficulties. I met Secretary of State, Shaun Woodward, yesterday evening to discuss the present situation, and our respective officials remain in close contact. It is vital, particularly in these challenging economic times, that the Executive gets down to business and works in a spirit of partnership and co-operation for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. This will also facilitate the continuation of the work of the North-South Ministerial Council, which is in the interests of the island as a whole. I am hopeful that, working together, the parties can resolve the outstanding issues before them, as indicated by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister during their joint appearance before a Stormont Assembly committee last week.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: We all share the Minister's aspiration that the work of the Executive resumes and that the outstanding issues are resolved. Does he agree the failure of the Executive to meet over such a long period has the capacity to turn into a serious political problem? Does he further agree the different constructions put on the St. Andrews meeting have contributed to the problem? Will he indicate whether the Government, separately or

jointly with the British Government, proposes to take an initiative to facilitate moving past this impasse?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I agree with the Deputy's proposition that this is a serious situation. The Executive has not met for three months, which, ultimately, has implications for people's confidence in the devolution process. Both Governments, therefore, are anxious that the Executive meets again and that devolution of policing and justice powers proceeds. I take the Deputy's point regarding the St. Andrews Agreement. People gained assurances from it but one can see that others did not sign up to the complete programme, including the justice dimension. There is a certain degree of ambiguity there but, on the other hand, the stated position of all parties is they favour devolution of policing and justice functions. The Democratic Unionist Party has stated it favours this. This revolves around timeframe and confidence issues. In other words, people are anxious that, prior to devolution of these functions, there should be confidence. The British and Irish Governments are clear these functions should be devolved and they support that. We would prefer if that happened sooner rather than later.

I met virtually all the parties on 18 September to assess their perspectives on this. The position of both Governments is the parties within the Executive should first and foremost endeavour to resolve this issue. Strand 1 is one of the three strands that affect our overall sets of relationships. The parties should have the flexibility and the capacity to resolve this and other issues attached to it, which have caused friction and disagreement within the Executive, and it is important that they do that.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: The failure of the Executive to meet is giving room to splinter groups. If it were meeting and conducting normal business, it would send a clear message that the system was working and it would lead to mutual trust, which could allow for the justice and policing issue to be settled. This is a chicken and egg scenario and there is a significant need for the Minister, the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister to act quickly to make sure the Executive works and, through it, to resolve this issue as quickly as possible. Otherwise, young people will get involved in situations we will all rue in the future.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is our desire that the Executive meets and both Governments have been in constant contact and have been in touch with the political parties, which are aware of our desire and our perspectives on this. The Taoiseach and Prime Minister Brown have been in constant contact on this. The Taoiseach has been involved with the parties and he has taken calls and had discussions with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. We will continue to be of help and we are anxious to enable the parties to come to an agreement on this and other issues that have held up the Executive meeting. I take on board the bona fide positions articulated by Opposition Members and I assure them we will do everything we can to enable the institutions set up under the Good Friday Agreement to work effectively for the people.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Does the Minister share my frustration about the recent lack of movement and progress on policing and justice matters? People have been talking about this in recent weeks and they are frustrated by the lack of movement. Will the Minister and the Taoiseach use their influence to bang heads together to move the parties forward? I am concerned about complacency setting in. People should not become complacent just because there is an absence of violent conflict. Does the Minister agree that the majority on the island want the DUP to get on with the job instead of allowing dark forces to prevent progress?

Deputy Micheál Martin: We are all anxious that the Executive meet. The House must acknowledge that all parties in Northern Ireland, including Sinn Féin and the DUP, have made tremendous strides to get to this point. Many have moved on a range of issues. We should never lose sight of the significant steps taken by all parties to having a devolved administration up and running on a power-sharing basis, with cross-community participation and so forth. It is a unique form of government. They have put so much work into this and shown great courage that it would be a tragedy to undermine it in any way. People must continue to consider the big picture. The problems are not insurmountable. In principle, all parties are supportive of the policy dimensions of policing and justice. It is a question of standing back, not getting hung up on specifics and saying they have moved a long way in ten years. It should not be risked because a vacuum would not be desirable. Others have reason to undermine the institutions and cause mischief and havoc, which must be avoided at all costs.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: Does the Minister agree that, were the Irish Government to use part of its influence with the British Government to remove the stonewalling in some intelligence matters, including the previous activities of intelligence forces in Northern Ireland, it would contribute significantly? Does he agree that co-operation by those on Sinn Féin's side with the Garda and the PSNI in the Paul Quinn and Robert McCartney murder inquiries would have assisted? The external moral suasion of both Governments would help in both respects. The attitude of the British Government in refusing to reopen intelligence issues of the deepest concern on an all-island basis is not helpful.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have pursued many of these issues with the British Government, including inquiries into particular cases. On the broad political front, both Governments stand together regarding the impasse. From the beginning, our strong relationship has been a fundamental pillar of the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement.

Deputy Higgins referred to Sinn Féin. While we would have preferred to see better co-operation on some matters, particularly those identified by the Deputy, Sinn Féin delivered on its commitments to the PSNI, namely, participation in policing boards and anything asked of the party. To a certain extent, it moved its constituency with it in terms of the PSNI's acceptability and strength, which is important.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: It had the courage to leave the few behind also.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Yes.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Hear, hear.

European Council Meetings.

7. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the discussions that have taken place recently between members of the Government and the Presidency of the European Union; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34186/08]

Deputy Micheál Martin: Since France took over the EU Presidency in July, I have accompanied the Taoiseach to two meetings with President Sarkozy and Foreign Minister Kouchner at which we had comprehensive and constructive discussions. Consequently, we have gained a good understanding of each other's position on key EU issues, which will serve us well as we prepare for the October and December European Councils at which matters of considerable significance for Ireland and the Union will be discussed.

On 21 July, the Government and the Presidency discussed the Lisbon treaty in Dublin during a visit by President Sarkozy. On that occasion, the Taoiseach stressed the need for the decision of the people to be respected and explained the Government's objective of developing a fuller understanding of the concerns that influenced the outcome of the referendum before deciding on the best way forward. The Taoiseach also stressed that the people remained committed to Ireland's full involvement in the European Union.

During the meeting we exchanged views on the situation in Sudan and Chad and the important contribution being made by the EUFOR Chad-CAR mission to which Ireland and France are the two largest troop contributors and which is under the command of Lieutenant General Pat Nash. There was also a discussion of the situation regarding Iran and its nuclear programme. During his visit to Dublin President Sarkozy also discussed the outcome of the referendum with representatives of the political parties and others who had been active on either side of the referendum campaign.

On 1 October I accompanied the Taoiseach to Paris for a further meeting with President Sarkozy and Foreign Minister Kouchner. This meeting provided a useful opportunity for preparatory work ahead of next week's European Council. It allowed the Taoiseach to bring the President up to date with the latest developments in Ireland, including the findings of the independent research commissioned by the Government and the establishment of the Oireachtas Sub-committee on Ireland's Future in the European Union. At this meeting the Taoiseach also outlined the measures that the Government had announced to safeguard the Irish financial system. The French Presidency has been giving priority to dealing with the financial crisis. It is expected the Union's response to the crisis will be the central topic at next week's European Council meeting. Ireland is open to a comprehensive European response and regards the European Council as an important opportunity for the Union to contribute to stabilising financial markets and managing the economic effects of the current upheavals.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: I might begin at the end. Will the Minister address the apparent contradiction between the German and French positions on the future role of the European Central Bank in responding to rising unemployment in Europe?

One reason for tabling the question is the original Lisbon accord's legacy of neglect of competitiveness and cohesion. Given the long-standing French influence on competitive space, France's neglect of the cohesion aspect of the accord has emphasised the importance of mediating institutions. Highly unaccountable institutions involved in speculative rather than productive versions of the economy were enabled to run riot with a type of wild capitalism, while the mediating institutions of state regulation or partnership were neglected. When President Sarkozy stops lecturing us on where we should go, will the preparations for the forthcoming Council meeting include an employment strategy involving state initiatives?

Deputy Micheál Martin: In the immediate aftermath of the June Council, there was an interesting discussion on social Europe. The President of the Commission, José Manuel Durão Barroso, was clear on the necessity for the European Union to demonstrate its relevance to its citizens in terms of expanded social programmes and so forth. I am not sure that the Deputy's depiction of the Union and its institutions is entirely accurate. There has been a strong social and cohesion dimension to the European agenda. Take, for example, the new member states and the significant attempts to table proposals on workers' rights, social solidarity and so forth.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: It is a neglected agenda.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Any country only holds the Presidency for six months. Given that only three months of the French Presidency have passed, we cannot blame France for all of the European Union's identifiable shortcomings. I am satisfied that the Commission is clear on the necessity to do more regarding the social agenda.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: The Lisbon Agenda is important. Obviously, the European Union has not gone far enough, predominantly because it has not been allowed to by member states. We must consider this matter in the context of our position on the future of Europe. Does the Minister agree that, were we not in the Union and the euro zone, the economy could have gone the way of Iceland's in recent days? The safety net we have, by virtue of our membership, is absolutely crucial. In bilateral discussions with the Presidency, has there been concentration on the future response? There is a Council meeting next week but the EU cannot operate on the basis of a Council meeting every two months. I assume there is more constant and regular communication.

Regarding the fallout from Lisbon, in the Minister's discussions with the French President, is there frank discussion of the consequences of Ireland's "No" vote to Europe? The Taoiseach, the Minister and the Minister of State have stated that everything is rosy in the garden and that they were welcomed with open arms at Council meetings. I do not believe this and we know that there are consequences. I ask the Minister to outline these to the House.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I agree with Deputy Creighton's point that we are a euro zone country. The role of the ECB has been important in weathering the storm over the past 12 months in providing liquidity to our banking system.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: It was crucial.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is a story that needs to be told. Every banking system has had major challenges, to understate it slightly, in the past few weeks. Ireland would have had those challenges far earlier if it was not for the ECB. Now is the time to be at the heart of Europe, not on the margins. I would be worried about going down an isolationist road, which would not be good for the country and could imperil our future in terms of financial and economic stability and job creation.

Regarding the EU Presidency, there were frank discussions but we are all democrats. All democrats cannot get away from the reality when people vote. People voted in a certain direction and that is it. President Sarkozy understands that but is anxious to understand the underlying issues and to know if he can be of any help in respect of the issues the Irish people surfaced in the debate on the Lisbon treaty. The national consultation we are engaged in through the Oireachtas committee is a good starting point. The timeframe of two months is tight and I appreciate the co-operation of all in the Houses.

In fairness to the French Presidency, it has been an eventful three or four months. As President Sarkozy stated, he was hardly in office before he had the Lisbon treaty agenda on his desk because of the Irish vote, followed by a war in Georgia in August and the financial stability crisis in September. It cannot be described as uneventful and he is wondering what is coming in the next three months.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Does the Minister respect the 53.4% "No" vote in the referendum on the Lisbon treaty? At times, the opposite message is coming across. Does the Minister agree the treaty requires all EU member states to ratify it and that it cannot be implemented at the moment? Does the Minister agree that the fear of conscription was never used in literature

brought out by mainstream “No” campaigners? Does the Minister agree that this point, peddled in some quarters, is absurd?

Is it not a bit rich that some European countries are lecturing Iran on nuclear powers when France and Britain are major nuclear powers? I ask the Minister to bring this message to Europe.

Deputy Billy Timmins: Is the Minister under pressure from his colleagues in Europe to have a second referendum? Have they articulated the view that they are under pressure to put him under pressure?

The Minister referred to isolation and how we should not be going down the road on our own. The perception was created that our European counterparts were not satisfied with the policy we adopted in the banking crisis. Was that view articulated to him? The British, French and Germans seemed to be dissatisfied with the route we took. Did the Minister receive that message, notwithstanding that matters have changed dramatically in the past few days in those countries?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have made it clear that I respect the decision of the Irish people.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Minister always says “but”.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I do not.

Deputy Finian McGrath: “But” comes up a lot.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This refers to Deputy Creighton’s point that other countries in Europe have a desire to move forward. We must reconcile the view in Ireland that we should be part of the EU with the dilemma faced by the EU from the decision not to proceed with the Lisbon treaty. We must make up our mind what to do and that will happen in due course. I prefer genuine engagement between parties in this House on that issue, in the context of the sub-committee, to see what the red line issues are for Ireland in terms of our continuing engagement with the EU. Are there areas where we can get satisfactory assurances on certain issues? It is a useful debate to have at this point.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: Particularly between elected people rather than the self-selected people.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Yes. Regarding the fear of conscription, independent research showed that 40% of the Irish people believed that the Lisbon treaty meant conscription to a European army, although I am not saying they all voted based on this basis. I met one couple with two children at the polling station and they asked me if the children would be conscripted. I am not making that up, it happened.

Deputy Billy Timmins: Deputy McGrath’s colleagues in Sinn Féin campaigned on that ground.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am not saying it was included in literature on the treaty but the research showed that 40% of the Irish people believed that Lisbon meant conscription to a European army.

Deputy Billy Timmins: It was not in literature but by word of mouth.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We must go behind it and ask why people believe that. What leads people to have that sense?

Iran is not satisfying all of the transparency requirements of the International Atomic Energy Agency and Dr. ElBaradei. We have put this to the Iranians and there is ongoing engagement.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: Iran should not be threatened with a pre-emptive strike.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The EU would love to have the Lisbon issue resolved and go ahead with it, but it cannot because of our decision. I was at the parliamentary constitutional committee last Monday and this message came across strongly. Socialists and Christian Democrats wanted Ireland to get it sorted but that is their perspective and we have our perspective as a democratic country.

Deputy Billy Timmins: What about the banking issue?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are now seven minutes over time.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The banking issue is moving very fast.

Deputy Billy Timmins: Any telephone calls?

Overseas Development Aid.

8. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his plans to implement the recommendations of the task force report on hunger; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34077/08]

22. **Deputy John Deasy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures he plans to implement the reorientation of Ireland's aid programme to focus on food insecurity, as recommended in the Hunger Task Force report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34167/08]

50. **Deputy Deirdre Clune** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his plans to appoint a special envoy for hunger, as recommended in the Hunger Task Force report; the duties, functions and powers which would be assigned to such an envoy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34169/08]

60. **Deputy Tom Hayes** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the proportion of the aid budget committed to alleviating hunger; his plans to increase this commitment to 20% of the aid budget, as recommended in the Hunger Task Force report; the areas of the aid budget which will be reduced to achieve this target; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34168/08]

Deputy Peter Power: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8, 22, 50 and 60 together.

The report of the Hunger Task Force, which was commissioned by the Government last year, was submitted on 25 September at the recent UN Millennium Summit in New York. The Hunger Task Force was established before the current global food price crisis hit the headlines and was informed by our knowledge gained on the ground, through our overseas aid programme, Irish Aid.

I pay tribute to our former colleague Joe Walsh who did a magnificent job in chairing this group of national and international experts. I thank each member of the task force for their

commitment and dedication in producing this report. The report has been circulated to all members of the Oireachtas and copies placed in the library. The report is concise, focused and accessible, and provides a clear picture of what must be the greatest scandal of the world today, the fact that notwithstanding all the global technical development and innovation, in 2008 there are more than 862 million people who do not have enough to eat. That number is constantly rising, driven by the recent escalation in the global price of food.

The report of the task force is both timely and welcome and I have no difficulty in endorsing its overall findings that we focus our attention and efforts on three areas: to follow through on commitments made both nationally and internationally by all Governments, both donors and Governments of developing countries and to increase the priority given to hunger in the aid programme; to target smallholder agricultural productivity; and to promote effective actions to counter maternal and infant under-nutrition. To follow through on this, I am establishing a new section which, *inter alia*, will have a special dedicated focus on food security tasked with advancing our work on addressing hunger.

Hunger is a complex issue and the task force has made detailed recommendations. Our first task will be to carry out a careful analysis of the recommendations and the extent to which current aid programming is responding to the many facets of hunger. Once that exercise has been completed we will be in a position to plan how we can strengthen our efforts to address the root causes of hunger, with a view to making a real and lasting contribution to the abolition of hunger from our world.

Two recommendations of the task force have been raised. The first is that a target of 20% be set for aid spending on hunger by 2012. In response to this, I assure Deputies that different aspects of food security are funded across a range of programmes within Irish Aid. We must assess in full our current degree of engagement with hunger across the entire range of our programmes. When the results of our assessment are available, we will be in a better position to determine how best to move forward with regard to volume and quality.

The second is that a special envoy be appointed to ensure that the recommendations are implemented. This recommendation will be examined closely and I agree that donors and governments should be held to account on their commitments. However, we must reflect and assess whether the appointment of an envoy would be the most effective way to do this. We must be sure that such a step will bring added value in these challenging times.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I welcome this report. I have a question for the Minister of State concerning the figure of 860 million people. This was used at a conference in Rome in June 2008. Can we establish how accurate this figure is? It should be authenticated because it will be used again and again. How are these measurements drawn up?

I encourage the Minister of State to follow some of the recommendations, in particular that 20% of our overseas development aid should go towards alleviating hunger. I stated earlier to some of my colleagues that education is important but there is little point in educating somebody who will die from hunger. In the mid 1980s, 12.3% of overseas aid went to agriculture but in 2006 this figure was down to 3.1%, and the level of direct food aid given is back to where it was in the early 1960s. It is very important that we push the concept of developing local agriculture. We must re-emphasise this and must re-focus. I ask the Minister of State if he agrees with me on this point.

Deputy Peter Power: I agree with the Deputy. Regarding the 862 million, that figure came from international multilateral agencies such as the United Nations, the World Food Prog-

[Deputy Peter Power.]

ramme and from a collation of experts in the area. It is their estimate that 862 million people will go hungry to bed tonight.

With reference to the figure of 20%, it should be noted that a considerable proportion of Irish aid spending goes across a range of programmes, including bilateral aid, multilateral aid and through the United Nations and international agencies. It is difficult to calculate the precise proportion of the amount of aid spent on the alleviation of food hunger. I fully agree with Deputy Timmons that this amount is much less than it was in the 1980s, not just in this country but across all donor countries. If this report serves to do one thing it is to re-focus our attention and that of all donor countries to this fact. Food and food hunger should be at the centre of our international aid and development programmes.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: I ask the Minister of State if Ireland Aid is interested in establishing a special study on the issue of land ownership, taking specific account of recipient countries of Irish aid in Africa. This is in the context of investment of outside countries such as Saudi Arabia, China and others, and also the recycling of what might be regarded by many people as dubious oil revenues into the purchase of land. Such purchase comes at the cost of the capacity of those who are occupying the land in order produce their own food, bring it to market and so on. This is a question of respect for tribal and ethnic common ownership of land. The other side of that is to address the issue of those in the slums who are without title to their shanty existence.

Deputy Peter Power: The point is very well made. Part of the problem regarding the declining capacity of many developing countries to produce their own food is the increasing fragmentation of small holdings. That is a major problem. Allied to that are problems with establishing proof of legal tenure, including that of women who comprise, surprisingly, 80% of all farmers in Africa. This figure is borne out in the report. Their rights to own land and to develop that land for productive agricultural purposes are diminishing because of fragmentation. That is a very real issue which we must address. It is an extremely complex issue and varies from country to country. In Mozambique, for example, all the land is owned by the state. In other countries nobody knows who owns the land and the system goes back perhaps to early stages of feudal ownership such as we had in Ireland.

The Deputy's point is well made. The key, however, as identified and recommended in the report, is that international foreign aid and development should be focused upon increasing the productive capacity in agriculture. We have lost focus on that, not only in Ireland but right across the world. The report takes a leadership role in the international community.

I conclude with one point. The report on food hunger, which was welcomed across the House, shows Ireland taking an outstanding leadership role in the world. This report was launched on the floor of the United Nations, in the presence of the UN Secretary General and to wide acclaim in the international community. Ireland is at the cutting edge, taking a leadership role on this issue and Irish people should be proud of that.

Written Answers follow Adjournment Debate.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: On a point of order, this morning the House ordered the Whips to set aside time for the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy John Gormley, to come into the House and make a personal statement. The Whips duly met and agreed that a suitable time would be now, at this moment in proceedings. The Minister conveyed to the Government and Opposition Whips that he would do so. I understand now

that he is not coming to the House. This is the kind of arrogance and disrespect for the House that I find intolerable. I ask the good office of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle to ensure that the House is not treated in this cavalier fashion by the Minister when an agreement was made with the House on all sides, including the Ceann Comhairle, that the Minister would be here to make a personal statement. He has now said that he will not come because the matter was to be on the Adjournment. The matter on the Adjournment is entirely separate. The Minister agreed to make a personal——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is a long point of order. A personal explanation is a matter exclusively for the Deputy concerned. I have been informed that the Minister made no request to the Ceann Comhairle's office for time in which to make a personal statement.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: To put the record straight, the Minister conveyed to the Office of the Chief Whip that he was prepared, and wanted to make a personal statement and that he wished to do so at this time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I can only say that I have been informed that no request was made to the Ceann Comhairle's office for the making of such a personal statement. We will therefore proceed to the normal business of the House at this juncture, namely, the Adjournment Debate. I understand that one of the debates concerns the matter that the Deputies raised. Does Deputy Costello have a point of order?

Deputy Joe Costello: It is a point of order. I was in the House at the time and it was by agreement with the Ceann Comhairle that the Whips would meet to arrange a time when a statement would be made. It was not as if it was a request from the person who was——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will explain to the House——

Deputy Joe Costello: It was a decision of the House that there would be a meeting of the Whips and that at a suitable time——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I shall explain to the House that it is not a matter for the Ceann Comhairle, or for the House, when a personal statement is involved but rather a matter exclusively for the Deputy concerned. It is my understanding that no request was made to the Ceann Comhairle's office for any Deputy to make a personal statement today.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: The Deputy concerned conveyed to the Whips' office that he was to make a personal statement at this time——

Deputy John Gormley: I did not.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: Misleading the House and treating it with disrespect is unacceptable.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is nothing the Chair can do about that. We will move on.

Adjournment Debate Matters.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 21 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Joe Costello — the provision of funding for the Irish Family Planning Association; (2) Deputy Pat Breen — the future of Aer Lingus jobs currently based at Shannon Airport; (3) Deputy Jimmy Deenihan — the recent sinking of the *Asgard II* and the possibility

[An Leas-Cheann Comhairle.]

of the *Jeanie Johnston* replacing it as the national sail training ship; (4) Deputy Ciarán Lynch — the appointment of two members of local authorities to the Private Residential Tenancies Board; and (5) Deputy James Bannon — the need for the Minister for Education and Science to provide an up-date on a commencement date for the new school building at Forgney national school, County Longford, which is urgently required to replace the 40 year old prefab structure and which was approved two years ago in November 2006 in an announcement of a new building programme by the then Minister for Education and Science, under which 72 primary schools nationwide were allocated funding.

The matters raised by Deputies Costello, Breen, Deenihan and Lynch have been selected for discussion.

Adjournment Debate.

Health Services.

Deputy Joe Costello: While I was hoping to have the opportunity to listen first to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, this is an important issue that must be dealt with. I cannot see a relevant Minister on the other side of the House to do so.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Deputy Barry Andrews, is present.

Deputy Joe Costello: Very well. The issue is that the Irish Family Planning Association, IFPA, has been obliged to suspend all its family planning services for the remainder of the year. The Minister of State will be aware the Irish Family Planning Association provides a national service to medical card holders and the reason it has been obliged to suspend its service for the final quarter of the year is that the Department of Health and Children has failed to provide the necessary funding. Moreover, that Department has failed to increase the level of funding for the past two years.

No family planning services will be available as a result of the failure to provide an increase in funding. Second, the number of medical cards has increased substantially. An additional 78,000 medical cards, as well as a number of GP-only cards, have been granted to citizens in the past 12 months. When the quantity of medical cards increases, the service providers should have ample funds to deal with the services required by such medical card holders. However, exactly the same sum of money has been made available. The annual allocation from the HSE to the IFPA is a meagre €290,000, which has not increased for the past couple of years. As the IFPA is a not-for-profit charity organisation, it has no means of fundraising and must bear any over-expenditure on its annual allocation itself. At present, it is €60,000 over budget and has no means of paying off that money. It now faces a bleak winter of being obliged to turn away medical card holders. It is a catch-22 situation.

The IFPA provides its services to the most vulnerable people in Ireland, such as young people, particularly in respect of teenage pregnancies, the unemployed, people with a disability, minority groups, ethnic women, single parents and those on low incomes. Such services are essential in reducing the numbers of unwanted and unplanned pregnancies and in providing women with family planning and primary health care. The services are provided on a national

basis and their suspension will result in many women being unable to access family planning services for the next three months.

Cost-effective analyses indicate that for every euro spent on providing family planning services, more than four euro is saved on maternity services. The experience of the IFPA is typical of the dysfunctional manner in which the Government goes about its business. It makes a Cabinet decision to increase the number of medical cards but expects the service providers to operate with the same budget and staff numbers.

The budget will be announced next Tuesday and the budget increase must reflect the rising cost of providing comprehensive family planning services, the recent increase in the number of medical card holders and the increase in annual inflation rates. Something must be done immediately to ensure the HSE will increase the IFPA's budget in order that the necessary services and care will be provided for women and young people with medical cards between now and the year's end.

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Barry Andrews): I will be taking this Adjournment matter on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Mary Harney. I thank the Deputy for raising this issue as it provides me with an opportunity to reaffirm the Government's commitment to the provision of family planning services.

Under the provisions of the Health (Family Planning) (Amendment) Act 1992 and the Health (Family Planning) Regulations 1992, the Health Service Executive is obliged to ensure that an equitable, accessible and comprehensive family planning service is provided nationally. The legislation requires health boards, now the Health Service Executive, to make available comprehensive family planning services, either directly or by way of an arrangement with another body. The Department of Health and Children issued guidelines to the health boards in 1995 on the provision of family planning services for all persons in their respective areas who needed such services. These services are provided primarily through general practitioners, non-governmental organisations and, to some extent, maternity hospitals and units.

The Irish Family Planning Association is one of a number of bodies offering a range of services designed to support reproductive choice. The Health Service Executive grant aids the Irish Family Planning Association on an annual basis to supply a quantum of service for this funding. The executive has indicated that arrangements are in place with the Irish Family Planning Association for the provision of family planning services to medical card holders at their centres in Cathal Brugha Street and Tallaght in Dublin as an alternative to the normal GP services.

The level of funding is limited to an agreed allocation discussed at various local service level agreement meetings throughout the year. The HSE has indicated that the IFPA was advised in July of this year that additional funding would not be made available to address expenditure overruns and that the association was requested to review the service to ensure that it remained within its available budget allocation. However, it is understood from the HSE that the IFPA has exceeded its budget in recent years, despite clear agreements in place for funding. Clearly, the HSE and those bodies funded by the HSE must operate within the resources made available to them in any given year. The HSE remains available to work with the Irish Family Planning Association to prioritise service provision within the allocated budget agreed to operate the service.

[Deputy Barry Andrews.]

Family planning services continue to be available free of charge to medical card and GP-only card holders through their GPs. If a GP does not provide family planning services, he or she is obliged to refer a patient to a GP who will provide this service.

Job Losses.

Deputy Pat Breen: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for allowing me the opportunity to raise this highly important matter. It was a sad day at Shannon Airport last Monday when the announcement filtered through to Aer Lingus staff there. Nearly all the 300 Aer Lingus staff employed in Shannon are to be written off by a single stroke of a pen. The jobs of all check-in staff, baggage handlers and cargo staff are to be outsourced to lower-paid workers. The cabin crew base is to be abolished and American crews will be brought in to do the cabin crews' jobs. This is an appalling way for a company to treat staff that have given such dedicated service and have shown such great loyalty to the airline for many years. Although many of the staff involved chose to stay with the airline to help it to return to profitability, this is the thanks they have received. Many of them have huge mortgages, young families and little prospect of finding alternative employment in an aviation business which, like other sectors of the economy, is experiencing a serious decline.

The Aer Lingus workers in Shannon are the sacrificial lambs who are bearing the brunt of the Government's failure to act last year to secure the Shannon to Heathrow service. Shannon bore the brunt of the crisis arising from the attacks in New York on 11 September 2001. Every time Aer Lingus gets flu, unfortunately Shannon appears to get pneumonia. Last year, Aer Lingus walked away from the profitable Shannon to Heathrow route that carried 360,000 people and opened a new base in Belfast. According to my verifiable analysis of its load factors, Belfast's average load factor was only 45% for the first five months of this year, compared to the average load factor of 70% out of Shannon. We were told this was being done for sound commercial reasons. Although we now know differently, no one is to be held to account.

Were these proposals to be implemented, it would be the beginning of the end of the green uniform in Shannon. I have travelled with Aer Lingus many times and have enjoyed its hospitality and friendliness. As for the check-in, boarding, baggage handling, ramp, maintenance and cargo staff, as well as the cabin crew, the green uniform and the céad míle fáilte is what they are all about and is what they know best. They are great ambassadors for Irish tourism and many American tourists choose to fly with Aer Lingus to experience the céad míle fáilte and a real sense of Irishness. I fear that wiping out one of its greatest assets, namely, its staff, will do irreversible damage to the airline's brand name.

Aer Lingus, with the support of the Government, has for several years operated a policy of consolidating its business outside of Shannon Airport. Following the Irish Ferries debacle, the Protection of Employment (Exceptional Collective Redundancies and Related Matters) Act was passed in the Oireachtas.

Is this any different from what happened at Irish Ferries?

Another part of the Aer Lingus proposal is to reduce the number of long-haul aircraft from nine to eight. The objective of Aer Lingus is to walk away completely from Shannon Airport. It might commit to service the airport next summer but beyond that I have significant doubts about its plans. There are 65 US companies based in the region, employing 11,000 people, which are dependent on direct daily US services. If we are to sustain these companies and maintain some level of competitiveness in the region, it is essential we have direct daily services.

Last year the Government let us down again on Shannon Airport. It gave its blessing to Aer Lingus in seeking to axe the Shannon-Heathrow route and ignored pleas to intervene from all sectors of business, the tourism industry and trade unions in the region. These sectors are still reeling from that decision and only this week Woodstock Hotel, a landmark, closed in Ennis with the loss of 40 jobs as a result of the loss of Heathrow Airport connectivity. I see the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, is present with the Minister of State. They came into the House last year and voted in favour of this decision. Will the Government turn its back on Aer Lingus workers at Shannon Airport for the second time in a year? I appeal to the Minister to intervene. The Government holds a 25% shareholding in Aer Lingus. All avenues must be explored to resolve the crisis. While the Government continues to claim Aer Lingus is a private commercial company, it has Government appointed directors sitting on the board. Did they support this decision? Does the Government support the decision to replace existing staff with other workers, either lower paid or from some other country?

Will the Government impress on Aer Lingus management the importance of sitting down with its staff to find alternatives to these draconian measures? Aer Lingus and Shannon Airport have a proud tradition and a wonderful history in aviation. Little did we think as we approached the 30th anniversary of the departure of Pope John Paul II to the United States from Shannon Airport in September 1979 on the Aer Lingus flagship, *St. Patrick*, that this was the final chapter in the airline's close association with the airport. I appeal to the Minister to intervene and ensure the proud association of Aer Lingus and Shannon Airport continues and that Aer Lingus workers at the airport will continue to fly the green flag.

Deputy Barry Andrews: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. He will be aware that the commercial decisions of Aer Lingus are a matter for the board and management of the company and that it is not open to the Government to intervene. Aer Lingus is an independent company and must make decisions on a commercial basis. It is understood the cost savings are necessary in order that the airline can remain competitive. These measures, we understand, will strengthen the long-term viability of transatlantic services at Shannon Airport.

The Government regrets the announcement by Aer Lingus of its intention to outsource part of its operations outside Ireland, with a view to reducing costs and maintaining its ability to compete in what we all accept is a very challenging aviation market. Any potential loss of jobs is regrettable, all the more so in the current international economic climate.

It is very much in Ireland's interest that Aer Lingus maintains its role as a major provider of air services to and from Ireland. The Minister, Deputy Noel Dempsey, is keenly aware of the human considerations at issue. The industrial relations machinery of the State is available to provide any necessary assistance in resolving challenges faced by management and employees of the company. It is encouraging to note that SIPTU has agreed to enter into a process with the Labour Relations Commission and, in the light of the wider global economic circumstances, the Minister urges all sides to take a sensible approach in dealing with the cost saving proposals.

The State has given a mandate to its three representatives on the board relating to wider government, aviation or regional development policies but this mandate is subject to the overriding obligations of directors pursuant to company law to uphold their fiduciary duties and protect the interests of all shareholders. From an Irish economy perspective, the overarching priority for aviation is that Ireland maintains the highest possible level of connectivity between Ireland and key business and tourism markets. This is all the more important in times of global economic turbulence. The problems facing the international aviation industry are well known

[Deputy Barry Andrews.]

and we have seen recent business failures of established airlines such as XL and Zoom, while some well known flag carrier European airlines are experiencing severe difficulty.

The Minister is aware that the Shannon Airport Authority has been having discussions with Aer Lingus to identify costs savings with a view to bolstering the prospects of future development of its transatlantic services. However, in framing any proposals to support Aer Lingus transatlantic services, the airport authority must ensure such assistance is provided on a commercial basis and also made available to other airlines.

Naval Service Vessels.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: The sinking of the *Asgard II* on 11 September was greeted with much sadness and shock. The *Asgard II* had served the country well since its commissioning in 1981, having been designed specifically for training purposes. The training vessel carried thousands of trainees and docked in hundreds of ports. It was a great ambassador for the country. It was fortunate nobody was injured when the ship sank and thanks to the speedy action taken by Captain Newport and his crew, everybody returned safely.

It has been said the *Asgard II* will hardly be salvageable, although I understand a survey is being carried out on the ship which is 70 m underwater. It has been indicated that it will take approximately €5.6 million to build a replacement. Now that there are major cutbacks and a reduction in tax receipts, there is surely a case to be made that the Government can make a saving.

The *Jeanie Johnston* was built at a cost of approximately €16 million and was the subject of much criticism at the time. It is now available to the Government and everybody concerned with it is more than willing to allow it to be used by the State.

I will give a brief overview of what has happened with the *Jeanie Johnston* since its commissioning. From 2003 to 2005 it carried over 300 sail trainees and 1,400 passengers. In 2006 Rivercruise Ireland took over operation of the ship and from 2006 to 2008 it carried approximately 980 sail trainees and over 2,500 passengers.

The *Jeanie Johnston*'s first voyages in 2002 were from Cork to Fenit to Dublin. In January 2003 it sailed from Dublin to Belfast to Waterford and back to Fenit for its maiden transatlantic voyage to West Palm Beach, Florida and up along the east coast of the United States and Canada before returning to Fenit. Since 2006 it has visited the Belgian port of Ostend, the French ports of Brest and Cherbourg and the Spanish ports of La Coruna and Porto de Ferrol. She has also visited the UK ports of Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool and Milford Haven.

The operation of the *Jeanie Johnston* has been self-funded since 2004 and over 200,000 people have visited during its port visits since 2002. It is primarily promoted as a sail training vessel and available for private sailing charters and functions. As I indicated, the vessel has proved to be very successful. It is regularly invited to maritime festivals all over Europe. In 2005 the Parade of Sail out of Waterford was led by three Irish ships, the *Asgard II*, the *Dunbrody* and the *Jeanie Johnston*, as part of the Tall Ships festival. The *Jeanie Johnston* continued with the fleet to join the Tall Ships festival in Cherbourg. In 2007 it was involved in the re-enactment of the pilgrimage from Ireland to Santiago de Compostela and the flight of the earls voyage from Rathmullan to Quilleboeff. In 2008 it was involved in the opening of the Southampton boat show and the principal attraction at the Cork Week international sailing competition at Crosshaven. Its crew was twice asked to re-enact the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, from Waterford and Dublin.

This is an opportunity for the State to save money. The ship is available and I have outlined its track record, which is impeccable. It has proved to be a very robust vessel on the high seas

and has crossed the north Atlantic. It has withstood all the tests expected of it to prove it is a very good training vessel.

Deputy Barry Andrews: As the House will be aware, on 11 September the national sail training vessel, *Asgard II*, sank in the Bay of Biscay off the coast of France. The ship was on a cruise from Falmouth in the United Kingdom to La Rochelle and on board were five crew and 20 trainees, all of whom were evacuated successfully and are safe and well. The decision to abandon the vessel and take to the life rafts was made by the captain because the vessel was taking in water at a far greater rate than the pumps could handle. Weather conditions at the time were moderate and all trainees and crew were rescued by the French lifeboat service and taken to the island of Belle He.

I compliment the captain and crew of *Asgard II* on the professional manner in which all the trainees were quickly and safely taken off the vessel. I also pay tribute to the French lifeboat service for quickly coming to the location and bringing everybody safely ashore. Following a meeting of the board of Coiste an Asgard and subsequent consultations with insurance company representatives, it was decided to undertake an initial survey of the vessel to establish her status prior to any decisions being made on salvage.

The vessel was recently located on the seabed in 80 m of water, close to where she sank. The initial underwater inspection has been carried out using a remotely operated vehicle. This indicates that the vessel is upright and largely intact. Damage to one of the hull planks has been observed but it is not possible, at this stage, to determine whether this has resulted from impact with the seabed or was the original cause of the sinking. Until further detailed investigations are carried out, it is not possible to state whether *Asgard II* can be salvaged.

The board of Coiste an Asgard is considering the question of procuring a suitable temporary replacement vessel for *Asgard II*. In that regard a number of factors must be taken into account, including the suitability of the vessel for sail training, number and qualifications of crew required and operation and maintenance costs. The availability of funding will also be a key factor. At this stage the Minister for Defence is not in a position to indicate when a decision may be made as to whether to procure a temporary replacement vessel. If it is decided to procure a temporary replacement vessel, all options will be considered.

Appointments to State Boards.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for permitting to raise this issue on the Adjournment. I ask the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to explain the circumstances in which he appointed to the Private Residential Tenancies Board two members of local authorities who are ineligible to serve on the board. As a result of these appointments, more than 100 decisions taken by the board have been set aside. Furthermore, this debate offers the Minister an opportunity to outline the steps being taken to have the board's decisions reconsidered and indicate whether he intends to review procedures for making appointments to State boards.

A question must be asked about the legality of the Minister's appointments. Under the relevant legislation, the Residential Tenancies Act 2004, a person who is a member of a local authority "shall be disqualified" from becoming a member of the board. In light of the unambiguous nature of this statement, has the Minister acted inappropriately and performed his duties in an illegal manner by appointing the two persons in question? A second legal issue arises regarding the matter of redress in the 100 decisions taken by the board since the appointments were made. Has a precedent been set which will expose the Private Residential Tenancies Board to legal liability?

[Deputy Ciarán Lynch.]

The Minister must answer a further series of questions. Upon whose recommendations were the two individuals in question appointed? For how long had they served before the matter came to the attention of the board? When did it come to the Minister's attention that two appointments had been made illegally? What specific action did he take on receiving this information? What expenses were the two appointees paid for their participation in meetings of the Private Residential Tenancies Board?

It appears from an examination of the appointments process that little consideration was given to the procedures and protocols clearly laid down in the Act, whereas every consideration was given to political cronyism. The Minister's actions are a reflection of a "one for us and one for them" approach. Is this the lesson the Green Party wishes members of the public to learn from its experience in government?

The Minister's illegal appointment of two councillors, one member of Fianna Fáil and one member of the Green Party, to the Private Residential Tenancies Board did not appear to be a source of embarrassment to him when he sauntered into the House this morning before attempting to saunter out again. His lack of embarrassment is typified in his refusal to come to the House earlier to make a statement on the issue and allow Deputies to have a proper debate. Instead, he will read a few lines and walk out the door at the close of business. This is not the way the House should operate.

The Minister was afforded an opportunity to have this issue aired prior to the Adjournment debate, which would allow Deputies to discuss the issue in an informed fashion. Instead, he has chosen to read out the document he is holding to his chest before running out the door.

The Minister's appetite for appointing advisers is well established. We know, for example, that he has a team of six people in his constituency office, four special advisers in his departmental office and three staff in his press office. The total annual cost of these staff to the taxpayer is €800,000. One may have expected someone with such substantial resources at his disposal to have taken time to read the relevant legislation before appointing a member of his party to a State board. The wording of the Act is unambiguous and leaves no room for interpretation.

The immediate fall-out from the Minister's cock-up has been that more than 100 enforcements and rulings have been set aside, resulting in landlords and tenants being left in limbo. No one is certain what is the current position and the long-term fall-out from this development can only be determined when we know the circumstances in which the two individuals in question were appointed and how the matter came to the board's attention. Judging from the legislation, however, the appointments were illegal. What legal liabilities does the board now face?

This cock-up opens up the possibility that the propriety of other appointments made by the Minister since taking office may also be questioned. A full audit should be carried out of all such appointments and a report placed before the Dáil.

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): The Residential Tenancies Act of 2004 instituted a comprehensive reform of the private rental sector. It set out a modern legislative code which strengthens tenants' rights and supports a more professional approach by landlords. One of the central ingredients of the Act was the establishment of the Private Residential Tenancies Board, PRTB, which has a central role in the registration of tenancies and with the resolution of disputes between tenants and landlords.

Appointments to the board are made by me, as Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. The Act specifies that the maximum number of board members shall be

15 and the minimum number shall be nine and, in making those appointments, a mix of legal, professional, operational and other skills is sought. Given the quasi-judicial nature of the board and its regular interactions with the courts, legal representation on the board has always been very useful. When considering further appointments to the board some months ago, I was particularly mindful that the existing board was strongly of the view that a barrister member would be helpful. Accordingly, on 30 June last, I appointed Vincent P. Martin, a barrister-at-law and member of Monaghan County Council to the board. I also appointed Dessie Larkin, a member of Donegal County Council with extensive experience. Both appointments were for the period up to 31 December 2012.

Last month, it was brought to my Department's attention that these appointments were made in error as section 169 of the Act not alone precludes members of the Oireachtas from membership of the board, but also members of local authorities. This provision was overlooked in my Department when the appointments were being made. The result is that both appointments were *ultra vires*, or invalid, and my office made contact in mid-September with both the individuals in question to advise them of this.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch will have no difficulty in principle with the fact that the people I chose to appoint to this board were councillors. Only yesterday his Labour Party colleague, Senator Michael McCarthy, called on the Government to allow councillors to continue membership of harbour boards.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: The Minister is a practised hand at reading scripts.

Deputy John Gormley: I am also aware that, during the various debates in the House and the Seanad on the establishment of the HSE and Health Information and Quality Authority, Opposition parties, including the Labour Party, called for councillors to be represented on these bodies.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: The Minister broke the law. He should not refer to debates in the Seanad.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should allow the Minister to continue without interruption.

Deputy John Gormley: Neither of the two appointees participated in any tribunals of the board, that is, three person appeal hearings. They had, however, attended five board meetings between 4 July and September. While all decisions at the relevant meetings were taken by consensus and with an attendance well in excess of the quorum of five, the board took legal advice on the matter and, in the interests of legal certainty, it agreed that all cases considered at meetings attended by the two gentlemen in question should be considered afresh.

This was done on 19 September when approximately 120 cases brought to the board between 4 July and 9 September were considered anew. Fresh determination orders and decisions were made and communicated thereafter to the parties.

I take this opportunity to emphasise that no decisions were "set aside", as stated in today's edition of *The Irish Times*. Every case in question was reviewed by the board, which then issued legally correct determination orders and decisions.

It also needs to be stressed that it is PRTB policy to pursue a criminal prosecution when requested in all cases of non-compliance with its orders. In the case of an over-holding tenant, the PRTB will always initially take a civil prosecution, as this would then allow the landlord to recover possession of the property. From time to time, certain issues arise in a case, making it economically unviable to pursue a prosecution. This might be where insufficient information is

[Deputy John Gormley.]

available as to the whereabouts of the non-compliant party and significant costs would be incurred in establishing this, and where there is little or no chance of recovery of these costs or the financial amounts awarded in the determination order. I stress that the board's policy is to pursue enforcement of its orders, while being mindful of the need to ensure value for money for taxpayers.

I assure the House that the PRTB has made significant progress since its establishment and it is heartening that less than 1% of tenancies end in a dispute. While critical cases such as those involving illegal eviction or serious anti-social behaviour are fast-tracked by the board and handled within weeks, the board is acutely aware that the average length of time to deal with cases needs to be significantly reduced. It has taken decisive steps in this regard, including proposals for amendment to the Act, several in-house operational initiatives and the design of an ICT strategy to optimise the resources available to it. I advise the Deputy that, as Minister, I have secured an increase in the permanent staff cohort from 26 to 40—

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: The question is who brought this matter to the Minister's attention.

Deputy John Gormley: —and I am confident that the collective impact of these initiatives will provide a sound platform from which the board should be able to discharge its functions efficiently and effectively.

I will take no lectures from the Deputy on cronyism. His party has practised it and brought it to a fine art.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: Once again, the Minister is talking about this side of the House as if he were sitting here. Who brought this matter to his attention?

Deputy John Gormley: We operate transparent decision-making in appointments. We have appointed three people associated with the Deputy's party to boards.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: Will the Minister answer to the House as to who brought this matter to his attention?

Deputy John Gormley: It is something that his party would not have the generosity or the foresight to do.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: The Minister failed to answer that question in this House.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.25 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 14 October 2008.

Written Answers.

The following are questions tabled by Members for written response and the ministerial replies as received on the day from the Departments [unrevised].

Questions Nos. 1 to 8, inclusive, answered orally.

Foreign Policy Issues.

9. **Deputy Joe Costello** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the programme in foreign policy terms of the new President of Pakistan taking office; his views on the departure of the previous incumbent in that post; if contact has been made with the office of the new President; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34193/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): President Zardari faces significant political and security challenges. In addition, Pakistan is experiencing severe problems with the economy and serious, endemic, governance issues.

As regards Afghanistan, the new President has got off to a promising start. I very much welcome the invitation he extended to President Karzai of Afghanistan to attend his swearing-in ceremony in Islamabad on 9 September. I welcome also the recent meeting between the Foreign Ministers of Pakistan and Afghanistan, at which ways and means of strengthening bilateral relations were discussed and at which the two Ministers reiterated their resolve jointly to fight extremist elements along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

Strengthening relations with India is another priority for President Zardari. Under President Musharraf, there had already been some positive developments in India-Pakistan relations, and the new President has demonstrated a renewed willingness to build up trust and to improve common understanding with India. A meeting between President Zardari and Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, took place recently in New York. The leaders pledged to resolve all outstanding issues between the two countries, including the dispute over Kashmir, and to bring lasting peace to the region.

Further afield, Pakistan's relationship with the US is of crucial strategic importance to both countries. President Zardari has already made very clear commitments to fighting terrorism and militancy forcefully and effectively.

Where Europe is concerned, Pakistan has also placed a renewed emphasis on the importance of strengthening EU-Pakistan relations. A number of high-level EU-Pakistan meetings will

[Deputy Micheál Martin.]

take place shortly which will provide an opportunity for further discussions on the development of this relationship.

Regarding the departure of President Musharraf, I respect the outcome of the internal democratic process in Pakistan. President Musharraf's legacy is a somewhat mixed one, but he must be credited with agreeing to hold democratic elections in January and to return the country to civilian rule. It is encouraging that his departure and the transfer of power to President Zardari's new administration was smooth, peaceful and in accordance with the Constitution.

Messages of congratulation have been sent to President Zardari. I also availed of the opportunity to meet the Pakistani Foreign Minister, Mr Shah Mahood Qureshi, in New York on 26 September. In addition to discussing regional and international issues, we agreed that we should work to develop a framework of bilateral cooperation, so that relations with Ireland can be expanded, in areas including private sector investment, educational exchange and trade.

Foreign Conflicts.

10. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position in Georgia and in particular in those regions seeking autonomy; the assistance he and the European Union was, and is, able to offer in an effort to mediate in this crisis; and, if such mediation was offered; his views on whether such work may be useful in the future should similar events arise and the EU be in position to offer mediation then also. [34183/08]

45. **Deputy Damien English** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the financial assistance Ireland has provided and will provide in order to assist in rebuilding the Georgian economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34086/08]

51. **Deputy Damien English** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs Ireland's contribution to the observer force in Georgia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34085/08]

53. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the recent discussions which have been held between EU officials and Foreign Ministers and their counterparts in the Russian Federation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34206/08]

71. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he, his Department and the European Union generally, following recent developments in various parts of Europe, are in favour of recognition, short of full sovereignty, for autonomous regions. [34203/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 10, 45, 51, 53 and 71 together.

The EU has played a very positive role in promoting conflict resolution in Georgia, working closely with all sides while maintaining a cohesive position on issues of substance relating to the conflict. Lessons from the EU's involvement in Georgia can certainly be drawn on for the future. The outstanding role played by the Presidency, the common approach adopted by Member States, and the rapid deployment of the EU Monitoring Mission have demonstrated our ability to move quickly and decisively when there is agreement on an objective.

Following the outbreak of the conflict on 7-8 August, when Georgia sent troops into the separatist region of South Ossetia and the Russian Federation responded with overwhelming force, the EU Presidency moved quickly to get all sides to agree to a 6 point cease fire plan on 12 August. The Presidency held an extraordinary European Council on the conflict on 1 September. This endorsed the Presidency's actions, agreed to suspend talks on a new EU-Russia agreement until Russian forces withdrew to their pre-conflict positions, and confirmed

the EU's opposition to Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Ireland and the EU have consistently supported Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. We believe that comparisons between the situations in Georgia and in Kosovo are invalid.

On 8 September President Sarkozy secured commitments from Russian President Medvedev on a complete withdrawal of Russian forces outside South Ossetia and Abkhazia within 10 days of an EU Monitoring Mission being deployed in Georgia. The agreement also indicated that international talks on the status of the two separatist regions would commence on 15 October. Following a decision at the 15 September General Affairs and External Relations Council, the EU Monitoring Mission has commenced duties in Georgia as of 1st October. Ireland has contributed four experienced monitors to the mission.

On 22 September I had the opportunity to discuss the situation in Georgia at some length with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov when he visited Dublin. He confirmed Russia's positive impression of the EU's involvement in defusing the crisis and its intention to abide by the agreements it had made with President Sarkozy. Over the past weekend, Russia began dismantling its positions adjacent to South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The tragic death of eight Russian servicemen and three civilians last Friday in South Ossetia has fortunately not slowed this process. Javier Solana confirmed yesterday his satisfaction with the progress towards final withdrawal of Russian forces from the areas around South Ossetia and Abkhazia. As agreed, this will be followed by the opening of a talks process in Geneva on 15 October under the auspices of the EU, UN and OSCE.

The situation in Georgia has stabilised but remains very tense. There was considerable loss of life and damage to infrastructure during and after the fighting in August. While conditions have improved, 50,000 internally displaced people will require temporary accommodation over the winter and there will be difficulties with the return of approximately 20,000 ethnic Georgians to South Ossetia. Russia is providing assistance to the displaced in its territory and in South Ossetia. Little is needed in Abkhazia. International humanitarian organisations have been working with the Georgian authorities to provide assistance. FM Lavrov told me that the main need now in South Ossetia is reconstruction of damaged properties.

The European Commission and World Bank are organising an international donors' conference for Georgia on 22 October in Brussels. Ireland has provided over €260,000 in humanitarian assistance since the onset of the conflict, focusing on meeting the most urgent needs. Longer-term assistance is currently under consideration.

Poverty Eradication.

11. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the achievements of the New Partnership for Africa's Development with particular reference to its achievement of its stated aims; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34204/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, is an African-owned and led initiative which is intended to eradicate poverty, achieve sustainable development in Africa, enhance Africa's potential in the global economy and accelerate the empowerment of women. It is based on the recognition that the primary responsibility for Africa's future lies not in the hands of donors or multilateral institutions but in the actions of Africa's governments and peoples. NEPAD has been adopted by the African Union as its socio-economic programme and has also been endorsed by the UN General Assembly which has urged international support for its implementation. The priorities of NEPAD are: (a) The establishment of conditions for sustainable development by ensuring peace and security, and good political, economic and corporate governance; (b) The promotion of regional cooperation and integration; (c) Capacity building;

[Deputy Peter Power.]

(d) The promotion of policy reforms and increased investment; (e) The mobilization of resources both domestically and from international sources.

The major progress achieved to date through NEPAD has been the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) which scrutinizes, monitors and reports on progress in good governance (both political and economic) through a forum of Heads of State of participating countries. Twenty-nine countries, including Irish Aid's seven programme countries in Africa, and South Africa itself have so far signed up to the APRM. Seven reviews have been completed to date — in Rwanda, Ghana, Kenya, Algeria, Benin, South Africa and Uganda. Two more reviews — in Burkina Faso and Nigeria, are due to be completed by the end of 2008. A number of others are also underway.

Progress has however been slower than expected. One reason is the lack of capacity to manage the process at national and continental level. While the reviews have highlighted some of the key governance problems in the countries surveyed, implementing the recommendations has proven challenging.

However, it should be acknowledged that this is a politically sensitive process and the full impact of the APRM on governance standards in Africa will not become apparent for several years. In spite of the challenges it faces, the APRM arguably remains one of the most important initiatives to date aimed at the improvement of governance in Africa. The commitment of African leaders to the process, the necessary capacity to manage it, and the continued implementation and guaranteed integrity of the APRM will be key to its success.

Human Rights Issues.

12. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the efforts he has recently made ten years after the unjust arrest of persons (details supplied) to raise and challenge their unjust detention by the United States. [34095/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): The case to which the Deputy refers relates to five Cuban men, known as the Miami Five, who were convicted in the US in 2001 on charges ranging from espionage to first degree murder. On 4 June 2008, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta, Georgia, issued its judgement on appeals lodged on behalf of the five.

The Circuit Court concluded that the appellants' arguments, which centred on the suppression of evidence, sovereign immunity, discovery, jury selection, and the trial itself, were meritless and that there was sufficient evidence to support each conviction. The sentences of two of the defendants were affirmed, while the remaining three men have been sent for re-sentencing.

It is my understanding that the defendants' legal counsel is considering other avenues for appeal, including recourse to the US Supreme Court. As I have previously stated, the Government has no standing in this matter, which is a bilateral consular question between the US and the Cuban authorities and, consequently, I have not raised this matter.

Diplomatic Contacts.

13. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the discussions which have been held between EU officials and their counterparts in South Africa in the context of a changing government in that country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34207/08]

28. **Deputy Phil Hogan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on recent developments in South Africa; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34074/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 13 and 28 together.

On 20 September, the African National Congress (ANC) National Executive Committee “recalled” President Thabo Mbeki as President of South Africa, as a result of comments made by a judge in relation to the prosecution of former Deputy President Jacob Zuma. President Mbeki immediately handed his resignation to the Speaker of Parliament, to take effect once his successor was elected. ANC Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe was elected President of South Africa in a parliamentary vote on 25 September. This change of President took place in accordance with the South African constitution.

In his address to the nation following his election, President Kgalema Motlanthe paid tribute to the durability of South Africa’s constitutional order and the vibrancy of its democracy. He committed the new executive to continuity in economic policy. The key priorities of his government will be to reduce unemployment, improve healthcare and tackle crime and poverty.

The EU issued a statement on 29 September expressing its warmest wishes for the success of President Motlanthe’s work, and paying tribute to the achievements of former President Mbeki. On behalf of the people of Ireland, President McAleese has written to congratulate President Motlanthe on his new position. The Government welcomes the fact that the change of Government in South Africa happened very smoothly, and we look forward to continuing our good working relationship with South Africa under this new administration.

Both Ireland and the EU have continued their routine diplomatic contacts with South Africa throughout the changeover period, as is usual when an orderly change of Government takes place. The next meeting of the EU Co-operation Council with South Africa will take place in Cape Town 20-21 October, and this will be the next opportunity for political dialogue between the EU and South Africa. Finally, I should like to make the point that South Africa continues to be a source of stability in the southern African region, and an important partner for both Ireland and the EU.

Foreign Conflicts.

14. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will mark the 60th anniversary of the Palestinian Nakba by making the right of return of refugees an enforceable and enforced condition of preferential trade with Ireland. [34096/08]

17. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the situation in the Israel-Palestine conflict; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34071/08]

57. **Deputy Kathleen Lynch** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the statement made by the departing Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, that in order to effect a lasting and peaceful settlement in Israel and the Palestinian areas, the Israeli State will have to revert to its pre-1967 borders and that the city of Jerusalem will have to be administered divisionally by both Israeli and Palestinian authorities. [34197/08]

160. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which he or his EU colleagues continue to make a positive impact on the Arab-Israeli conflict; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34373/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 14, 17, 57 and 160 together.

[Deputy Micheál Martin.]

Ireland, together with its EU partners, is committed to a negotiated and comprehensive settlement in the Middle East, with a two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at its core.

Ireland strongly supports the Annapolis process, launched under US auspices in November 2007, aimed at reaching agreement between Israel and the Palestinians by the end of this year. While few now expect that this deadline will be met, it is understood that some progress has been made in the discussions, which have been led by out-going Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, and Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas.

President Abbas briefed me during his recent visit to Dublin, explaining that while considerable work remained to be done, greater clarity and understanding has been achieved between the parties.

Following its most recent meeting in New York on 26 September, the Quartet commended the parties for their serious and continuous efforts to reach agreement, and expressed its desire to see the process continue. I hope that such progress as has been made can be built upon when new administrations are in place in Israel and the US, and that the process will lead to a lasting and just settlement.

I am encouraged by comments made by Prime Minister Olmert in an interview with an Israeli newspaper on 29 September. He acknowledged that, in order to make peace with the Palestinians, Israel would have to withdraw from “almost all the territories” seized during the Six-Day War in 1967, and clarified that his comments also applied to Jerusalem, “with special solutions” for sacred and historical sites. He also made clear that any part of the pre-1967 Palestinian territory which was not returned would have to be compensated by the granting of a similar percentage of Israeli territory.

The question of borders is one of the key ‘final status’ issues for negotiation between the two sides. I firmly hope that Prime Minister Olmert’s successor will continue to adopt a realistic approach.

Similarly, it is clear that there will be no overall settlement without agreement on the question of refugees. While it is, of course, primarily a question for resolution between the parties — and I don’t believe that it would be helpful to the process for others to seek to impose conditions on one side or the other — Ireland and its EU partners will do all within our means to support any just, viable and agreed solution.

More generally, I welcome the improved security situation in the West Bank, and hope that it will result in the urgent lifting of restrictions on access and movement for ordinary Palestinians, facilitating greater economic activity and growth.

However, despite the ceasefire that has been in place between Israel and Hamas since June, the situation in Gaza remains critical. I have consistently called for an end to the isolation of the people of Gaza, in particular through the re-opening of crossing points for people and goods.

The continued construction of Israeli settlements also remains of serious concern. In my recent speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations, I urged Israel to listen to the concerned voice of the international community on this question. An end to settlement construction would be a strong and welcome signal of good faith.

Finally, I support and commend efforts being made by Egypt, on behalf of the Arab League, to advance reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. Success in these discussions is greatly in the interests of the Palestinian people, and can only help to underpin efforts to secure a lasting peace.

EU Treaties.

15. **Deputy Mary Upton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position following the rejection of the Lisbon reform treaty; the decisions the Government has come to regarding future consultation with the Irish people; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34184/08]

36. **Deputy Jim O’Keeffe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position regarding discussions on the Lisbon treaty; and the Government’s proposals in this regard. [33996/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 15 and 36 together.

The Government has taken a number of steps to address the outcome of the referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. At the European Council in June the Taoiseach gave his colleagues his initial assessment and explained that we needed time to analyse the result and to reflect on its full implications. Only then could we turn to devising solutions acceptable to Ireland and the other Member States.

The European Council in June agreed that more time was needed to analyse the situation and that it would discuss the Treaty again at its meeting on 15 October in order to consider the way forward. The Taoiseach and I have made clear at all stages that our ratification procedure and our vote would have to be respected, just as we respected the procedures and decisions of others.

Following the European Council, the Government commissioned comprehensive research, which aimed to identify our people’s key concerns. The survey was conducted by experts in the research and analysis field. The results, which were published on 10 September, form an important input into our ongoing work in determining the best way forward for Ireland. The results also highlight the scale of the challenge facing us, especially in communicating more effectively about the Union’s policies and purpose.

At the European Council next week, the Taoiseach will provide a thorough analysis of developments since June. The Government will not, of course, be in a position to set out a basis for a solution, as our domestic process of reflection and debate has not yet been completed.

The Taoiseach will brief his colleagues on the results of the research and on the establishment of the Oireachtas sub-Committee on Ireland’s future in the European Union.

The sub-Committee is an inclusive political process designed to examine the options and challenges facing us in Europe. It will be expected to report by the end of November. The Government believes the sub-Committee’s terms of reference are appropriately forward looking.

This is not a time for re-running the referendum campaign. The priority for us at this stage must be to chart a way forward for Ireland in Europe. This will involve reconciling the concerns of the Irish people with the wishes of our partners, twenty of whom have now fully ratified the Treaty while a further four have completed their parliamentary procedures. By the end of the year, it is quite possible that all 26 of our partners will have ratified.

This situation imposes a responsibility on us to strive with our partners for a solution that will enable all 27 Member States to move forward together. It has always been our firm wish to be part of the European mainstream. In the months ahead, we will be engaged in a determined effort to find a solution that respects the wishes of the Irish people and protects and develops our position within the Union.

16. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if bilateral talks have taken place with other member states on the fallout from the Lisbon treaty referendum; the progress that has been made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33991/08]

58. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the nature of discussions he has had with EU colleagues following the defeat of the Lisbon treaty referendum; his plans to proceed with a particular strategy before and after the European elections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34246/08]

155. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent of the discussions he has had with his EU colleagues with a view to addressing the issues arising in the wake of the defeat of the referendum on the Lisbon reform treaty; if it is intended or expected to have outstanding matters resolved before the forthcoming European elections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34368/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 16, 58 and 155 together.

Since the referendum in June I have discussed the outcome and its implications with my counterparts in the Council of Ministers, and with leaders of the European Parliament and the European Commission.

The June European Council agreed that more time was needed to analyse the situation and that the Irish Government would consult at home as well as with our EU partners, in order to suggest a common way forward. That is exactly what the Government has been doing since June.

Last Wednesday, for example, I accompanied the Taoiseach to Paris to again meet with President Sarkozy and Foreign Minister Kouchner, in their capacity as President of the European Council. We had fruitful discussions with them in preparation for next week's European Council.

I have also had the opportunity to discuss the situation with many of my colleagues and I will be meeting more of them over the coming weeks. The Minister of State with special responsibility for European Affairs has also been actively engaging with colleagues and this will continue in the period ahead.

In discussions with colleagues, I have been highlighting the concerns which the Irish electorate raised during the referendum campaign. I have stressed that we wish to see these concerns addressed in a manner which accommodates both Ireland's interests and those of the other 26 Member States.

On Monday, I addressed a meeting of the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the European Parliament and met with President Barroso and Vice-President Wallstrom. One issue that arose during these discussions was the challenge facing the Union in the field of communications. This came out strongly from the recent research into the reasons behind the referendum result. Leaving aside the Lisbon Treaty, there is a real need for the Union to communicate more effectively. The Commission has a key role to play in that regard and we look forward to cooperating with them in making the activities of the Union, and their everyday relevance, better known to our people.

In all of our contacts in Brussels and elsewhere, we have underlined the Government's determination to maintain Ireland's position at the heart of an effective and responsive EU. All indications are that the Irish people want this positive approach to the EU to continue.

We have made it plain that we are determined to find a solution within a reasonable time-frame. I recognise that the desire for a stronger, more cohesive and more effective Union has gained momentum in light of recent political and economic developments.

At next week's European Council, the Taoiseach plans to provide a thorough analysis of developments since June. The Government will not, of course, be in a position to set out a basis for a solution, as our domestic process of reflection and debate has not yet been completed. He will brief his colleagues on the results of the research and on the establishment of the Oireachtas sub-Committee on Ireland's future in the European Union.

I hope that we will be able by the December European Council to identify more precisely the issues that need to be addressed and to outline the necessary steps to achieve our objective. It is not possible at this point to set a precise timetable for potential developments in 2009 although we fully recognise the desire of our EU partners for clarity at an early stage in relation to the basis on which the European elections will be held and the arrangements for appointing the members of the next European Commission.

Question No. 17 answered with Question No. 14.

Overseas Development Aid.

18. **Deputy Dan Neville** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the countries with which he has agreed five year country strategy papers; the amount of Irish Aid funding to be spent in each of these countries in each of the years covered by the CSPs; his plans to agree CSPs with additional countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34171/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): The time-frame for Country Strategy Papers (CSPs) generally reflects the time-frame specified in partner countries' national development plans. Five year CSPs covering the period from 2008-2012 have been approved for Ethiopia, Lesotho and the Republic of South Africa. The amounts of funding in each of these countries, subject to annual review, for the years 2008 to 2012 are as follows:

€m

Country	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Ethiopia	36.0	40.00	46.00	To be decided following a mid term evaluation	To be decided following a mid term evaluation
Lesotho	13.5	15.50	17.00	18.50	20.00
South Africa	11.40	13.62	13.52	13.64	12.19

New CSPs are planned for Uganda and Timor Leste. The current strategy for Uganda runs until the end of 2009. The process of preparing a new CSP will get underway in early 2009, following an evaluation of the current programme. Irish Aid is preparing a one year extension to the Timor Leste CSP (2006-2008) to ensure continued support to that country, while awaiting completion of its new National Development Plan. Malawi this year became the ninth Programme Country for Ireland and an interim budget of €10 million has been put in place for 2008. It is intended to conclude a multi-annual CSP for Malawi by the end of 2009.

In the case of Zambia and Vietnam, a four year CSP covers the period 2007 to 2010 in each case with a funding commitment of €123 million and €87 million respectively for that period. Similarly for Tanzania and Mozambique, the CSPs cover the period 2007 to 2010 with total budgets of €168 million and €158 million respectively.

Emigrant Issues.

19. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the funding allocated by him to a centre (details supplied) for the years 2007 and 2008; if he has audited the accounts of this organisation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34083/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): As the Deputy will be aware, the Government continues to attach a high priority to supporting Irish communities overseas. This commitment is reflected in the unprecedented level of funding secured for emigrant services in recent years.

The needs of the Irish community in Britain, in particular older people and those at risk of social exclusion, are a key priority. Since the publication of the Report of the Task Force on Policy regarding Emigrants in 2002, Irish community organisations in Britain have been allocated more than €44 million in Government funding. In 2007 alone, Emigrant Support grants totalling €11.484 million were allocated to more than 134 frontline welfare and community organisations in Britain. In 2008, grants exceeding €8.5 million have already been allocated to 131 organisations, with further grant applications currently under consideration.

The London Irish Centre, Camden is one of the largest and oldest Irish Centres in Britain. The Centre provides a range of welfare services to the city's Irish community and is host to the offices of several important Irish organisations, including the Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas, the Irish Elders Advice Network and the London Irish Survivors Outreach Workers.

In 2007, the Centre was awarded funding of £582,974 (€856,526), with further funding of £437,755 (€554,857) allocated this year. These allocations, like all emigrant services funding in Britain, were approved on the basis of recommendations from the Emigrant Services Advisory Committee (Díon) and the Embassy of Ireland, London, in close consultation with the Irish Abroad Unit.

Government funding enables the Centre to provide important frontline services to the local Irish community. These services include helping people to access housing and welfare entitlements and supporting those experiencing serious problems, such as alcoholism, mental illness and domestic violence. Government funding is also directed to the Centre's Outreach Programme, which helps to tackle social isolation and provides on-going support and referral services to the elderly in Camden and its surrounding Boroughs.

In line with our financial requirements, the London Irish Centre has provided its independently audited accounts for the year ending 31 March 2007, and is expected to submit accounts for the year ending 31 March 2008 shortly. The annual accounts of all Government funded organisations in Britain are monitored and reviewed by the Embassy, London, as a matter of standard practice.

Northern Ireland Issues.

20. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has discussed with the British Prime Minister the work of the historical enquiries team in the Six Counties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25481/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): The Government consistently raises with the British Government ongoing issues which are the legacy of the Troubles.

As the Deputy is aware, matters arising from the past are being addressed through a variety of mechanisms, including the Weston Park Inquiries, the ongoing work of the Historical Enquiries Team, the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the work of the Victims Commission.

Since its establishment by the Chief Constable in 2005, my Department has maintained contact with the Historical Enquiries Team. My officials also liaise with families and NGOs with which the HET are interacting, and have taken forward their concerns in contacts with the British side.

The wider question of the effectiveness and coherence of approaches to dealing with the past is among the issues being considered by the Consultative Group on the Past, which is co-chaired by Archbishop Robin Eames and Denis Bradley. The Government welcomed the establishment of the Consultative Group and has remained in close contact with it.

I hope that various mechanisms for dealing with the past can help bring closure to victims and survivors, and hopefully underpin community confidence in the wider process.

Commemorative Events.

21. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his plans to commemorate United Nations International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on 17 October 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34082/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): The eradication of extreme poverty and hunger is the central objective of Ireland's overseas development programme. The programme has a very high international reputation based on its poverty focus and commitment to excellence.

The UN International Day for the Eradication of Poverty is an opportunity for all of us to reflect on the scale of the challenge. It is appropriate that it falls so soon after the high level event on the Millennium Development Goals at the UN Headquarters in New York in September, in which the Taoiseach, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and I participated. I believe that our involvement demonstrated the determination of the Government to continue to play an important role in global efforts to combat poverty. The UN event was also the occasion of the launch of the report of the Hunger Task Force, established by the Government to examine how Ireland can make a key contribution to tackling the hunger crisis in the developing world.

On 17 October, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, the Minister for Foreign Affairs will address the Biennial Conference of the Irish Forum for Global Health at University College Cork. The Conference will examine global health challenges, focusing on the environment, hunger and diseases of poverty. The Irish Forum for Global Health is supported by Irish Aid.

Question No. 22 answered with Question No. 8.

International Agreements.

23. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the information he is in receipt of indicating that Iran is in breach of its International Atomic Energy Agency obligations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34200/08]

39. **Deputy Dinny McGinley** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the situation in Iran; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34088/08]

73. **Deputy Phil Hogan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the assistance he will provide to deal with a case (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34076/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 23, 39 and 73 together.

The situation in Iran, in particular in relation to the nuclear question and to human rights, remains of serious concern. On the nuclear question, Ireland fully supports the twin track approach of the EU3+3 (involving France, Germany, the United Kingdom, together with the US, Russia and China), which offers Iran positive engagement and cooperation if it changes course, but a concurrent enforcement track at the Security Council while it refuses to do so.

On 14 June, on behalf of the EU3+3, High Representative Solana handed an improved ‘incentives package’ to the Iranian authorities, proposing areas of possible cooperation if Iran abandons its programme of uranium enrichment. Iran tacitly rejected this package by responding with a counter-proposal which did not provide for the suspension of enrichment.

On 12 September, the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed El Baradei, briefed the IAEA Board of Governors on developments since his last report in May. While his report noted some progress, it concluded that “contrary to the decisions of the Security Council, Iran has not suspended its enrichment related activities”. The DG urged Iran “to implement all measures required to build confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear programme”. On 12 September, the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed El Baradei, briefed the IAEA Board of Governors on developments since his last report in May. While his report noted some progress, it concluded that “contrary to the decisions of the Security Council, Iran has not suspended its enrichment related activities”. The DG urged Iran “to implement all measures required to build confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear programme at the earliest possible date”.

Responding to this report, on 27 September, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1835 (2008), reaffirming its previous Resolutions, and calling on Iran “to comply fully and without delay with its obligations”.

I met with Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki in New York on 29 September, and made clear to him our serious and ongoing concern regarding Iran’s nuclear programme, our strong support for the EU3+3 process, and the urgent need for Iran to listen to the voice of the international community and to comply fully with the IAEA’s requirements. I also raised our serious concerns regarding the worsening human rights situation in Iran.

It is clear that the Iranian regime has become increasingly resistant to receiving representations from abroad, ceasing even to operate a formal human rights dialogue with the EU. Among the many areas of ongoing concern are the suppression of dissenting voices in the media and suppression of NGOs, trades unions, women’s groups and human rights defenders; torture and killings in custody; increased use of the death penalty, including executions of minors; a lack of freedom of religion, including the oppression of members of the Baha’i faith.

On the cases raised by Deputy Hogan, I am pleased that two of individuals in question — Mr Mahmoud Mohammed Matin-Azed and Mr Arash Ahmad-Ali Basirat — were released from custody last month. The third, Mr Ramtin Soodmand, remains in custody. These cases highlight the very real dangers facing Christians in Iran, including those who have converted from Islam.

The Government has been monitoring the proposed apostasy law closely through our Embassy in Tehran, in cooperation with our EU partners. As the situation currently stands, a draft of the law has yet to be finally adopted by the Parliament and a number of amendments are being proposed and debated. The EU has expressed its acute concern about the law, which clearly violates Iran’s commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political

Rights, to which it is a party. I will continue to raise our concerns about human rights in Iran, including freedom of religion, at every available opportunity.

Diplomatic Contacts.

24. **Deputy Shane McEntee** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the recent discussions he has had with the Belorussian authorities regarding Belorussian children visiting here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34100/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): Visits to Ireland by children from the Chernobyl region have, for over 17 years, offered the children the chance for rest and recuperation with Irish families. The continued success of these visits is due to the efforts of the many charities and families who respond generously to the children year after year. In recognition of the valuable work of Chernobyl Children's Project International, Irish Aid committed €600,000 over three years in March 2008 for the development of day-care centres in Belarus.

In our contacts with the Belorussian authorities they have frequently underlined their satisfaction with the welcome afforded the children in Ireland. However, Belarus has proposed to a number of EU Member States, including Ireland, formal agreements that would, in their view, secure the welfare of the children and ensure their return to Belarus. Pending conclusion of such agreements, the Belorussian Government indicated in late August that it would be suspending visits by Chernobyl children.

In light of these developments, I met Adi Roche of Chernobyl Children's Project International on 8 September to hear her concerns at first hand. I explained that I had asked the Ambassador to Moscow, who is also accredited to Belarus, to travel to Minsk on 9 September to register with the Belorussian authorities the Government's strong concern about the suspension of the children's visits in the absence of a formal Agreement. In addition, at my invitation, the Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of the Republic of Belarus travelled to Dublin on 11 September. During meetings with him, it was agreed that we would work with the Belorussian authorities to arrive at an agreement between our two Governments that would provide a framework for such visits.

Since then, officials in my Department have worked with the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Attorney General's Office to prepare a revised version of the draft Agreement presented by the Belorussian authorities. In addition, on 30 September two officials from my Department met with officials from the Department of Humanitarian Affairs in Minsk to explain Ireland's approach to the draft Agreement.

A revised draft of an Agreement was forwarded by my Department to the Belorussian authorities on 6 October and we requested that a response should be forthcoming very quickly with a view to concluding an agreement at an early date. It is our strong hope that — even if negotiations are not fully concluded — visits by the Chernobyl children to Ireland will be allowed to go ahead over Christmas.

Ministerial Meetings.

25. **Deputy Mary Upton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his recent meeting with Foreign Secretary Miliband during his recent visit to Dublin; the matters which were discussed during their interview; if matters related to Northern Ireland and the Lisbon reform treaty were touched on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34185/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I met with the British Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, on 11 September when we had substantive discussions on a wide range

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of European and international issues, including the Lisbon Treaty, Climate Change, the Millennium Development Goals, Zimbabwe, the Middle East, Iran and the conflict between Georgia and Russia. We also briefly touched on the Northern Ireland situation.

With regard to the Lisbon Treaty, I briefed the Foreign Secretary in detail on the results of the study conducted for the Government following the result of the referendum, and also on plans for the establishment of the Oireachtas sub-Committee on Ireland's future in the European Union. Our discussion looked forward to next week's European Council, at which the Taoiseach will brief his colleagues on developments since our referendum. I took the opportunity of the meeting with the Foreign Secretary to thank him for his Government's strong support for Ireland within the EU following the referendum on the Lisbon Treaty in June.

We reviewed progress towards the formation of a power-sharing government in Zimbabwe — the meeting took place before the broad agreement reached between Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai, which remains to be implemented. In regard to the Middle East, we agreed that it was important to maintain such progress as has been made in the Annapolis process, with a view to building on it once political conditions allow. We discussed the implementation of the six-point peace plan for Georgia brokered by the French EU Presidency, and the future of wider EU-Russia relations. The Foreign Secretary also briefed me on discussions on the Iranian nuclear issue within the E3 + 3 grouping. A further UN Security Council resolution has since been agreed.

Co-operation between our two countries is excellent. It owes much to the close and sustained contact between the Irish and British Governments over the past eleven years of working together, building peace and bringing devolution to Northern Ireland.

Overseas Development Aid.

26. **Deputy Michael D'Arcy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will establish an umbrella group to deal with individual or small group applications for overseas aid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34072/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): In the period 2006 to 2008, Irish Aid provided multi-annual support to Dóchas, the umbrella group for Irish development NGOs, amounting to €690,000. Dóchas works to maximise the impact of development NGOs. It promotes a coherent public approach on development issues by its members and helps build public awareness of development challenges. Dóchas plays an important role in building members' capacity to engage with policy issues at national and EU level.

Irish Aid also provides support directly to small and medium-sized NGOs through the Civil Society Fund and the Micro-Projects Fund. The total combined budget for these two grant schemes in 2008 amounted to some €41 million. Application forms and full details of these funding schemes are available on the Irish Aid website www.irishaid.gov.ie.

Currently, I have no plans to establish an umbrella group to deal with individual or small group applications for overseas aid. I believe it is essential that Irish Aid continues to appraise, approve, monitor and evaluate NGO projects, working in partnership with the NGOs, large and small.

27. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amounts of direct financial aid received by each developing country in each of the past five years under multilateral or bilateral programmes; the amount of debt write-off for each in the same period; the

amount and nature of indirect aid throughout; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34245/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): For 2008 the Government has provided a total allocation of €769 million to Irish Aid. A further estimated €130 million will be spent by other Government Departments and through Ireland's allocation to the EU Development Cooperation Budget. This will bring Ireland's total expenditure on Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to some €900 million, representing 0.54% of GNP on current estimates.

Ireland's ODA comprises both multilateral and bilateral contributions. Multilateral ODA consists of contributions channelled through multilateral and international organisations and these pooled contributions are not reported to Irish Aid on a country-specific basis. Bilateral ODA consists of contributions made directly by Ireland to developing countries, including contributions made through NGOs, missionary organisations and other bilateral partners.

Ireland provides assistance to over eighty countries, mainly to Least Developed Countries, in particular in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this regard, Ireland places particular emphasis on long term strategic assistance to nine Programme Countries — Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique, Zambia, Lesotho, Malawi, Vietnam and Timor-Leste. These countries are amongst the poorest in the world and Ireland's assistance to them is directed primarily to the health, education rural development and governance sectors.

Comprehensive details of all assistance to our partner countries are set out in the Irish Aid Annual Report, which has been placed in the Dáil Library. I will ensure that a copy of the 2007 Annual Report is provided to the Deputy.

Ireland also remains closely engaged with the issue of alleviation of the debt burden on developing countries. Moreover, our bilateral assistance to the developing world is exclusively in the form of grants rather than loans. The Government's financial contributions to debt relief have concentrated on the two main international initiatives in this area, which are implemented primarily by the World Bank and the IMF. We have provided €20 million to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, towards reducing the debt burden of qualifying countries to sustainable levels. We have also contributed €58.64m to the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI), to cancel the multilateral debt owed by many of the world's poorest and most indebted countries.

Question No. 28 answered with Question 13.

Emigrant Issues.

29. **Deputy Seán Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will provide assurances that proposed cutbacks in the various Departments will not impact adversely on the vital front-line work being carried out by the Safe Home programme, which continues to assist in the repatriation and resettlement of Irish emigrants from various countries worldwide, who by their lifelong remittances have contributed on a major scale to the development of the Irish economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31093/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): As the Deputy will be aware, the Government have progressively and substantially increased the level of funding available for emigrant services in recent years. These increases have enabled the Emigrant Support Programme, administered by the Irish Abroad Unit of my Department, to provide greater financial support to frontline welfare organisations which assist the most vulnerable members of our overseas communities, including the Safe Home Programme.

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My Department continues to be very supportive of the work undertaken by the Safe Home Programme. The award of a €249,900 grant in April of this year brought the Department's total funding to the organisation since 2003 to over €1,100,000. In 2007, additional Government funding, totalling €72,000, was also awarded to the Safe Home Programme by the Department of Environment and Local Government and the Department of Social and Family Affairs. This substantial funding is testament to the high value which the Government places on the work performed by the organisation in enabling elderly Irish emigrants to return to live in Ireland.

I can assure the Deputy that the Government remains committed to supporting frontline welfare agencies and organisations, including the Safe Home Programme. As the Deputy will appreciate, however, all grant applications for Emigrant Support funding are reviewed on their respective merits each year.

Question No. 30 answered with Question No. 6.

Overseas Development Aid.

31. **Deputy James Bannon** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount of funding for overseas development aid allocated for 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34080/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): It is estimated that Ireland's spending on Official Development Assistance (ODA) for 2008 will reach 0.54 % of GNP. During the 2008 estimates process, the Government allocated €914 million to ODA. €814 million was allocated to Vote 29 (International Cooperation) of the Department of Foreign Affairs and an estimated €100 million to other Government Departments and through Ireland's allocation to the EU Development Cooperation Budget. This allocation, based on the then estimated GNP, was made to achieve a target of 0.54% of GNP in 2008.

As the Deputy is aware, in light of the changed economic situation, the Government reviewed current expenditure allocations across all Departments in July. The overall ODA allocation was revised to €899 million, which however continued to ensure that the target of 0.54% of GNP would be achieved. Moreover, I am confident that this will also ensure that Ireland maintains its position as the sixth most generous per capita donor in the world, which was confirmed by the OECD for 2007.

International Conventions.

32. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if legislation to enable the international Convention on Cluster Munitions will be confined to the final text published following the Dublin meeting or if it will more comprehensively deal with issues of definition, new technology and interoperability. [34177/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): The Convention on Cluster Munitions was adopted by consensus by the 107 states that participated at the Dublin Diplomatic Conference hosted by the Government in Croke Park from 19 to 30 May last. The Convention will be opened for signature at a ceremony to be hosted by the Norwegian Government in Oslo on 3 December.

As a demonstration of commitment to its early entry into force, the Government is resolved to ratifying the Convention as soon as possible. To this end the Government last month approved the General Scheme of the Inhumane Munitions Bill and assigned priority to its drafting. It will be introduced in the Oireachtas very shortly.

The Bill will enable the State to meet its obligations under the Convention by implementing its provisions in domestic law, as necessary, and supplementing them where appropriate. The Bill will also make further provision for the implementation of the State's obligations under the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention.

The definition of a cluster munition under the Convention is comprehensive and will lead to the prohibition of all cluster munitions that cause unacceptable harm to civilians. The Convention prohibits all cluster munitions that have ever been used in an armed conflict.

During the negotiations however we remained concerned that new technologies could be developed to circumvent a prohibition of cluster munitions. The Irish delegation therefore proposed that the Convention also prohibit weapon systems that dispense bomblets that are designed to perform similar tasks to sub-munitions and that produce the same negative humanitarian consequences, but that would not be captured by the definition of a cluster munition. I am glad to be able to report that Ireland's proposal was accepted in the negotiations and that the Convention prohibits explosive bomblets that are specifically designed to be dispersed or released from dispensers affixed to aircraft in the same way as it does cluster munitions proper. The new Bill will therefore make appropriate provision for explosive bomblets as well as cluster munitions.

The issue of interoperability concerns relations between states parties to the new Convention and states that are not party to it. This was one of the central issues in the negotiations and the Convention makes detailed provision in relation to it. The Bill will ensure that future participation by the Defence Forces in UN mandated peacekeeping operations will be consistent with the Convention.

I look forward to the co-operation of all members of the House in ensuring that Ireland can ratify the Convention on 3 December.

Human Rights Issues.

33. **Deputy Michael D'Arcy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the situation in Tibet; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34075/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I remain deeply concerned by the situation in Tibet. Following the disturbing events there in March, and in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympic Games, the situation remained extremely tense and widespread restrictions remained in place on the local population. Some of those restrictions are gradually being lifted and tourists and other outsiders are being permitted to visit the area. But many of those involved in the March events are still in detention or imprisoned, some monasteries, monks and others remain subject to heavy restrictions and surveillance, and reports continue to come in of intimidation and ill-treatment.

As reported to Deputies on many previous occasions, I myself, and my Department, maintain close contact with the Chinese authorities regarding Tibet, as well as supporting efforts at the EU level. Through these contacts, we continue to underline the importance Ireland attaches to human rights, to freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest, and to dialogue between the Chinese authorities and the Dalai Lama.

We believe that dialogue between the Chinese Government and the Dalai Lama or his representatives remains the most effective way to achieve the protection of Tibetan culture, identity, religion and human rights, and some measure of autonomy for Tibet within China. However, the currently unsatisfactory pace and substance of the dialogue process need to be accelerated and upgraded. We believe that positive developments in the dialogue would benefit not only the Tibetan people, but also China itself, and that it would serve to curb increasing

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militancy, calls for secession and divergence from the moderate views of the Dalai Lama within Tibet, particularly among the young, which could be dangerous for all concerned.

The Government will continue to keep the situation of Tibet under careful review and high on the agenda in our contacts with China.

Overseas Development Aid.

34. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position regarding the work being carried out in Irish Aid's target countries; if it is proposed to expand this programme; if he will give an assurance that the overall budget for this programme will not be cut in Budget 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34189/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): In 2008, ODA expenditure will be the highest in the history of the programme, amounting to almost €900 million or some 0.54% of GNP on current estimates. Irish Aid delivers assistance to over 90 countries in the developing world. Nine have been designated Programme Countries with a commitment to long term strategic assistance: Tanzania, Zambia, Lesotho, Mozambique, Uganda, Ethiopia and Malawi, Vietnam and East Timor.

Support to Programme Countries is framed in agreed country strategies with the aim of assisting in the achievement of national development plans. These address fundamental human needs including food security, basic education and primary health care. They also emphasise the central importance for sustainable development of good governance, respect for human rights and transparency and accountability.

The Government's White Paper on Irish Aid, published in 2006, contained a commitment to increase the number of key partner countries from eight to ten, in the medium term. Malawi was designated Irish Aid's ninth Programme Country in 2007. An Embassy has now been established in the capital, Lilongwe, and Ireland will provide some €10 million in assistance for Malawi this year. This support will be targeted in particular at vulnerable communities in the areas of food security, livelihoods and protection against the effects of natural disasters.

Preliminary work has also been undertaken towards identifying a tenth Programme Country in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government. In keeping with the conclusions of the White Paper on Irish Aid, Africa will remain the primary geographic focus for Ireland's development programme.

35. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the outcome of the review of the management of the Irish Aid Programme undertaken in conjunction with the Department of Finance; the details of changes in the management of the programme that resulted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34172/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): Delivering a high quality aid programme as funding expands towards reaching the UN target of 0.7% of GNP on official aid poses challenges at every level of the Irish Aid programme. The scale of these challenges was recognised in the Government's 2006 White Paper on Irish Aid which proposed a major review of the management and structures of the programme, to ensure that overseas aid is delivered optimally in terms of accountability and quality.

The review commenced in 2007 and was carried out by external management consultants guided by a Steering Committee comprised of high level officials from the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Finance. The review encompassed a comprehensive examination of Irish Aid's management structures, capacity and delivery systems. Arrangements to ensure appro-

appropriate coordination, including with development partners, and foreign policy coherence were also considered.

The consultants' report was finalised in July 2008 and is currently under active consideration in my Department and the Department of Finance. It is expected that the recommendations will be submitted to Government in the coming months and, if approved, that an Action Plan will be formulated to implement them over the next two years on a phased basis.

Question No. 36 answered with Question No. 15.

Immigration Policy.

37. **Deputy Jan O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the contact he and his Department have had with the Nigerian Embassy following the treatment undergone by a person (details supplied) at Dublin Airport in September 2008. [34199/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): Immigration arrangements at Dublin Airport are the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, who answered a number of parliamentary questions on this case recently. In the circumstances, there has been no Ministerial or official contact between this Department and the Nigerian Embassy, although the Nigerian Ambassador, at an informal gathering, did mention to an official here that it was her intention to liaise further with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform on the matter.

Planned Coup.

38. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the recent reports regarding a planned assassination of the President of Venezuela; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34179/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I am aware from media reports of allegations of a planned coup against the Venezuelan Government. However, I am not in a position to assess the reliability of these allegations. I would also note that the recent meeting of Heads of State and Government of the Union of South America decided to make no statement on the matter, despite a Venezuelan request to do so.

Question No. 39 answered with Question No. 23.

Overseas Development Aid.

40. **Deputy P. J. Sheehan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he is satisfied that the scope and quality of assessments of the effectiveness of humanitarian aid are as rigorous and robust as those assessments carried out on development aid; his plans to extend, deepen and improve assessments of humanitarian aid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34170/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): Irish Aid's support for humanitarian action is provided through a variety of organisations which are responding to emergency needs on the ground, including multilateral organisations such as UN agencies and the Red Cross/Red Crescent.

All of our multilateral partners maintain dedicated evaluation functions. These plan and implement rigorous evaluation work programmes. The reports of these evaluations provide Irish Aid with valuable information about the quality and effectiveness of the work co-funded by Ireland. Moreover, in the contracts with NGOs, evaluation requirements are specified,

[Deputy Peter Power.]

including an obligation to furnish Irish Aid with the reports of any internal evaluations carried out.

Notwithstanding the rigour of the evaluation work carried out by Irish Aid's partners, Irish Aid also commissions its own evaluations of humanitarian assistance funding. In recent years, for example, we carried out Value for Money reviews of our support to Afghanistan and to the Tsunami disaster. In addition, evaluations of humanitarian assistance initiatives are being included in the annual work plans of Irish Aid's Emergency and Recovery section, as well as the Evaluation and Audit Unit.

Freedom of Information.

41. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the freedom of information requests currently under examination by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34073/08]

66. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the freedom of information requests released by him since 1 September 2007 to date in 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34070/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 41 and 66 together.

It is the policy of my Department to make all requests and replies made under the Freedom of Information Act, which are not of a personal nature, publicly available. There is a Freedom of Information Requests Database available on the website of my Department, which contains copies of the non-personal requests made since April 2004 to date. The website of the Department of Foreign Affairs is: www.dfa.ie.

Since September 2007, there have been 81 Freedom of Information requests made to my Department. Eleven of which were granted in full, 28 were part granted and 12 were refused in full. There were 18 requests withdrawn; four of which had information provided to the requester outside of the Act. There are currently 12 requests pending response.

Foreign Conflicts.

42. **Deputy Jim O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position regarding our relations with the Government of Sudan; and his views on the decision of the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to request an arrest warrant for President Omer Hassan al-Bashir. [33997/08]

67. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the situation in Darfur; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34069/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I proposed to take Questions Nos. 42 and 67.

I remain deeply concerned at the situation in Darfur, and the ongoing suffering of its people. The fracturing of the main rebel groups over the past year, and the apparent determination of the Government of Sudan to pursue a military solution, at a high price in terms of ongoing suffering for ordinary people, makes the search for peace even more difficult. I welcome the appointment of Djibril Bassolé as joint AU-UN chief mediator in June 2008, and am hopeful that his committed efforts to bring the two sides together will be successful. So far, however,

the process has been disappointingly slow, and a lack of political will is apparent on all sides. Despite these discouraging developments, there is no alternative to a political solution.

In Darfur, ongoing conflict, including targeted attacks against aid workers and their assets, continues to constitute a major obstacle to humanitarian operations. Since 2006, the Government has committed over €48 million in assistance to the people of Sudan, including Darfur. Through EUFOR Tchad/RCA, which is under the command of an Irish officer, Lieutenant General Pat Nash, the EU is also helping provide security for those Darfuris who have fled across the border into neighbouring Chad.

Serious human rights abuses against civilians, particularly women and children, have been a constant feature of the Darfur conflict. On 14 July 2008, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) requested that a warrant be issued for the arrest of Sudanese President Al-Bashir on charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes in Darfur. It is now up to the appropriate bodies of the ICC and, where appropriate, the UN to determine what action they intend to take in response to the Prosecutor's request.

Ireland fully supports the crucial role being played by the ICC in the promotion of international justice, and deeply regrets the lack of co-operation on the part of the Sudanese government with the ICC to date. While the situation in Darfur is very complex, and there is a need to foster any prospects for peace which exist, the reality should be that serious crimes such as those which have been committed in Darfur must not go unpunished.

Overseas Development Aid.

43. **Deputy Pat Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his plans to fulfil the commitment in the programme for Government to meet the UN target of 0.7% of GDP assigned to overseas development aid by 2012. [34191/08]

54. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will give an assurance that, in view of budget 2009 which is pending, the Irish Aid budget will not suffer cuts and our commitments to the poorest of the poor will not be undercut. [34188/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): I propose to take Questions Nos. 43 and 54 together.

The Programme for Government contains a clear commitment to the expansion of the Aid Programme. We have set a target of spending 0.7% of GNP on Official Development Assistance (ODA) by 2012.

For 2008 the Government has allocated approximately €900 million to ODA. The bulk of this funding — €769 million — comes under Vote 29, International Cooperation, which is managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs, through Irish Aid. A further estimated €130 million will be spent by other Government Departments and through Ireland's contribution to the EU Development Cooperation Budget.

Expenditure on ODA in 2008 will be the highest in the history of the programme. On current estimates, we expect it will represent 0.54 % of GNP. This level of spending will ensure that Ireland remains one of the most generous donors in the world.

The Government remains on course to meet the target of spending 0.7% of GNP on ODA by 2012. The Deputy will appreciate that all public expenditure allocations for 2009 are subject to decisions taken in the context of the Budget which the Minister for Finance will present to the House on 14 October.

[Deputy Peter Power.]

The spending priorities for Irish Aid will remain as set out in the White Paper on Irish Aid, with a comprehensive focus on the reduction of poverty, in line with the Government's clear commitment to the implementation of the UN Millennium Development Goals.

44. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the initiatives in which his Department is involved in anti-poverty and land reform movements across Latin America; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34202/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): Irish Aid provides support to anti-poverty initiatives in Latin America, and elsewhere in the developing world, through a number of funding mechanisms. Total Government support to civil society in Latin America exceeded €16 million in 2007.

Through the Multi Annual Programme Scheme, (MAPS), Irish Aid has established a strategic and programmatic relationship with key Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) partners. The Scheme ensures predictability of financial support for an agreed programme of development activity. Three organisations supported under MAPS — Trócaire, Christian Aid and Concern — implement programmes in Latin America amounting to some €6.59 million. The areas covered include governance, human rights, gender, mobilising for justice, sustainable livelihoods programmes, and HIV/AIDS.

In addition, through the Civil Society Fund, Irish Aid provides grants for smaller NGOs for projects contributing to poverty reduction. In Latin America, the Fund supports a range of NGOs working in areas with high levels of poverty. Priority sectors include human rights, education, health and HIV/AIDS, livelihood security, fair and ethical trade, and water and sanitation. In 2007, the Fund provided €6.98m in support of such NGO programmes in Latin America.

Irish missionaries carry out important development work in fifteen countries in Latin America. Irish Aid funding is administered through Misean Cara, which was established in 2004, taking over management of existing funding schemes for missionary development work. In 2007, Misean Cara allocated €2.44 million for development work in Latin America, focusing on basic education, primary health care, income generation, urban and rural community development and water and sanitation.

An additional €134,880 was allocated last year, through our Embassies in Latin America, for local Civil Society activities. Irish Aid has also provided support for organisations working on the protection and recuperation of indigenous land rights. This includes €110,379 towards a three-year project in Colombia which has been successfully completed this year, and funding for a three-year project focusing on the protection of Mayan indigenous land rights in Guatemala.

Question No. 45 answered with Question No. 10.

Foreign Conflicts.

46. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position in Burma, particularly in the view of the first anniversary of the 2007 Saffron Revolution and its subsequent military clampdown as well as the further tragedies suffered in the country due to Cyclone Nargis; and the support of a financial as well as humanitarian and diplomatic kind which Ireland has offered over the past year. [34182/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): The situation in Burma remains of major concern. There has been a conspicuous absence of political progress since the Saffron Revolution in September 2007, and repression by the military of monks, political activists and others continues. In May, the military junta pressed ahead with a fundamentally flawed referendum on a new Constitution for Burma. At the same time, they also extended the detention order on Aung San Suu Kyi for a further six months. I immediately condemned this action and renewed the Government's call for her release.

As regards to the humanitarian situation following Cyclone Nargis, this is still very difficult but, thanks to facilitation efforts by the UN and ASEAN and the generous response of the international community, the Burmese people most affected are being actively assisted in their recovery efforts. In this regard, over €1.35 million in Irish Aid funding was provided to the emergency relief effort, as well as two airlifts of essential humanitarian supplies from our pre-positioned emergency stockpiles in Brindisi, Italy and in the Curragh.

As I highlighted in my address to the UN General Assembly last month, the continued reluctance by the Burmese authorities to engage seriously over the past twelve months with the Good Offices Mission of the UN Secretary General is gravely disappointing. The Government continues to support actively the work of the Secretary General, his Special Representative, Dr Ibrahim Gambari, and the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Burma. I believe the roles of the Special Representative, and of the Secretary General personally, are vital to the long-term goals of real democratisation and national reconciliation in Burma, especially in relation to ensuring that the process leading up to the elections promised in 2010 will be as inclusive as possible.

In recent weeks, we have marked not only the first anniversary of the Saffron Revolution but also the twentieth anniversary of the 8-8-88 uprising. As I stated at the time of that commemoration, Ireland remains committed to helping the Burmese people in their struggle for democracy. In pursuit of this goal, the Government has engaged in diplomatic activity at Ministerial and senior official level with Burma's neighbours and in international fora. During my recent visit to the UN, I raised the situation in Burma in the course of discussions with senior UN officials and with the Foreign Minister of Indonesia, who is also deeply concerned about the situation there.

The Government have also worked to enhance the EU's role in supporting the people of Burma, including securing the extension of sanctions against the regime in December 2007. The Government has ensured that the issue remained high on the Council's agenda throughout the last twelve months, promoting and supporting European Council and GAERC Conclusions on Burma on a number of occasions in 2007 and 2008.

My Department has also continued to work closely with the Burmese community and friends of Burma in Ireland, including supporting the work of Burma Action Ireland. We have likewise maintained close working relations with the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) — Burma's government in exile. In June I launched a comprehensive report on the brutal suppression of Burma's September 2007 public protests, 'Bullets in the Alms Bowl'. This was produced by the NCGUB and funded by my Department.

47. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the general position in Iraq; his views on reports regarding the danger to 4,000 Iranians living in Ashraf city upon that city being handed over from American to Iraqi forces in view of their threatened deportation to Iran resulting in their lives being in danger. [34181/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): Overall, there has been a substantial improvement in the security situation in Iraq over the last 18 months. This has been based both on intensified security actions by Iraqi and international forces, and on internal progress in reconciliation and political accommodation, which we have always stressed as an essential element in resolving Iraq's problems.

While the level of violence remains unacceptably high, there is no doubt that the improvement on the streets in Iraq has changed the political atmosphere, and provided space in which political action to achieve real inter-communal reconciliation may now be possible. It is essential that this opportunity be fully grasped.

The US Government has not, as yet, made any statement concerning the future of Camp Ashraf, or Ashraf City, the base of the People's Mujahideen of Iran, which is in an area of Iraq controlled by US forces. However, the progressive handing over of responsibility for security from US to Iraqi forces, which is a welcome development, has led to obvious speculative reports that, in due course, this will also apply to the area containing Camp Ashraf.

Iraq's elected leaders and parties have always made clear their unhappiness at the continued presence in Iraq of the PMOI, due both to the importance of improving relations with Iran, and to the actions of the PMOI in support of the former regime of Saddam Hussein, including its involvement in attacks on Iraqi civilians.

The Iraqi authorities have recently restated their determination that the group should leave Iraq. They have not, however, suggested that they be forcibly returned to Iran. Rather, they have suggested that they should move to another country, or countries, and that such a move must be carried out in coordination with the International Committee for the Red Cross.

While the issues involved are complex, I would agree that the residents of Camp Ashraf should not be forcibly returned to Iran, where they would very probably face a real threat of persecution.

48. **Deputy Pat Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position as it pertains in Somalia in view of the fact that there has been widespread displacement and a threat of famine; if his Department has been asked to assist in non-governmental organisations gaining access to the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34190/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): Somalia has been without an effective government since 1991, and despite an initial period of stability after Ethiopian troops and Transitional Federal Government (TFG) forces defeated the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) in December 2006, the situation has worsened catastrophically in the last year. There has been a pattern of fighting in the capital Mogadishu since November 2007, between Ethiopian and TFG forces on the one hand, and clan militias and Islamists on the other hand. An agreement between the TFG and the opposition Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) was initialled in Djibouti in June and signed on 19 August. However, despite this agreement, violence by opposition groups has increased since June, and has affected previously stable areas. Violence has intensified further in Mogadishu in September, and over 100 people have been killed there since 22 September.

Drought, widespread violence and displacement have caused the UN to estimate that 3.2 million Somalis are currently in need of assistance; a forty per cent increase since January. It is feared that this figure will rise even further by the end of 2008.

The humanitarian situation across Somalia remains grave, particularly in and around Mogadishu. Food shortages and drought have been compounded by escalating violence against civilians and aid-workers, which has made Somalia one of the most dangerous environments for aid

workers in the world. This is the primary challenge for all NGOs and aid agencies in seeking to respond to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Somalia. Security issues include random violence, piracy, kidnapping, landmines and general banditry.

Since 2006, Ireland has contributed more than €17 million in humanitarian assistance to Somalia. Thus far in 2008, Ireland has provided €5.65 million in humanitarian assistance. In addition to our financial support, we have made three successive deployments of members of the Rapid Response Corps (based in Nairobi) to assist UNHCR in their operations for Somalia.

The serious threat posed by piracy to the effective delivery of humanitarian aid is a cause for great concern, with so many in Somalia being dependent on food aid delivered through the World Food Programme (WFP). The EU is playing its part in the international efforts to combat the problem of piracy and EU Member States have decided to co-ordinate their maritime action in response to this issue and facilitate the escort of WFP ships into Mogadishu.

My officials are in continuing contact with a range of agencies and NGOs in order to monitor the situation, particularly on the issue of humanitarian access to those needing assistance.

Election Monitoring.

49. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has been monitoring the preparations for the elections planned in Bangladesh for December 2008 at which it is planned to reintroduce a multi-party democracy; and if the EU has offered to supply election monitors or other assistance which may be of use in this context. [34194/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): Together with our EU partners, Ireland has been monitoring preparations for the parliamentary elections planned in Bangladesh for December 2008.

An election observation Exploratory Mission was deployed to Bangladesh between 15th and 28th June last to assess whether re-deployment of the European Union Election Observation Mission (EOM), suspended on 11th January 2007 when the elections scheduled for last year were cancelled, would be useful, feasible and advisable. The deployment of the Exploratory Mission followed the renewal of the invitation from the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) to observe the elections.

During its deployment, the Exploratory Mission met representatives of the state and electoral authorities, as well as representatives of major political parties, civil society, the media and the international community. It also took notice of the findings of the previous Exploratory Mission conducted in September 2006.

Several of the 2006-2007 EOM's key recommendations have been followed up on by the BEC, or their implementation is underway, including the production of an electronic voter list; enhancing BEC's independence; mandatory registration of political parties; the display of results at polling station level; a fresh delineation of constituencies; and establishing a specific timeframe for the adjudication of electoral complaints. At the same time, progress remains outstanding on issues such as the involvement of civil society in observing the voter registration process; a women's quota and the role of the media.

Overall the Exploratory Mission was broadly positive about the feasibility and usefulness of an Election Observation Mission, subject to the easing of the State of Emergency which was declared at the time the elections were cancelled last year, and the resolution of certain election-related rights. A decision regarding the deployment of the mission is due shortly.

Question No. 50 answered with Question No. 8.

Question No. 51 answered with Question No. 10.

Foreign Conflicts.

52. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures he will take to assist in reaching a settlement in Sri Lanka; his views on the situation there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34084/08]

69. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position in relation to the conflict in Sri Lanka, especially with regard to the independence sought by the Tamil people for those areas of the country where there is a Tamil majority; if Ireland has been able or proposes to be of assistance in efforts to find a just settlement in the area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34178/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 52 and 69 together.

As I have reported to the House on a number of previous occasions, the Government is seriously concerned about the political, security and humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka. I am particularly troubled at the extent of civilian casualties, the increasing numbers of internally displaced families and the disruption to the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the needy which have resulted from both the government's military offensive and from acts of terrorism on the part of the LTTE and others.

This is particularly the case since the decision taken in January by the Government of Sri Lanka to pull out of the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement, to terminate formally the peace process and to seek to resolve the Tamil issue through military force. But, equally, we remain deeply concerned about the widespread wanton acts of terrorism and violence carried out by the LTTE ('Tamil Tigers') and other groups, including this week's suicide bombing in Anuradhapura. Such actions have resulted in the EU and others in the international community listing the LTTE as a terrorist organisation and, therefore, ceasing contact with them.

In the Government's contacts with the Government of Sri Lanka and in all our international contacts regarding Sri Lanka, we have consistently expressed the view that there can be no military solution to the Tamil issue. It is the Government's clear view that the legitimate aspirations of Tamil people for their ethnic, cultural and religious rights to be safeguarded, and for some form of autonomy, should be the subject of peaceful, national dialogue and negotiation, with a view to reaching a comprehensive political agreement that will address the aspirations of both Tamils and the majority Sinhalese community in Sri Lanka.

This was the objective of the currently defunct ceasefire and peace process, which was facilitated by Norway, backed up by the Nordic Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, and supported with development assistance by the Tokyo Conference on Reconstruction and Development of Sri Lanka. I believe that it is vital that every effort is made to try to reinvigorate this peace process.

We remain strongly supportive of the role Norway has played and we very much welcome its commitment to continue contacts with both sides in hopes of encouraging them back to the negotiating table.

In the meantime, we will continue to provide practical, humanitarian support to the people of all communities in Sri Lanka. Since 2005, Irish Aid has provided more than €5.3 million for humanitarian and development activities in Sri Lanka. This includes significant emergency assistance provided in the aftermath of the tsunami, and continuing support to the World Food Programme in Sri Lanka.

Question No. 53 answered with Question No. 10.

Question No. 54 answered with Question No. 43.

Sporting Events.

55. **Deputy Alan Shatter** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the fact that offensive anti-Irish songs were sung by supporters of Glasgow Rangers Football Club attending the match that took place between Glasgow Celtic and Glasgow Rangers on 31 August 2008 and that the singing of such songs is a regular event and has caused both fear and concern to Irish residents and their children who on occasion visit Glasgow for such football matches; if he will take an initiative with the relevant authorities in Scotland in the interest of Irish-Scottish relations to bring this behaviour to an end; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33971/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I am aware of the concern, and indeed the intimidation, that can arise from slogans and songs during and after Celtic-Rangers matches.

Since its opening in 1998, the Consulate General of Ireland in Edinburgh has maintained a wide-ranging dialogue with the Scottish Government on all relevant issues. In September, for instance, the Consul-General met with senior officials in the Scottish Government to discuss recent incidents of sectarianism. Following from these and other on-going discussions, I am assured that tangible new steps to tackle sectarianism are currently being reviewed by the Scottish Government and I am hopeful that the proposed measures will help to improve the situation. The Consulate General will continue to monitor closely developments in this regard.

Overseas Development Aid.

56. **Deputy Charlie O'Connor** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his priorities for the coming year in respect of development aid for Africa; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33995/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): The Government's official programme of development assistance, Irish Aid, has as its overarching objectives poverty reduction and sustainable development. Africa remains the principal geographic focus for Irish Aid, containing as it does 34 of the world's least developed countries. In this regard, seven of our nine Programme Countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa — Tanzania, Zambia, Lesotho, Mozambique, Uganda, Ethiopia and Malawi.

In recent years Ireland and other donors have moved towards a more programmatic approach to aid, aligned with the national planning of partner countries. Priorities and strategies for engagement are based on the particular circumstances in each country. These priorities are reflected in Country Strategy Papers, which are now in place for each Programme Country.

Within this overall context, our development priorities are focused primarily on basic needs, including in the key social sectors of health and education, and the fight against HIV/AIDS. We also focus on the productive sectors, including rural development, the private sector and support for livelihoods.

Irish Aid also places a particular emphasis on building good governance in its partner countries. This includes enhancing parliamentary oversight, promoting democratic systems of government, improving transparency and accountability and enhancing respect for human rights.

[Deputy Peter Power.]

Overall, I believe our funding enables us to make a real and tangible difference to the lives of the poorest of the poor in our partner countries in Africa.

Question No. 57 answered with Question No. 14.

Question No. 58 taken with Question No. 16.

59. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way aid funding is audited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34068/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): Irish Aid has in place rigorous accounting and audit controls that recognise the various types of risk inherent in delivering a large scale and multi-faceted aid programme in difficult and challenging environments.

The Evaluation and Audit Unit of the Department of Foreign Affairs has responsibility for overseeing the internal audit function, which includes Irish Aid. This unit is staffed by professionals and they carry out and oversee a range of audit, evaluation and Value for Money review activities that are appropriate to the various components of the aid programme using a risk-based approach. Clear priority is given to the audit of expenditure in partner countries where the risks are judged to be highest.

The audit strategy embraces four separate, though very complementary, approaches:

- (a) Work carried out directly by Irish Aid's Evaluation and Audit Unit, and by our internal auditors based at Missions in the field;
- (b) Work carried out by internationally reputable audit firms commissioned by Irish Aid;
- (c) Joint donor funded audits of specific programmes and
- (d) Audit reports obtained from partner organisations (e.g. those carried out by National Audit Offices, UN bodies and by Non-Governmental Organisations).

Internal auditors, based in our Missions in the field, implement an audit programme which consists of the independent examination of partner organisations that receive Irish Aid funding. In addition the internal auditors actively review the controls in place at our Missions. The Missions are also audited annually by internationally reputable audit firms.

NGO partners funded by Irish Aid under the Multi Annual Programme Scheme or the Civil Society Fund are required to submit their annual audited financial statements. The Evaluation and Audit Unit also conducts its own internal audit and review work of NGO partners, as part of its evaluation and audit work programme.

In addition to these robust internal systems, the Department has an independent Audit Committee which reports to the Secretary General. It provides an independent appraisal of audit reports and of the Department's audit and evaluation arrangements. The Committee meets with the Secretary General and annually with the Comptroller and Auditor General. It also publishes an annual report on its work.

Regular reviews of the overall audit approach, audit work programmes and resources are undertaken by management to ensure that developments in audit keep abreast of the challenges posed by the expanding programme.

Question No. 60 answered with Question No. 8.

Foreign Conflicts.

61. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if, with regard to the newly formed Government in Zimbabwe, he will indicate which sanctions have been either lifted, or newly imposed, upon that country. [34201/08]

74. **Deputy Shane McEntee** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the support measures put in place by the EU to support the transitional Government in Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34099/08]

166. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the support measures in place to assist the transitional government in Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34093/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 61, 74 and 166 together.

More than three weeks after the signing of a power-sharing agreement between Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF party, and the Tsvangirai and Mutambara factions of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), there has still been no agreement on forming a Government, and the situation in Zimbabwe remains deeply worrying. Although political violence has greatly diminished, it has not yet stopped. The rate of inflation is almost impossible to calculate, but has now reached unimaginable levels — one US think-tank estimates that it reached 531 billion per cent by the end of September. The World Food Programme estimates that 3.8 million people will require food assistance in October, and that this figure will rise to 5.1 million in January 2009 at its peak.

EU Foreign Ministers stated after our meeting of 15 September that the EU stands ready to support a transitional government which is taking steps to restore democracy and the rule of law in Zimbabwe. That commitment stands, and the EU very much hopes that ongoing dialogue will soon result in the formation of a government of national unity which is credible and reflects the will of the Zimbabwean people, as expressed at the 29 March elections. Ireland supports a co-ordinated international approach to addressing Zimbabwe's problems, once an administration is in place in Harare which is committed to working with us to rebuild the country economically and politically.

Meanwhile, however, the EU is continuing to act on our concern for the suffering of the ordinary people of Zimbabwe at this very difficult time. The European Commission has allocated an additional €10 million in relief assistance for people affected by the humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe, while Irish aid to Zimbabwe for the period 2006 to 2008 (to date) amounts to approx €25m.

Zimbabwe is again on the agenda for the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council next Monday, 13 October. Given the disappointing rate of progress in the talks on forming a Transition Government, I do not believe that my colleagues and I will be in a position to lift the EU restrictive measures on the Zimbabwean leadership. We will of course review what we can do to assist our African partners in bringing the ongoing negotiations to a successful conclusion, so that we can begin the real task of working with Zimbabweans to restore peace, stability, and sustainable economic development.

Election Results.

62. **Deputy Joe Costello** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the recent election results in Austria where the far right won 29% of the popular vote; if this has been

[Deputy Joe Costello.]

discussed at European Union level; if he has done so with his fellow Foreign Ministers; the outcome of such deliberations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34192/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I accept the democratically expressed will of the Austrian people. I have no doubt that other EU member States take a similar position.

Overseas Development Aid.

63. **Deputy Kathleen Lynch** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the food crisis in Ethiopia, reports of which, it is suggested, the Government may be trying to suppress although the UN's World Food Programme reports that it is receiving increasing reports of hunger related mortality; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34196/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): I am aware of the recent increase in food insecurity in Ethiopia which is currently facing its most vulnerable period since the early 1980s because of a combination of food price inflation and drought. A number of regions in Ethiopia are particularly at risk because the cumulative effect of repeated shocks of this kind have left them especially vulnerable and without any means of coping.

While there had been some reports that the Government were initially less than frank about the real situation in some regions or districts, my understanding is that they are now more open about the seriousness of the situation.

My colleague Micheál Martin T.D., Minister for Foreign Affairs, raised the situation in Ethiopia with the UN Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, John Holmes, when they met on 26 September. The Under Secretary-General had just returned from a visit to Ethiopia and Minister Martin urged him to continue to provide every possible assistance and to maintain a careful watching brief on developments over the coming period.

Ethiopia is a partner country for Irish Aid and we are maintaining a particular focus within our programme on the issue of food security. Of our planned €36 million programme country budget this year, over €11 million is for the Productive Safety Nets Programme which provides cash and/or food to vulnerable households in return for work on projects targeted at reducing the vulnerability of their communities. Following the food crisis this year an additional €2 million from the programme country budget has been allocated for food security initiatives. In addition to the Country Programme, we have provided more than €2.1 million in humanitarian funding through a number of Irish NGOs to support the food insecure in Ethiopia.

Foreign Conflicts.

64. **Deputy Jan O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position as it pertains in Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34198/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I am deeply concerned about the situation in Afghanistan. As was the case when I last addressed this issue in the House on 1 May, there are very clear difficulties regarding security, human rights, governance and rule of law issues, and the production of narcotics.

The security situation remains a particular cause for concern. In his most recent report on Afghanistan entitled "The Situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", released on 23 September, the UN Secretary General concludes that it has deteriorated markedly over the last six months. The influence of the insurgency has expanded

beyond the traditionally volatile areas and has increased in provinces neighbouring Kabul. Incidents stemming from cross-border activities from Pakistan have increased significantly. Another worrying development is that attacks on aid-related targets and NGOs have become more frequent and more deadly. Tragically, the tactics of the insurgency, as well as military operations, have caused the number of civilian casualties to rise sharply.

On 22 September, the UN Security Council unanimously extended the mission of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan for another year and called for it to be strengthened in the face of increased violence and terrorism from the Taliban, Al-Qaida and drug smugglers. It urged ISAF and other partners to continue training Afghan national security forces towards the goal of setting up self-sufficient and ethnically balanced national forces to provide security and the rule of law.

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan has also deteriorated, in part due to the on-going conflict. The most pressing humanitarian problem is that drought and high global food prices have created food shortages affecting one sixth of the country's population.

The Secretary General has, however, also identified recent positive developments. The Paris Conference on 12 June launched the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) which, together with the Paris Declaration, establishes a road-map for future efforts by the Government of Afghanistan and the international community to provide for the security and prosperity of the Afghan people. In addition to seeking international endorsement of the ANDS, the key aim of the Conference was to redefine the programme of support for Afghanistan and to encourage increased Afghan ownership of the reconstruction process. A total of \$21 billion was pledged by donors. Ireland pledged €9 million for relief, reconstruction and development in Afghanistan over the two-year period 2008-9.

The mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was renewed in March.

A new EU Special Representative for Afghanistan, Mr. Ettore Francesco Sequi, took up duty on 1 September and will take forward the implementation of EU policy in Afghanistan. I wish him every success in his new appointment.

For its part, Ireland has allocated over €15 million in relief, recovery and development assistance to Afghanistan since 2005. In addition, seven members of the Irish Defence Forces are serving in non-combat roles with ISAF in Kabul.

65. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the recent expulsion from Bolivia of the US Ambassador; the reason in his view for which this has occurred; and the status of Bolivian-Irish diplomatic relations. [34180/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): Ireland established diplomatic relations with Bolivia in 1999. Ireland is accredited to Bolivia on a non-resident basis through our Embassy in Buenos Aires, while Bolivia is accredited to Ireland on a non-resident basis through their Embassy in London.

In relation to the recent expulsion from Bolivia of the US Ambassador to that country, and the subsequent reciprocal expulsion of the Bolivian Ambassador to the US, this is a bilateral matter between the two countries in question. It is clearly related to the ongoing political crisis in Bolivia, which I hope can be resolved through peaceful and constitutional means.

Question No. 66 taken with Question No. 41.

Question No. 67 taken with Question No. 42.

Overseas Development Aid.

68. **Deputy Dinny McGinley** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if aid funding goes to government organisations or agencies in Ethiopia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34087/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): Wherever it is feasible and effective to do so, Irish Aid is committed to working through existing national systems, so as to reinforce good governance and avoid undermining national capacity. This approach is recognised as best practice and is pursued by all those donors who have acceded to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, including Ireland.

No Irish Aid funding goes directly to the Government of Ethiopia via direct or general budget support. Rather, it goes through the dedicated distribution and delivery systems (health, education etc) which have been built up over many years. The funding that we do provide is ring-fenced for its intended purposes and is channelled to recipients using sectoral Ministries, or regional or local government channels. For example, Irish Aid supports the provision of basic services in health and education and also social “safety-nets” programmes which are vital to saving the lives and livelihoods of millions of Ethiopians.

Effective and responsible donors and NGOs must take account of local authorities and systems. For example, when we train teachers, we must use the training systems and institutions, colleges etc. that are in place nationally. It would be a total waste of money, and it would be unsustainable in the long term, if we were to try to create a parallel system. NGOs and voluntary organisations also work with local and national systems.

In 2007, €32m was allocated to Ethiopia through the bilateral country programme and a further €36m has been allocated for 2008. In addition, in 2007 Irish Aid provided over €7m, mostly for multi-annual funding to major Irish NGOs, but also to other civil society projects. A further €9.1m has been committed to date in 2008. In 2007 and 2008, €2.5m was allocated for humanitarian aid to Concern, Goal and the World Food programme in Ethiopia.

Question No. 69 answered with Question No. 52.

Debt Relief.

70. **Deputy Fergus O’Dowd** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the assistance he will provide the Jubilee Debt Campaign; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34081/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): Ireland is closely engaged with the issue of alleviation of the debt burden on developing countries. The Government has provided considerable resources to initiatives designed to ease or cancel the debt burden. Moreover, our bilateral assistance to the developing world is exclusively in the form of grants rather than loans.

The Government’s financial contributions to debt relief have concentrated on the two major international initiatives on the issue. We have paid €20 million to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, towards reducing the debt burden of qualifying countries to sustainable levels. We have contributed €58.64m to the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI), to cancel the multilateral debt owed by many of the world’s poorest and most indebted countries. Each of these initiatives is implemented by the World Bank and the IMF. The MDRI also involves the African Development Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

Irish Aid maintains a close dialogue with Irish NGOs on the debt issue, but has not provided assistance to the Jubilee Debt Campaign, a British-based coalition of groups and organisations established to influence British Government policy on debt. There are no plans to provide such assistance. I strongly appreciate the work of NGOs in highlighting the issue of the debt burden. The Government remains fully committed to playing its part in tackling the issue urgently and effectively.

Question No. 71 answered with Question No. 10.

Diplomatic Representation.

72. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the suggestion that in embassies in Europe, including here, there is non-compliance with internationally recognised labour rights and standards, particularly in relation to non-EU staff. [34205/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): All locally recruited staff in Irish Missions abroad, including those based in the other EU Member States, are treated equitably regardless of nationality. Local staff are remunerated at the mid to upper end of local salary norms and are employed in compliance with the applicable labour legislation. Where Irish statutory minimum standards exceed local entitlements, Irish standards are applied.

As regards Embassies in Ireland, the general position is that under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, it is the duty of all persons enjoying privileges and immunities to respect the laws and regulations of the receiving State. Nevertheless, in the case of an employment law dispute involving an Embassy located in Ireland and a locally-recruited employee of that Embassy, the international law doctrine of sovereign immunity may apply in certain circumstances to deny the jurisdiction of the Irish courts. However, even where this is the case, the employment rights and standards at issue may still be enforceable in the courts of the foreign country concerned, if that state subscribes to those rights and standards.

Notwithstanding the above, my Department is not aware of any case where foreign Embassies in Ireland may be treating non-EU nationals any differently to EU nationals in their employment.

Question No. 73 answered with Question No. 23.

Question No. 74 answered with Question No. 61.

Companies Registration.

75. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment further to Parliamentary Question No. 68 of 1 October 2008, the average length of time involved in the registration of a business name in the Companies Registration Office; the steps proposed to be taken in order to eliminate the backlog for registration of business names; the targets and timescale, having regard to the inconvenience and delay being caused to business and commerce as a result of the backlog; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34266/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy John McGuinness): At present, the average length of time from receipt to registration of an application for a business name with the Companies Registration Office (CRO) is eight weeks.

The Office recently allocated extra resources to this area and it is anticipated that the backlog will be eliminated by the end of November if applications continue to be received at their present rate.

Workplace Accidents.

76. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the efforts her Department is making to reduce deaths and injuries from workplace accidents in different industries, such as construction, agriculture and so on; the number of such accidents by individual sector which occurred in 2007 and to date in 2008; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34356/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Billy Kelleher): I would refer the Deputy to my combined written answer in the Dáil Debates for 24 September 2008 to Questions Nos. 136, 141 and 159.

Statistics

In 2007 a total of 67 workplace fatalities was reported to the Health and Safety Authority compared to 48 to date (7 October) in 2008 and compared to a total of 51 fatalities in the whole of 2006.

There were over 7,000 non-fatal work injuries overall reported to the Authority in 2007 compared to over 5,000 non-fatal injuries to date in 2008.

The NACE industrial and economic sector classification system changed in January 2008. Therefore, a direct comparison on the sector codes for each year is not possible as the sectors represented by some codes have changed significantly. However, the figures for five key sectors have been extracted from the data and are on the following table.

Health and Safety Authority

Operational responsibility for the enforcement of occupational health and safety policy and the promotion of a general awareness of occupational health and safety issues rests with the Health and Safety Authority.

Details of the Authority's planned activities, in pursuit of its operational remit, are contained in its annual Programme of Work 2008 which can be accessed at the Authority's website (<http://publications.hsa.ie/index.asp?locID=17&docID=268>). I expect to receive the Authority's proposed Programme of Work for 2009 before the end of this month.

Construction and Agriculture

It is obvious, from the statistics, that both construction and agriculture are the leading high risk sectors. It is my view that the Authority should prioritise its efforts in accordance with the sectoral risk profiles and this is, in fact, how the Authority operates in practice.

For my part, I will continue to use all opportunities to drive home the health and safety message. For example, on the construction side, I formally launched the Construction Safety Partnership Plan 2008-2010 on 17 June 2008. The overall aim of the partnership is to achieve the highest possible standard of safety, health and welfare in Irish construction. The Construction Safety Partnership (CSP) includes representatives of the Construction Industry Federation (CIF), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), Health and Safety Authority (HSA) and other relevant Agencies and Government Departments.

On the agriculture side, I attended and addressed the first All Island Farm Safety Conference in Monaghan in June of this year. This conference was co-hosted by the Health and Safety Authority along with the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI). The

conference attracted over 200 from North and South to hear both national and international experts present on safety strategies and initiatives on farm safety.

I also, participated in the Authority's awareness initiative at the recent National Ploughing Championships in Kilkenny. I have encouraged the Authority to continue and develop its partnership with Teagasc and to follow through on the development and distribution of the Farm Safety Code of Practice which was distributed to 160,000 farm households in December 2006. This joint initiative focuses on increasing the use of this Code of Practice and take up of half day training courses on the Code of Practice available at Teagasc Advisory Centres.

I am satisfied that the Health and Safety Authority is proactive in encouraging safety in all workplaces and have prioritised its initiatives in the agriculture and construction sectors. However, it is always important to remember that the Authority, on its own, cannot deliver health and safety in every workplace. Ultimately, health and safety in the workplace can only be delivered by those who control and work in each workplace.

	2007*		2008	
	Fatal	Non-fatal	Fatal	Non-fatal
Construction.	18		13	920
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing	23		17	66
Mines and Quarries	2		0	60
Manufacturing	3		6	1,156
Transport and Storage	8		3	656
Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	3		0	50
Water supply; sewerage, waste mgt & remediation	0		2	81
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles	1		2	548
Information and communication	1		0	66
Professional, scientific and technical activities	0		1	30
Administrative and support service activities	2		0	70
Public administration and defence	4		1	571
Arts, entertainment and recreation	0		1	21
Other service activities	2		2	162
Other sectors	0		0	1,010
Totals	67		48	5,467

*Due to the change to the NACE industrial and economic sector classification it is not possible to give definitive numbers of non-fatal accidents for the each sector (as defined in NACE) reported to the Authority in 2007.

Reported accidents 2007

Economic Sectors	Reports
Agriculture, hunting, forestry	100
Fishing	10
Mining and quarrying	71
Manufacturing	1,609
Electricity, gas, water supply	27
Construction	1,660
Wholesale and retail trade	778
Hotels and restaurants	125
Transport, storage, communication	987

[Deputy Billy Kelleher.]

Economic Sectors	Reports
Financial intermediation	156
Real estate, renting, business activities	238
Public administration, defence, social security	903
Education	73
Health and social work	877
Other	213
Total	7,827

Company Restructuring.

77. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the position regarding a company (details supplied) in County Limerick in view of the media reports regarding the company; and if she will make a statement regarding the future of this plant. [34413/08]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Mary Coughlan): The fact that Dell is undertaking a fundamental review of its manufacturing operations and global business model has been in the public domain for some time. It is standard IDA practice, where any of its client companies is undertaking restructuring of this type, to engage with the company with a view to mitigating the impact on the company's Irish operations. I can confirm that IDA has been engaged in extensive discussions with the company at the highest level. I have been fully briefed on these discussions as they have occurred. I need hardly say that such contacts always proceed on a confidential basis and it is vitally important, if the best possible outcome for the Irish operations is to be secured, that confidentiality is respected.

Departmental Staff.

78. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Finance the number of officials engaged in customs duties in the Border, midland and west region for the years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34263/08]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that the number of officials engaged in customs duties in the Border Midlands West region for the years in question is as follows:

- 2005 — 89
- 2006 — 87
- 2007 — 84
- 2008 — 89

The counties covered by the Border Midlands West region are: Galway, Roscommon, Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim, Longford, Donegal, Westmeath, Offaly, Louth, Cavan and Monaghan.

79. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Finance if there are vacancies within the Office of Public Works in County Wexford or south Leinster which could be filled by transfer at general operative level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34305/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Martin Mansergh): At present the Office of Public Works has no vacancies in County Wexford or in South Leinster which could be filled by transfer at general operative level. However, any general operative in OPW can apply for a transfer, which would be considered in the event of a suitable vacancy arising.

80. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Finance if there are vacancies within any Department in County Wexford or south Leinster which could be filled by transfer at general operative level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34306/08]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I have no function in the filling of General Operative level vacancies in other Government Departments.

I would refer the Deputy to my reply to Parliamentary Question No. 79, ref. 34305/08, and advise that, other than the Office of Public Works, my Department has no General Operative posts in County Wexford or South Leinster nor do they have any posts that could be filled at General Operative level.

Decentralisation Programme.

81. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Finance the number of properties purchased, leased, built or under construction for the decentralisation programme; the floor space in respect of each; the number of occupants for which it was designed; the cost in capital or annual lease; and the numbers in occupation to date. [34335/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Martin Mansergh): The number of properties purchased, leased, built or under construction under the Decentralisation Programme are outlined in the following tables. The numbers in occupation to date is a matter for each individual Department. *Note:* The following table does not include €24m approximately in respect of furniture, total rent, VAT on fit outs, surveys and fees, per cent for art scheme and other miscellaneous expenditures.

Location	Occupier	Permanent places available now or under construction or at advanced stage of procurement	Places available advance	Building lease area/ area as per planning application	Site acquisition costs	Annual lease/rent	Project construction costs to date	Fit Out costs excl VAT, fees and Furniture
					€	€	€	€
Athlone	Dept. of Education & Science (includes local office rationalisation)	210		4,665		None	12,489,489.00	
Athy	Revenue Commissioners		100	1,269		231,554.00		493,000.00
Ballina	Road Safety Authority	62		972		151,641.00		319,000.00
Buncrana	Dept. of Social and Family Affairs	120		2,460	1,105,860.00	None	2,372,671.00	
Carlow	Dept. of Enterprise, Trade and Employment	300		21,334	1,440,000.00	None	28,000.00	
Carlow	Dept. of Enterprise, Trade and Employment		100	1,806		369,436.00		2,068,000.00
Carrick-on-Shannon	Dept. of Social and Family Affairs	186		3,716		800,000.00		4,331,000.00
Cavan	Dept. of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and HIQA				2,900,000.00	None		
Cavan (4)	Dept. of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources		43	478		102,818.00		196,000.00
Ciaremorris	OPW plus local staff of Dept. Agriculture, D/SFA, PSA and Courthouse				2,500,000.00	None		
Ciaremorris	OPW		40			68,712.00		725,106.00
Clonakilty	Dept. of Agriculture, BIM & Others	210		6,458	2,875,000.00	None	12,932,941.00	
Clonakilty (Lease 1)	Dept. of Agriculture, BIM & Others		100	1,152		157,480.00		118,855.00
Clonakilty (Lease 2)	Dept. of Agriculture, BIM & Others		45	870		118,910.00		116,744.00
Drogheda	SFA, CIB, (& Courts Service)				12,400,000.00	None		
Dundalk	Sustainable Energy Ireland		30	503		96,000.00		190,000.00
Dungarvan	OSI				2,100,000.00	None		

Location	Occupier	Permanent places available now or under construction or at advanced stage of procurement	Places available advance	Building lease area/ area as per planning application	Site acquisition costs	Annual lease/rent	Project construction costs to date	Fit Out costs excl VAT, fees and Furniture
					€	€	€	€
Edenderry	Dept. of Education & Science	34		722	1,500,000.00	None		
Furbo	Dept. of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs					None	2,805,325.00	
Furbo	Dept. of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs		13	223		24,382.00		22,000.00
Killarney	Dept. of Arts, Sport and Tourism	135		4128	4,500,000.00	None	13,972,099.00	
Killarney	Dept. of Arts, Sport and Tourism		70	1,115		140,000.00		64,000.00
Kilrush	Revenue Commissioners	65		585		85,050.00		411,000.00
Limerick	Dept. Of Foreign Affairs	170		4,300		833,112.00		
Limerick	Dept. Of Foreign Affairs		55	854		128,694.00		
Listowel	Revenue Commissioners	65		1,140		183,000.00		1,352,000.00
Longford	Irish Prisons Service	178		5,523		None	18,478,714.00	
Loughrea	Transport	50		808		139,235.00		572,000.00
Mullingar	Dept. of Education & Science	314		9,068	8,250,000.00	None	20,559.00	
Navan	Dept. of Justice, Equality and Law Reform	150		2,744		440,000.00		3,093,740.00
Navan	Revenue Commissioners	130		2,671		575,360.00		2,135,235.00
Newbridge	Department of Defence	288		7,806	6,300,000.00	None	5,757,000.00	
Newcastlewest	Revenue Commissioners	51		877	325,000.00	None	2,141,110.00	
Newcastlewest	Revenue Commissioners		50	492		68,771.00		
Portlarington	NCCA, DATA PC, Equality Tribunal, NEWB		22	547		73,500.00		
Portlaoise (Lease 2)	Dept. of Agriculture		100	1,479		264,640.00		106,000.00
Portlaoise (Lease 1)	Dept. of Agriculture		153	1,324		191,000.00		
Portlaoise (Lease 3)	Dept. of Agriculture		35	406		75,000.00		
Portlaoise (Lease 4)	NCCA, Equality Tribunal		26			69,661.00		
Portlaoise	Dept. of Agriculture	850		20,873		None	1,247,148.00	357,952.00
Roscommon	Land Registry				1,027,636.00	None		
Roscrea	Equality Authority, Garda Authority (Ombudsman)		22	542	3,000,000.00	108,000.00		

Location	Occupier	Permanent places available now or under construction or at advanced stage of procurement	Places available advance	Building lease area/ area as per planning application	Site acquisition costs	Annual lease/rent	Project construction costs to date	Fit Out costs excl VAT, fees and Furniture
					€	€	€	€
Sligo	Dept. of Social and Family Affairs	83		4,404		None	12,595,481.00	
Sligo	Dept. of Social and Family Affairs		18	146		27,926.00		
Thomastown	H.S.A.				1,800,000.00	None		
Thurles (Lease 1)	Garda Fines Office — Temporary Accommodation		67	1,236		186,186.00		1,267,000.00
Thurles (Lease 2)	Garda Vetting Unit		66	393		66,254.00		262,271.00
Thurles	Garda Branches plus Revenue Commissioners and DSFA				967,500.00	None		
Tipperary Town (Lease 1)	Private Security Authority		60	502		108,200.00		
Tipperary Town	Private Security Authority	67				None	3,349,429.00	
Tipperary Town (Lease 2)	Dept. of Justice / INIS		70	628		103,597.00		800,693.00
Tipperary Town	Dept. of Justice / INIS			1,035		None		
Trim	OPW		30	382		67,752.00		43,000.00
Trim	OPW	333		8331		None	12,500,000.00	
Knock	Dept. of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs				3,600,000.00	None		
Tubbercurry (Lease 1)	Dept. of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs		60	753		86,755.00		81,000.00
Tubbercurry (Lease 2)	Dept. of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs		42	810		88,138.00		321,318.00
Tullamore	Dept. Of Finance (building purchased)				10,034,000.00	None		
Waterford	Dept. of Environment, Heritage and Local Government	130			8,000,000.00	None		
Wexford	Dept. of Environment, Heritage and Local Government			6,586		None	6,860,000.00	
Wexford	Dept. of Environment, Heritage and Local Government	283	44	581		75,000.00		206,000.00
TOTALS		4,464	1,461		80,716,246.00	6,305,764.00	113,635,966.00	19,652,914.00

Tax Code.

82. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Finance the rates of excises and VAT which apply to each of the excisable products showing in respect of each product the final price and the amount of this final price which is made up by VAT and by excise duty; and the total revenue expected to be raised in each case from the product in 2008. [34336/08]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that the excise duty and VAT that applies to the main excisable products are as shown in the following table.

With respect to the total revenue expected to be raised in each case from the products in 2008, I will be publishing the annual Budget next Tuesday, 14 October 2008.

Tax Context of Main Excisable Products

Product	Measure	Price	Excise Content	VAT Content	Total Tax Content
		€	€	€	€
Lager	Pint	4.40	0.47	0.76	1.23
Whiskey	Standard Measure	3.73	0.56	0.65	1.20
Wine	Bottle 75cl	9.02	2.05	1.56	3.61
Cider	Bottle 33cl	4.56	0.27	0.79	1.07
Cigarettes	20 Pack	7.55	4.56	1.31	5.87
Unleaded Petrol	Litre	1.23	0.44	0.21	0.66
Auto Diesel	Litre	1.29	0.37	0.22	0.59
Marked Gas Oil	1000 Litres	792.00	47.36	94.20	141.56

Consumer Price Index.

83. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Finance the impact on the consumer price index of a five cent increase on motor fuels, €20 per tonne carbon tax, 50 cent on a bottle of wine, 10 cent on a pint of beer, 10 cent on a measure of whiskey and 50 cent on a packet of 20 cigarettes respectively. [34337/08]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that, based on data currently available, their estimate of the impact on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) of increases on the products referred to are as follows:

	Excise Increase (VAT inclusive) of	Impact on CPI in a full year
Petrol	5 cent	+0.13%
Diesel	5 cent	+0.03%
Wine	50 cent	+0.05%
Beer	10 cent	+0.13%
Spirits	10 cent	+0.05%
Cigarettes	50 cent	+0.21%

The impact on the CPI of the increases referred to above would, of course, vary depending on the timing of any such increases.

[Deputy Brian Lenihan.]

The CPI impact from a carbon tax will depend on the extent to which a carbon tax will apply. Consequently, it is not possible to establish any reliable CPI impact at this stage from a carbon tax.

Tax Code.

84. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the tax credits in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare with a statement from 1 January to date in 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34367/08]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I have been advised by the Revenue Commissioners that a letter detailing the 2008 tax credits granted to the person concerned issued on 7 October 2008.

Disabled Drivers.

85. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if and when a primary medical certificate will issue to facilitate qualification under the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) 1994 Regulations in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34381/08]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The initial application for a Primary Medical Certificate under the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Regulations 1994, is made to the Senior Medical Officer of the relevant local Health Service Executive administrative area.

If the Primary Medical Certificate has been refused in this case, the named person may appeal the refusal to the Medical Board of Appeal, National Rehabilitation Hospital, Rochestown Avenue, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin. I would point out that the Medical Board of Appeal is independent in the exercise of its functions.

Parliamentary Questions.

86. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health and Children the reason the Health Service Executive has yet to issue a full reply in relation to a previous parliamentary question (details supplied). [34265/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I have been informed by the Health Service Executive that a reply issued to the Deputy on 24 September 2008.

Nursing Homes Repayment Scheme.

87. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health and Children the reason a claim for a person (details supplied) in County Mayo has been refused on the basis that they were not entitled to claim when in fact they were; and when the new claim which was made on their behalf by their solicitor will be dealt with. [34278/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The Health Service Executive has responsibility for administering the Repayment Scheme and the information sought by the Deputy relates to matters within the area of responsibility of the Executive.

My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued to the Deputy.

Services for People with Disabilities.

88. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health and Children the circumstances in which an application under the motorised transport scheme could be approved without the applicant being in employment or in a position to return to employment. [34292/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): The Motorised Transport Grant is a grant towards the purchase/adaptation of a vehicle by a person with a severe disability where the vehicle is essential for him or her to retain employment. Persons with a disability who qualify but are incapable of driving and who have to be driven to and from work are also considered eligible for a grant provided that they are driven by another named person to and from work.

The grant may also be provided other than for retaining employment, (in exceptional circumstances) to a person with a severe disability who lives in very isolated circumstances. The persons disability must prevent them from using public transport and they must have serious transport difficulties. However, the applicant still needs to meet the medical criteria, the means test, he or she cannot be in receipt of the Mobility Allowance and the calculation of the amount of grant will factor in any tax relief received under the Disabled Drivers and Passengers Tax Relief Scheme (administered by the Revenue Commissioners).

Suicide Incidence.

89. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the target for the reduction of suicides by 20% by 2012; the number of suicides that have been reported for 2007 and 2008; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34308/08]

90. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of recommendations of Reach Out that have been implemented as promised in the Programme for Government; the number of the recommendations of the sub committee on the high levels of suicide that have been implemented as promised in the Programme for Government; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34309/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 89 and 90 together.

According to the Central Statistics Office the provisional number of deaths by suicide in 2007 was 460. The figures for 2008 are not yet available. Suicide prevention rates have been agreed with the National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) — an interim target for a 10% reduction in suicide is to be achieved by 2010. In addition, a target of 5% reduction in repeated self-harm by 2010 and a further 5% by 2016 has been set.

The recommendations of the Joint Committee on Health and Children regarding the “High Levels of Suicide in Irish Society” are consistent with the actions identified in “Reach Out”. The HSE, through the National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP), oversees the implementation of the “Reach Out” The Executive, therefore, is the appropriate body to consider the particular matter raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Mental Health Services.

91. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of multi disciplinary mental health teams that have been established nationwide; the number of teams it is estimated that will be needed; the number of staff; the cost of establishing such teams; the

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timeframe for these teams to be in place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34310/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): “A Vision for Change”- the Report of the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy provides a framework for action to develop modern, high quality mental health services over a seven to ten year period. The Report estimates that 332 community mental health teams are required to deliver the proposed community-based mental health service. Each multidisciplinary team will include the core skills of psychiatry, nursing, social work, clinical psychology, and occupational therapy. To implement this, substantial change is required in the organisation and delivery of mental health services. Current resources require to be reallocated and remodelled to fund the new structure.

Implementation is the responsibility of the Health Service Executive (HSE). The Executive, therefore, is the appropriate body to consider the particular matter raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

92. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the amount of the estimated €800 million from the sale of existing mental hospitals that has been realised; the use to which the moneys received has been put; the length of time her Department had those moneys; the mental health purpose for which they will be used in the future; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34311/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): “A Vision for Change”, the Report of the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy has been accepted by Government as the basis for the future development of our mental health services. The Report recommends inter alia that a plan to bring about the closure of all psychiatric hospitals should be drawn up and implemented and that the resources released by these closures should be protected for reinvestment in the mental health service. It is understood that the Health Service Executive (HSE) has disposed of a small number of assets since the launch of the Report in January 2006.

As the HSE has primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation, the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular issues raised by the Deputy. Therefore, my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Health Service Staff.

93. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of extra post graduate training places that have been provided for clinical psychologists as promised in the programme for Government; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34312/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): As previously outlined to the Deputy in Parliamentary Question No. 268 of 8 July 2008, a Working Group within the Health Service Executive continues to examine the issue of training places for clinical psychologists. Accordingly, I have requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to furnish me with a report on the current position, and I will communicate further with the Deputy in relation to this matter as soon as it comes to hand.

Health Services.

94. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of chest and pain respiratory clinics that have been established as promised in the programme for Government; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34313/08]

96. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of local injury clinics as promised in the programme for Government that have been established; the location of same; the hours they are open to the public; the services available therein; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34315/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 94 and 96 together.

Improving the delivery of Accident and Emergency services continues to be a high priority for this Government.

The Programme for Government contains a number of commitments designed to further improve the delivery of Accident and Emergency services including:

- the further development of chest pain and respiratory clinics to ease pressure on A & E
- the establishment of a national network of Local Injury Clinics.

Chest pain assessment and respiratory services are provided at existing Emergency Departments. There are also examples of dedicated GP access to chest pain assessment units in hospitals such as the Mater, Connolly, Cork University and South Infirmary. Dedicated respiratory clinics are conducted at hospitals such as the Mater Hospital and Connolly.

Capital provision has been included by the HSE within its Capital Plan 2008-2013 for the enhancement of Emergency Department facilities in line with the recommendations of the Emergency Task Force. The funding is to be targeted at upgrading and extending existing departments and the development of new departments. A number of the new Emergency Departments have provision for minor injury clinics at hospitals including Connolly, Cork University, St Vincent's, St James's and South Tipperary General Hospitals.

Outside of Dublin, funding was provided for the expansion of the minor injury service at St. John's Limerick, and the provision of a minor injuries unit at Waterford Regional Hospital. These services are fully operational.

In line with the recommendations of the Teamwork Report "Improving Safety and Achieving Better Standards", the HSE is also committed to the development of Minor Injury Units in local hospitals in the North East. The first of these units is to be developed at Monaghan Hospital. Other units are to open at Our Lady's Hospital, Navan and Louth County Hospital, Dundalk.

My Department has asked the HSE to communicate directly to the Deputy on the additional operational issues raised.

Hospital Staff.

95. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of new, not replacement, accident and emergency consultants who have been appointed as promised in the national development plan; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34314/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Subject to overall parameters set by Government, the Health Service Executive has the responsibility for determining the

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composition of its staffing complement. In that regard, it is a matter for the Executive to manage and deploy its human resources to best meet the requirements of its Annual Service Plan for the delivery of health and personal social services to the public. The Executive is the appropriate body to consider the matter raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Question No. 96 answered with Question No. 94.

97. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of the 2000 extra consultants promised in the programme for Government who have been appointed; the percentage that number represents of the 2000 promised; the specific funds that have been allocated to recruit 2000 consultants in 2008; the estimated cost in 2009 and other years thereafter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34316/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Subject to overall parameters set by Government, the Health Service Executive has the responsibility for determining the composition of its staffing complement. In that regard, it is a matter for the Executive to manage and deploy its human resources to best meet the requirements of its Annual Service Plan for the delivery of health and personal social services to the public. The Executive is the appropriate body to consider the matter raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Hospital Accommodation.

98. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of the 1500 public only hospital beds promised in the programme for Government that have been provided; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34317/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The Programme for Government includes a commitment to provide an additional 1,500 public acute hospital beds. Approximately 1,000 of these will be provided through the co-location initiative and the balance through the Health Service Executive's (HSE's) capital plan, which is part of the National Development Plan. The co-location initiative aims to deliver approximately 1,000 of these beds for public patients through the development of private hospitals on public sites. The intention is to transfer private activity to those hospitals thereby freeing up capacity for public patients. The Board of the Health Service Executive (HSE) has approved preferred bidder status for the development of co-located hospitals at the following six sites:

- Beaumont Hospital,
- Cork University Hospital,
- Limerick Regional Hospital,
- St. James's Hospital,
- Waterford Regional Hospital and
- Sligo General Hospital.

Project Agreements for the Beaumont, Cork and Limerick sites have been signed. The necessary preparatory work for Project Agreements in respect of St. James's Hospital, Waterford Regional Hospital and Sligo General Hospital is proceeding.

Connolly Hospital and Tallaght Hospital, which are also participating in the co-location initiative, are at an earlier stage of the procurement process. A tender in respect of Connolly Hospital has been received and is under consideration. Work is being undertaken to finalise the Invitation to Tender (ITT) for Tallaght Hospital.

In 2007 the HSE commissioned an independent review of acute bed capacity requirements for Ireland until the year 2020. The report produced reaffirms the case for continuing to increase our focus on a primary and community care model. The review recommended that Ireland develop an Integrated Model of Care system. This overall strategic direction has already been adopted by other developed countries, such as Denmark and Canada. The review forms a basis for discussion with key stakeholders on how best to plan for the provision of public health care to 2020.

My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to furnish the Deputy with the specific information requested on progress on the additional public acute hospital beds and day places being provided under the Executive's capital programme.

Hospitals Building Programme.

99. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the amount of the €2.4 billion acute hospital capital programme in the national development plan that has been expended to date; the percentage that represents of the target; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34318/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services including estate management was assigned to the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Therefore the Executive is the appropriate body to respond to the particular query raised by the Deputy.

Accordingly, my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Medical Cards.

100. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she has index linked the income thresholds for medical cards to increases in the average industrial wage as promised in the Programme for Government; if she has doubled the income limit eligibility for parents with children under the age of six and trebled them for parents of children with an intellectual disability under the age of 18 as promised in the programme for Government; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34319/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): In conjunction with the development of a new legislative framework to provide for clear statutory provisions on eligibility for health and personal social services, my Department is currently reviewing the assessment criteria for medical cards in the context of financial, medical and social need in line with the commitment in Towards 2016. A Steering Group has been established to undertake this review and is expected to complete its work and report to me within the next few months. Upon completion of this report, it is my intention to then consider how best to progress the commitments in the Programme for Government in relation to medical card eligibility.

Health Services.

101. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the amount of the €2.1 billion promised in the programme for Government that has been invested in the primary care capital investment programme in the national development plan; the percentage of the €2.1 billion that represents; when the programme will be completed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34320/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services including estate management was assigned to the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Therefore the Executive is the appropriate body to respond to the particular query raised by the Deputy.

Accordingly, my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Water Quality.

102. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children if the Health Service Executive has been mandated to report on the fluoridation of water; if it has been resourced to do so; when the report will be completed and published as promised in the programme for Government; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34321/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): There is a commitment in the Programme for Government that the Health Service Executive will publish a comprehensive report on water fluoridation. My Department is working with the HSE to ensure that the commitment will be met.

Vaccination Programme.

103. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children when cervical vaccine will be introduced; the funds that have been set aside to introduce it; the vaccine or vaccines that have been chosen; the cost per patient and in total; the number of vaccines expected to be administered and to which age groups; if appropriate arrangements have been made with the medical professions to roll out the vaccine nationwide; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34322/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): In August 2008, the Health Service Executive was requested by my Department to examine operational and procurement issues relating to the introduction of a HPV vaccination programme for 12 year old girls on a basis that would achieve maximum cost effectiveness and appropriate national uptake rates. A response has recently been received from the HSE and it is being examined by my Department.

Alcohol Abuse.

104. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of the recommendations of the working group on alcohol abuse established under Sustaining Progress that have been implemented as promised in the programme for Government; the funds that have been set aside to do so; when the recommendations will be implemented in their entirety; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34323/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Mary Wallace): An Implementation Group was established by my Department in November 2006 in order to monitor and report the progress on the implementation of the 29 actions identified in the Report

“Working Together to Reduce the Harms caused by Alcohol Misuse”. The Report of the Implementation Group will outline the progress made to date on the actions identified, which fall across a range of sectors, and identify where continued progress is needed in order to deliver on the commitment in the Programme for Government. The Report of the Implementation Group Report will be published shortly.

Obesity Strategy.

105. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of recommendations of the National Strategy for Tackling Obesity her Department or the Health Service Executive has implemented; the percentage of the number of recommendations that represents; the funding that has been provided to implement the recommendations; the time-frame for the completion and implementation of the recommendations of the National Strategy for Tackling Obesity; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34324/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Mary Wallace): Implementation of the report of the National Taskforce on Obesity is ongoing. A range of initiatives are being taken by various Government Departments and Agencies. These include the following:

- my Department and the Department of Education and Science are developing healthy eating guidelines for schools. Guidelines for preschools and primary schools are already developed and appropriate healthy eating training by community dieticians with preschool and primary school staff is currently under way. The guidelines for post-primary schools will be published shortly. Guidelines on levels of physical activity are currently being devised by the Population Health Directorate of the Health Service Executive (HSE).
- my Department is finalising the first National Nutrition Policy. This will fulfil a key recommendation of the Taskforce on Obesity. While addressing the nutritional needs of the whole population, it will have a particular focus on the 0 -18 year age group.
- the Cardiovascular Health Policy Group, due to report this year, will be advising on measures to tackle lifestyle issues like obesity at population level as well as in the primary care setting.
- my Department, through the HSE, is participating in the World Health Organisation (WHO) European Growth Surveillance Initiative, which aims to monitor child growth and overweight and obesity trends throughout Europe and is targeted at children aged between 7 to 7.9 years. This initiative will contribute to the development of a National Database to monitor prevalence trends of growth, overweight and obesity in children, as one of the priority actions in Improving Health Outcomes for Children in the National Partnership Agreement-Towards 2016.

In order to give a new impetus to this issue, I am commencing a series of bilateral discussions with relevant Departments with regard to the implementation of the recommendations of the Taskforce. It is my intention to work closely with Government colleagues to ensure a coherent approach to implementing the recommendations of the Taskforce.

My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy in respect of relevant aspects of the question.

Health Services.

106. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she appointed an expert group in 2007 to develop the personal health check programme promised in the programme for Government; if so, if the report of the group has been published; the funding she put in place to implement the promise to provide a personal health check programme; when it will be rolled out nationwide; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34325/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The Programme for Government contains a commitment to the development of a freely available and personalised national programme to provide for the prevention and early detection of illnesses for both men and women.

The Programme intends that guidelines should be developed for the Personal Health Check based on best available national and international evidence of what works well, with structured call and recall arrangements during a person's life and provision for appropriate clinical follow-up where required.

My Department is continuing to examine a range of issues which need to be addressed in order to decide how best to proceed in relation to this commitment, in the context of international best practice, our own national health policy and the many competing priorities for health service development.

Mental Health Services.

107. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the funding and financial arrangements in place to build a new central mental hospital at Thornton Hall; the financial arrangements intended, that is, if the project will be funded by direct Government investment or by way of public private partnerships; the projected cost of the hospital; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34327/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): In accordance with the Government decision of 16th May 2006 to approve the development of a new national forensic mental health facility at Thornton Hall, Co. Dublin, the cost of developing the hospital will be met from the proceeds of the sale of the existing site in Dundrum.

Medical Cards.

108. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the estimated cost of means testing the over 70s medical card per person and, in total, for the current number of over 70s medical cards issued; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34328/08]

111. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of over 70s medical cards issued for each year since the over 70s medical card became available; the number of such cards issued to date in 2008; the total fees awarded to general practitioners for those specific medical cards; the fees paid to date in 2008; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34331/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 108 and 111 together.

All persons aged 70 and over have had a statutory entitlement to a medical card since July 2001 and, therefore, it was not necessary to assess means. Information provided by the Health Service Executive (HSE) to my Department indicates that on 30th September 2008 there were

138,269 persons aged 70 and over who had a medical card which attracts the higher GP capitation fee of €640. A GP capitation payment of between €139.59 and €244.64 (depending on the person's age, gender and distance from their residence to the GP surgery) applies in respect of a medical card for a person reaching the age of 70 years who previously held a medical card.

Details of the number of medical card holders are provided to my Department by the Health Service Executive (HSE) on a net basis showing the balance after new cards have been issued and other cards, as appropriate, have been deleted from the Executive's database. The HSE has provided the following information in relation to the number of higher GP capitation medical card holders at the end of each year from 2001 to 2007.

	31-12-2001	31-12-2002	31-12-2003	31-12-2004	31-12-2005	31-12-2006	31-12-2007
Total	64,317	83,771	94,241	103,957	113,842	122,158	131,668

As the information regarding the total fees awarded to general practitioners in respect of those specific medical cards is not provided by the Health Service Executive to my Department as a matter of routine, the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive has been requested to arrange to address these matters and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Health Services.

109. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the present day build cost of a 55 to 60 bed community nursing home unit (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34329/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): My Department has been in touch with the Health Service Executive and I am informed that the Unit referred to by the Deputy is a 50 bed Community Nursing Unit (CNU) consisting of mainly 4 bedded and 2 bedded rooms with a small number of single rooms and was constructed circa 1998-2000.

The Executive is currently undertaking a construction programme for Community Nursing Units which are being procured by means of a Design Build tenders. These units comply fully with the recent Health Information and Quality Authority Design Guidelines for Residential Accommodation (80% single rooms, all with en suites etc). These 50 bed Community Nursing Units are being delivered for approximately €10 million each. This cost includes construction, design and equipping costs. On a pro rata basis a 55 to 60 bed unit would therefore cost approximately €11 million to €12 million.

Nursing Home Subventions.

110. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of elderly people or patients awaiting funding for nursing home beds per county and per Health Service Executive area, specifically in north Dublin City and County and in total here; her plans in the short term to address the shortfall in funding in this area which is causing hardship and clogging up acute hospitals through no fault of the patients who cannot leave hospital; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34330/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Máire Hackett): In 2007, expenditure by the HSE on nursing home subventions was almost €205 million. This year the Government has redirected an additional €25 million from the overall allocation in respect of the Nursing Homes Support Scheme, A Fair Deal, for the purpose of nursing home supports, including subvention. This includes €13 million for the provision of 200 contract beds.

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In addition, the long-term residential care fast-track initiative, which commenced in 2007 and is continuing until 2009, aims to provide 860 new intermediate and long-term residential care beds. The latest information received from the Health Service Executive indicates that 188 beds were provided in 2007 and that 325 and 347 are to be provided in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Of these, 75 are in the HSE West, 316 are in the HSE South, 242 are in the HSE Dublin North East and 227 are in the HSE Mid-Leinster.

Finally, the Deputy has asked about the number of elderly people or patients awaiting funding for nursing home beds per county and per Health Service Executive area. Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services was assigned to the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Therefore, the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular matter raised. I am referring the Deputy's query to the HSE for direct reply.

Question No. 111 answered with Question No. 108.

Medical Cards.

112. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of general practitioner visit only medical cards issued in each year since these cards became available; the number of such cards issued to date in 2008; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34332/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I introduced the GP visit card in 2005. Details of the numbers of GP visit card holders are provided to my Department each month by the Health Service Executive. The figures are provided on a net basis showing the balance after new cards have been issued and other cards, as appropriate, have been deleted from the Executive's database, e.g. following a review of a person's circumstances. The following table shows the number of persons with a GP visit card on the dates requested by the Deputy.

Year	Number of GP Visit Card holders
31st December 2005	5,080
31st December 2006	51,760
31st December 2007	75,589
31st August 2008	82,198

113. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of full medical cards issued for each of the years 2004 to date in 2008; the percentage of the population those numbers represent; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34333/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Details of the numbers of medical card holders are provided to my Department each month by the Health Service Executive. The figures are provided on a net basis showing the balance after new cards have been issued and other cards, as appropriate, have been deleted from the Executive's database, e.g. following a review of a person's circumstances. The following table shows the number of persons with a medical card on the dates requested by the Deputy.

Year	National Population	No. of medical card holders	Proportion of National Population with medical cards
31st December 2004	4,130,700	1,145,083	27.72%
31st December 2005	4,234,900	1,155,727	27.29%
31st December 2006	4,239,848	1,221,695	28.81%
31st December 2007	4,339,000	1,276,178	29.41%
2008 (31st August 2008)	4,422,100	1,324,477	29.95%

Health Service Staff.

114. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health and Children the position regarding the regulation of dental technicians; and if it is intended to make changes to same in the near future. [34362/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): In December, 2007, a new scheme for the creation of Clinical Dental Technicians was submitted to me by the Dental Council under the Dentists Act, 1985 for my consent. The draft scheme was examined by my officials and I granted my consent to this scheme in July, 2008.

This scheme will set down the training, qualifications and necessary knowledge for an individual to qualify to apply to join the register of Clinical Dental Technicians. This register of Clinical Dental Technicians will be operated by the Dental Council.

Health Services.

115. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health and Children the extent to which moneys or expenses have been granted to a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34379/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The Health Service Executive has responsibility for administering Patient Private Property Accounts and the information sought by the Deputy relates to matters within the area of responsibility of the Executive.

My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued to the Deputy.

Disabled Drivers.

116. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health and Children if and when a primary medical certificate will issue to facilitate qualification under the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) 1994 Regulations in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34380/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have this case investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Rail Services.

117. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Transport his intentions in regard to rail

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freight following the refusal by An Bord Pleanála to allow the transfer of the Port of Cork in the absence of rail freight facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34252/08]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): I refer the Deputy to my composite reply to Questions Nos. 262 and 265 that I answered on the 7th October which sets out the general position regarding the greater use of rail freight.

In relation to Cork Port, it is a matter for the port company in the first instance to consider the implications of the decision of An Bord Pleanála. The port company will convey the outcome of this consideration to my Department in due course.

Private Airports.

118. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Transport the number of privately owned aircraft which enter the State via private airports for the years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34264/08]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): My Department does not hold records of the number of private aircraft entering the State through privately owned airports or through the State airports. Under the provisions of the Chicago Convention which governs international civil aviation, privately owned aircraft may enter the State for non-traffic purposes without obtaining prior permission from my Department. In addition aircraft may land at Irish airports for technical stops (e.g. for refuelling purposes) without notifying my Department.

Rail Network.

119. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 719 of 24 September 2008, the amount of funding sought by Irish Rail towards the cost of the project in 2009; and if that sum is available for allocation. [34286/08]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): The allocation of capital funding to individual rail development projects will be decided following the announcement of the budget for 2009 taking account of the overall funding available and the requirements of individual projects.

Prison Building Programme.

120. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the status of the proposed prison at Thornton Hall; if funding is in place to build the facility; if a binding contract has been entered into with the preferred bidder under PPP; his views on recent media speculation (details supplied) that 25 banks have withdrawn funding and support for the €400 million prison; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34334/08]

128. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will proceed with building a prison at Thornton Hall in view of the fiscal crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34353/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I propose to take Questions Nos. 120 and 128 together.

Negotiations are currently at an advanced stage with a commercial consortium, which was selected following an E.U. tender procedure, as the preferred tenderer for the design, construction, finance and maintenance of the proposed prison facilities at Thornton Hall as a PPP.

It is a matter for the commercial consortium, under the PPP process, to arrange the funding of the project. Obviously, closure of the contract cannot be completed without the necessary funding being in place and it would not be appropriate, for commercial and procurement reasons, for me to comment on the specific financial funding aspects of the PPP contract negotiations.

For all PPP projects a Public Sector Benchmark is determined in advance of the project being tendered. The Public Sector Benchmark is a monetary value that represents a risk adjusted cost, over the construction and 25 year maintenance period, to the Sponsoring Agency of delivering the project using “traditional” public sector procurement.

Before the contract is awarded the final cost must be within the budget (capital envelope) allocated to the project and be below the Public Sector Benchmark. The National Development Finance Agency provides a letter to my Department indicating that the project represents Value for Money when compared to this Public Sector Benchmark, if this is their opinion.

In the current fiscal situation facing the country it is important that we all strive to reduce costs, live within our budgets and avoid any cost increases. The Irish Prison Service is currently examining all issues that have arisen in relation to the project and in this regard all options available are under review.

The bidder must meet all the criteria, including the financial criteria, in the tender. Although a preferred tenderer was selected, there are other tenderers and other viable options which can still be considered if for any reason the negotiations referred to are not successfully concluded.

Private Security Authority.

121. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform his views on broadening the membership of the Private Security Authority to include persons knowledgeable in the certification of security operations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34341/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): The Private Security Authority was established as an independent statutory authority under the Private Security Services Act 2004.

The Act contains provisions for the appointment of members to the Board of the Authority and provides for appointment of persons with a wide range of experience or knowledge of the industry. Section 7 sets out certain categories of persons for appointment but also enables the Minister to appoint up to two additional persons.

The current membership of the Board includes two Ministerial nominees with particular expertise in training and in the security industry more generally.

Departmental Offices.

122. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the amount of the budget of €9.2 million allocated to the Office of Integration he has disbursed to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34342/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Conor Lenihan): The amount disbursed to end-September was approximately €3.081 million.

Visa Applications.

123. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform his

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views on providing a special visa for visiting relatives allowing them to stay for more than three months or pay multiple visits here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34343/08]

124. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform his views on providing tourist visas for longer than a three month period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34344/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I propose to take Questions Nos. 123 and 124 together.

It is not the general practice of the Visa Office to issue multiple journey visas unless a compliant travel history to Ireland in the recent past has been shown. In that context, a Visa Officer would normally expect to be satisfied that the conditions of at least two previous visas has been observed.

There are two main categories of visa — a ‘C’ visa is for a stay of a maximum of 90 days, a ‘D’ visa is for a longer stay. Where a ‘D’ visa has been approved and a stay in excess of 90 days is intended, the applicant is required to register with the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB.)

Each visa application is considered on its individual merits, with the onus resting on the applicant to satisfy the Visa Officer as to why a visa should be granted. It should be borne in mind that a visa is merely a pre-entry clearance to seek permission to enter the State — no automatic right of entry is conferred. Whether the person is permitted to enter and the exact period for which s/he is allowed to remain is a matter for the Immigration Officer at the port of entry. The overwhelming majority of family visitors and tourists should find current visa and entry clearance arrangements adequate for their needs and consistent with the immigration policy of most other countries similar to Ireland. It is unlikely that such visitors would wish to become involved in the GNIB registration process. It is more likely that people wishing to come to Ireland for a period in excess of 90 days have something other than a visit planned and the ‘D’ visa caters to their needs.

Departmental Programmes.

125. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the reason the Minister with responsibility for integration closed the fund for integration, which was established in 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34348/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Conor Lenihan): The fund to which the question refers was a targeted initiative put in place in 2006 to provide funding for initiatives to support the integration of legally resident immigrants. This was intended as a once off initiative for a period of one year and €3 million was allocated to it to be administered by Pobal. Subsequent to the original allocation of €3 million, I allocated a further €1 million in 2007 to fund an additional number of NGOs and Partnerships, again to be administered by Pobal. In my statement on integration strategy and diversity management, Migration Nation, I announced the establishment of new funding lines to promote integration. These measures are being rolled out at the moment and will be the primary means by which my Office will support integration in the future.

126. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform his plans for the national action plan against racism, in view of the fact that it is due to close in December 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34349/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Conor Lenihan): I am committed to continuing to promote national campaigns aimed at challenging racism and promoting understanding of diversity. In the aftermath of the conclusion of the National Action Plan Against Racism, this work will proceed in conjunction with new structures which I outlined in my statement on integration strategy and diversity management, Migration Nation.

127. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if an organisation (details supplied) will receive future funding for its activities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34350/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Conor Lenihan): The organisation to which the question refers received monies from a special integration initiative introduced in 2006. This provided for seed-funding in relation to integration initiatives for legally-resident immigrants. As was made clear in the official guidelines for this special fund, support was provided on a once-off basis.

In my statement on integration strategy and diversity management, Migration Nation, I announced the establishment of new funding lines to promote integration. One of these funding lines is for sporting bodies. In Migration Nation, I stated that the time seems right to support the integration of migrants by making funding available to national sporting organisations to help them implement integration plans in their organisations. I went on to say that, as funding is necessarily limited, the intention is to provide it to the bodies with the greatest potential to involve large numbers of migrants in their activities. I am about to allocate monies to such bodies. I would suggest that the organisation referred to in the question should liaise with these bodies in relation to programmes which it wishes to promote and I am prepared to consider funding in that context.

Question No. 128 answered with Question No. 120.

Asylum Applications.

129. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position regarding an application for temporary or long-term residency or citizenship in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34389/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): The person concerned applied for asylum on 26 July 2004. His application was refused following consideration of his case by the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and, on appeal, the Refugee Appeals Tribunal.

Subsequently, in accordance with Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), the person concerned was informed, by letter dated 24 March 2006, that the Minister proposed to make a Deportation Order in respect of him. He was given the options, to be exercised within 15 working days, of leaving the State voluntarily, of consenting to the making of a Deportation Order or of making representations to the Minister setting out the reasons why he should be allowed to remain temporarily in the State. Representations have been submitted on behalf of the person concerned and will be fully considered before the file is passed to me for decision.

Residency Permits.

130. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform

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his views on granting temporary residency in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Offaly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34390/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I refer the Deputy to the detailed Reply I gave to his recent Parliamentary Question, No. 382 of Tuesday 30 September 2008. The position in the State of the person concerned is as set out in that Reply.

131. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the current or expected residency, citizenship or family reunification status in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34391/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I refer the Deputy to my answers to his previous Parliamentary Questions.

I am informed by the Immigration Division of my Department that a Family Reunification application was received from the person referred to by the Deputy in May 2002 and that a decision was issued in January 2005. A review of that decision was carried out in 2005 and following the review the person in question was notified that the original decision was upheld.

A new application for Family Reunification was received from the person in question in December 2007. The application was forwarded to the Refugee Applications Commissioner for investigation as required under Section 18 of the Refugee Act 1996. The investigation has been completed and the Commissioner has forwarded a report to my Department.

The report will be considered by my Department and a decision on the application will issue in due course.

Asylum Applications.

132. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the current or expected residency or citizenship status in the case of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 24; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34392/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I refer the Deputy to Parliamentary Question No. 243 of Thursday, 24 April, 2008 and the written Reply to that Question. The person concerned arrived in the State on 8 December 2003 and applied for asylum. Her two children arrived in the State on 16 April 2005 and 16 May 2005 respectively and were reunited with their mother and included in her application for asylum. The asylum application was refused following consideration of the case by the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and, on appeal, the Refugee Appeals Tribunal.

Subsequently, in accordance with Section 3 of the Immigration Act, 1999 (as amended), the person concerned was informed, by letter dated 10 November 2006, that the Minister proposed to make Deportation Orders in respect of her and her children. She was given the options, to be exercised within 15 working days, of leaving the State voluntarily, of consenting to the making of a Deportation Order or of making representations to the Minister setting out the reasons why she and her children should be allowed to remain temporarily in the State. In addition, the person concerned was notified of her entitlement to apply for Subsidiary Protection in the State in accordance with these Regulations and, following consideration of this application, it was determined that the person concerned was not eligible for Subsidiary Protection in the State. The person concerned was notified of this decision by letter dated 22 April 2008.

The case file of the person concerned, including all representations submitted, will now be considered under Section 3(6) of the Immigration Act, 1999 (as amended) and Section 5 of the Refugee Act, 1996 (as amended) on the prohibition of refoulement. When this consideration has been completed, the case file of the person concerned is passed to me for decision.

133. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the current or expected residency status in the case of persons (details supplied) in Dublin 15; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34393/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): The first named person concerned was granted permission to enter and reside in the State under family reunification.

The second named person concerned arrived in the State on 20 May 2003 and applied for asylum. His application was refused following consideration of his case by the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and, on appeal, the Refugee Appeals Tribunal.

Subsequently, in accordance with Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), the person concerned was informed, by letter dated 16 May 2005, that the Minister proposed to make a Deportation Order in respect of him. He was given the options, to be exercised within 15 working days, of leaving the State voluntarily, of consenting to the making of a Deportation Order or of making representations to the Minister setting out the reasons why he should be allowed to remain temporarily in the State. Representations have been submitted on behalf of the person concerned and will be fully considered before the file is passed to me for decision.

134. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position regarding the residency status in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Limerick; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34394/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): The person concerned applied for asylum on 26 March 2003. His application was refused following consideration of his case by the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and, on appeal, the Refugee Appeals Tribunal.

Subsequently, in accordance with Section 3 of the Immigration Act, 1999 (as amended), the person concerned was informed, by letter dated 30 June 2004, that the Minister proposed to make a Deportation Order in respect of him. He was given the options, to be exercised within 15 working days, of leaving the State voluntarily, of consenting to the making of a Deportation Order or of making representations to the Minister setting out the reasons why he should be allowed to remain temporarily in the State. Representations have been submitted on behalf of the person concerned and will be fully considered before the file is passed to me for decision.

Residency Permits.

135. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in regard to residency or family reunification in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34395/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I refer the Deputy to my answer to his previous Parliamentary Question.

I am informed by the Immigration Division of my Department that the person concerned is the subject of a Family Reunification/Permission To Remain application made in September 2006.

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The Family Reunification/Permission To Remain application for the person in question was withdrawn by the applicant in September 2008.

136. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in regard to an application for residency in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34396/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): The person concerned applied for asylum on 2 June 2005. His application was refused following consideration of his case by the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner. The person concerned was notified of his entitlement to appeal this determination to the Refugee Appeals Tribunal but chose to not do so.

Subsequently, in accordance with Section 3 of the Immigration Act, 1999 (as amended), the person concerned was informed, by letter dated 13 January 2006, that the Minister proposed to make a Deportation order in respect of him. He was given the options, to be exercised within 15 working days, of leaving the State voluntarily, of consenting to the making of a Deportation Order or of submitting written representations to the Minister setting out the reasons why he should be allowed to remain temporarily in the State. Representations have been submitted on behalf of the person concerned.

The person concerned later submitted an application to be re-admitted to the asylum process in accordance with the provisions of Section 17(7) of the Refugee Act, 1996 (as amended). Following consideration of this application, a decision was made to refuse the application.

On 10 October 2006, regulations known as the European Communities (Eligibility for Protection) Regulations, 2006 (S.I. No 518 of 2006) came into force. The person concerned was notified of his entitlement to submit an application for Subsidiary Protection in the State in accordance with these Regulations. The person concerned submitted an application for Subsidiary Protection in the State and, following consideration of this application, it was determined that the person concerned was not eligible for Subsidiary Protection in the State. The person concerned was notified of this decision by letter dated 21 August 2008.

The case file of the person concerned, including all representations submitted, now falls to be dealt with in accordance with the provisions of Section 3(6) of the Immigration Act, 1999 (as amended) and Section 5 of the Refugee Act, 1996 (as amended) on the prohibition of refoulement. When this consideration has been completed, the case file of the person concerned is passed to me for decision.

Citizen Applications.

137. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in regard to an application for residency or citizenship in the case of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 24; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34397/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): An application for a certificate of naturalisation from the individual referred to in the Deputy's Question was received in the Citizenship Section of my Department on 13 December 2004.

Officials in that Section inform me that processing of the application has commenced and the file will be forwarded to me for a decision in the very near future.

Asylum Applications.

138. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in relation to an application to the refugee appeals tribunal in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34398/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): It is not the practice to comment in detail on individual asylum applications.

As the Deputy will be aware, applications for refugee status in the State are determined by an independent process comprising the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and the Refugee Appeals Tribunal which make recommendations to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform on whether such status should be granted.

A final decision on each application is made following receipt of the recommendation of the Refugee Applications Commissioner or the decision of the Refugee Appeals Tribunal, as appropriate.

139. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in relation to an appeal by a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34399/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): It is not the practice to comment in detail on individual asylum applications.

As the Deputy will be aware, applications for refugee status in the State are determined by an independent process comprising the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and the Refugee Appeals Tribunal which make recommendations to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform on whether such status should be granted.

A final decision on each application is made following receipt of the recommendation of the Refugee Applications Commissioner or the decision of the Refugee Appeals Tribunal, as appropriate.

Citizenship Applications.

140. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in regard to an application for citizenship in the case of persons (details supplied) in Dublin 15; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34400/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): Officials in the Citizenship Section of my Department inform me that there is no record of applications for a certificate of naturalisation from the persons referred to in the Deputy's Question.

Asylum Applications.

141. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in regard to residency in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34401/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): The person concerned applied for asylum on 13 February 2006. His application was refused following consideration of his case by the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and, on appeal, the Refugee Appeals Tribunal.

Subsequently, in accordance with Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), the person concerned was informed, by letter dated 26 October 2007, that the Minister proposed

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to make a Deportation Order in respect of him. He was given the options, to be exercised within 15 working days, of leaving the State voluntarily, of consenting to the making of a Deportation Order or of making representations to the Minister setting out the reasons why he should be allowed to remain temporarily in the State. In addition, he was notified of his entitlement to apply for Subsidiary Protection in the State in accordance with the European Communities (Eligibility for Protection) Regulations, 2006 (S.I. No. 518 of 2006). The person concerned submitted an application for Subsidiary Protection in the State in accordance with these Regulations and this application is under consideration at present. When consideration of this application has been completed, the person concerned will be notified in writing of the outcome.

In the event that the Subsidiary Protection application is refused, the case file of the person concerned, including all representations submitted, will then be considered under Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act, 1999 (as amended) and Section 5 of the Refugee Act, 1996 (as amended) on the prohibition of refoulement. When this latter consideration has been completed, the case file is passed to me for decision.

Residency Permits.

142. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the current or expected family reunification status in the case of persons (details supplied) in Dublin 24; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34402/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I refer the Deputy to my answer to his previous Parliamentary Question.

I am informed by the Immigration Division of my Department that the person in question was issued with a decision on his Family Reunification application in January 2003.

The person in question requested a review of his decision and the application was re-examined under section 18 of the Refugee Act and a decision issued to the person in question on 6th October 2008.

143. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the current or expected residency status in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34403/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I can inform the Deputy that the person's case is the subject of Judicial Review proceedings, and is due for mention in the High Court on 16 October, 2008. When these proceedings have been concluded the person's case will be assessed by the relevant officials in my Department, and the person concerned will be informed of any decisions made. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the matter further while legal proceedings are ongoing.

Citizenship Applications.

144. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the current or expected citizenship status in the case of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 24; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34404/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I refer the Deputy to my reply to Parliamentary Question 962 on 24 September 2008. The position remains as stated.

Refugee Status.

145. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the current or expected residency status in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34405/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): The person concerned applied for a declaration of refugee status in the State on 5th January, 2005. Her application was refused and a deportation order was made in respect of her on 15th September, 2005.

The individual submitted an application for subsidiary protection pursuant to the European Communities (Eligibility for Protection) Regulations, 2006, S.I. No. 518 of 2006 ('the Regulations') on 24th January, 2007. She was informed on 27th February, 2007 that her application was invalid and could not be considered as she was a person in respect of whom a deportation order was signed prior to the coming into force of the Regulations on 10th October, 2006. Judicial review proceedings challenging this decision were instituted on 20th April, 2007.

These judicial review proceedings were settled following the judgement of the High Court in the cases of Djolo and Hila, where it was determined that under Regulation 4(2) of the European Communities (Eligibility for Protection) Regulations, 2006, S.I. No. 518 of 2006, it is open to me to exercise discretion to accept and consider applications for subsidiary protection from persons who do not have an automatic right to apply but who have identified new facts or circumstances which demonstrate a change of position from that which pertained at the time the deportation order was made.

The individual in question submitted an application pursuant to Regulation 4(2) of the European Communities (Eligibility for Protection) Regulations, 2006 S.I. No. 518 of 2006 on 26th November, 2007, for my predecessor to exercise discretion to accept and consider an application for subsidiary protection from her. Following consideration of the material submitted, the application was refused and the person was notified of this decision on 14th March, 2008.

The applicant instituted judicial review proceedings on 31st March 2008 challenging the decision to refuse to exercise discretion to consider an application for subsidiary protection. As the matter is sub judice, I do not propose to comment further.

Asylum Applications.

146. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in regard to an application for residency in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34407/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): It is not the practice to comment in detail on individual asylum applications.

As the Deputy will be aware, applications for refugee status in the State are determined by an independent process comprising the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and the Refugee Appeals Tribunal which make recommendations to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform on whether such status should be granted.

A final decision on each application is made following receipt of the recommendation of the Refugee Applications Commissioner or the decision of the Refugee Appeals Tribunal, as appropriate.

Deportation Orders.

147. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will review and revoke the Deportation Order in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34408/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I refer the Deputy to the Reply I gave to his Parliamentary Question no. 929 of Wednesday 24 September 2008. The status of the person concerned remains as set out in that Reply.

As there is no application before me seeking revocation of the Deportation Order in this case, the matter does not arise.

Residency Permits.

148. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in regard to residency in the case of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 15; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34409/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I refer the Deputy to the detailed Reply I gave to his recent Parliamentary Question, No. 909 of Wednesday 24 September 2008. The position in the State of the person concerned is as set out in that Reply.

Visa Applications.

149. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if and when travel documentation will issue in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34410/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): The person concerned initially contacted the Ministerial Decisions Unit of my Department regarding a request to travel to Spain for medical reasons. The Immigration Division wrote to the person concerned on 25 September 2008 informing her that, as she had not been granted a declaration of Refugee status, the Immigration Division was not in a position to issue her with a 1951 UN Convention Travel Document. However, the letter also stated that the Immigration Division may be able to facilitate the person in question with a temporary Travel Document to travel for the purpose referred to.

The Spanish Embassy have advised that they cannot grant a visa for travel to Spain on a temporary Travel Document. Should the person concerned wish to apply for a temporary Travel Document for travel to another EU State for the purpose of medical treatment, she should advise the Travel Document Section of my Department. The Embassy of the proposed country of destination should be contacted prior to application to ensure that travel to that country is possible using a temporary Travel Document.

Asylum Applications.

150. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in regard to residency in the case of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 24; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34411/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I refer the Deputy to Replies given to Parliamentary Questions No. 844 of Tuesday 17 June 2008, No. 602 of

Thursday 17 April 2008, No. 467 of Tuesday 26 February 2008 and No. 247 of Thursday 31 January 2008.

The person concerned applied for asylum on 11 May 2005. His application was refused following consideration of his case by the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and, on appeal, the Refugee Appeals Tribunal.

Subsequently, in accordance with Section 3 of the Immigration Act, 1999 (as amended), the person concerned was informed, by letter dated 12 June 2006, that the Minister proposed to make a Deportation Order in respect of him. He was given the options, to be exercised within 15 working days, of leaving the State voluntarily, of consenting to the making of a Deportation Order or of submitting written representations to the Minister setting out the reasons why he should be allowed to remain temporarily in the State. Representations have been submitted on behalf of the person concerned.

The person concerned was notified, by letter dated 31 January 2008, of his entitlement to submit an application for Subsidiary Protection in the State in accordance with the European Communities (Eligibility for Protection) Regulations, 2006 (S.I. No. 518 of 2006) within the following 15 working days. The person concerned submitted an application for Subsidiary Protection in the State and this application is under consideration at present. When consideration of this application has been completed, the person concerned will be notified in writing of the outcome.

In the event that the Subsidiary Protection application is refused, the case file of the person concerned, including all representations submitted, will then be considered under Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act, 1999 (as amended) and Section 5 of the Refugee Act, 1996 (as amended) on the prohibition of refoulement. When this latter consideration has been completed, the case file of the person concerned is passed to me for decision.

Hunger Task Force.

151. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his plans to implement the recommendations of the recently published task force report on hunger; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34094/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): The current escalation in world food prices has highlighted the importance of food security. The establishment of the Hunger Task Force was a key recommendation of the White Paper on Irish Aid which was published before the onset of the current crisis. We established it because we knew from our people on the ground in developing countries that hunger was increasing — particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and that many countries would fail to achieve the Millennium Hunger Goal which is “to reduce by half the proportion of people suffering from hunger by 2015”.

The Hunger Task Force submitted its report on 25 September to the Taoiseach at the recent UN Millennium Summit in New York. I would like to pay tribute to our former colleague Joe Walsh who did a splendid job in chairing this group of national and international experts and to record my gratitude to every member of the Task Force for their diligent work in producing this report. The report has been circulated to all members of the Oireachtas and copies placed in the library.

The Report makes disturbing reading. It is a disgrace that in 2008 there are more than 862 million people who do not have enough to eat. At the presentation of the report, Bono, who

[Deputy Peter Power.]

was a member of the Task Force, pointed out that this figure was already out of date, and that the current figure is approaching 900 million and rising — driven by the continuing escalation in global food prices.

The report of the Task Force is timely and I welcome its focus on three key areas:

- To follow through on commitments made by all Governments, both donor Governments and Governments of developing countries and to increase the priority given to hunger in the aid programme
- to target smallholder agricultural productivity; and
- to promote effective actions to counter maternal and infant under-nutrition.

As an initial response I am establishing a new section which, inter alia, will have a special dedicated focus on food security tasked with advancing our work on addressing hunger.

Hunger is a complex issue and the Task Force have made detailed recommendations. Our first task will be to carry out a careful analysis of the recommendations, and of the extent to which current aid programming is responding to the many facets of hunger. Once that exercise has been completed, we will be in a position to plan how we can strengthen our efforts to address the root causes of hunger, with a view to making a real and lasting contribution to the abolition of hunger from our world.

Foreign Conflicts.

152. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position regarding the crisis in Darfur; and the efforts being pursued at present at EU level to help ensure that civilian refugees receive the food and medical attention needed. [34302/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): I remain deeply concerned at the situation in Darfur, and the ongoing suffering of its people. As a result of ongoing violence, the broader humanitarian situation in Darfur continues to be characterised by forced movement of civilians, continuing increases in internally displaced persons (IDPS) and rising tension in camps.

Ireland and our European Union colleagues are particularly concerned that humanitarian aid has stopped in many areas, in particular Jebel Marra. The European Union has called on all the parties to unconditionally honour their cease-fire commitments, and to abide by international humanitarian law, Human Rights Conventions and the resolutions of the Security Council. In particular, humanitarian workers and the United Nations African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) must have free access to these areas, and UNAMID must be free to carry out its civilian protection mandate. The international community must of course go beyond alleviating the symptoms of this humanitarian crisis to address its causes, and the EU and Ireland fully support UN and African Union efforts to bring about a lasting peace.

Through the military mission, EUFOR Tchad/RCA under the operational command of Irish Lieutenant General Pat Nash, the EU is also helping provide security for those Darfuris who have fled across the border into neighbouring Chad.

The fracturing of the main rebel groups over the past year, and the apparent determination of the Government of Sudan to pursue a military solution make the search for peace even more difficult. I and my EU colleagues welcome the appointment of Djibril Bassolé as joint

AU-UN chief mediator in June 2008, and we are hopeful that his committed efforts to bring the two sides together will be successful, despite the disappointing lack of political will apparent on all sides.

Emigrant Issues.

153. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps which have been taken to ensure the safe return of Irish expatriates who wish to return home. [34303/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): According to Central Statistics Office estimates, approximately 16,200 Irish emigrants returned to live in Ireland in the past year, bringing the total number of returned emigrants since 2003 to over 107,000.

As the Deputy will be aware, the vast majority of returning emigrants do not request State assistance in making arrangements for their return. However, some returning emigrants do require support and, in this context, my Department allocates financial support to frontline welfare organisations which assist such people.

My Department has provided funding to two organisations working specifically in this area, the Safe Home Programme and the Crosscare Migrant Project. The award of a €249,900 grant in April of this year brought the Department's total funding for Safe Home since 2005 to over €900,000. I have also approved funding of €159,000 this year to support the Crosscare Migrant Project, bringing the total Emigrant Support funding awarded to the organisation since 2005 to €475,000. This substantial funding is testament to the high value which the Government places on their work. The Government remains committed to supporting frontline welfare agencies and organisations.

In addition, our network of Missions overseas are happy to advise Irish citizens who contact them seeking information on returning to live in Ireland.

International Agreements.

154. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he and his EU colleagues have discussed the possible effects on Pakistan of the facilitation of the US-India nuclear agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34304/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): This matter has not arisen in discussion among EU colleagues.

The Nuclear Suppliers Group decision to permit nuclear trade with India followed the statement on 5 September 2008 by the External Affairs Minister of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, reiterating India's voluntary steps in relation to nuclear non-proliferation, testing and related policies. This decision was specific to India. I am unaware of any intention on the part of any NSG member to propose a similar decision in regard to Pakistan.

Question No 155 answered with Question No. 16.

EU Treaties.

156. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the action taken at European level to address the growing strength of the Eurosceptic movement with particular reference to the funding of such organisations, their objectives and their implications for this country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34369/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I had a meeting on 6 October with the Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the European Parliament which provided a useful opportunity to hear first-hand the concerns of MEPs from across the Union on issues related to the Lisbon Treaty. A number of MEPs also raised concerns about the funding of organisations seeking a No vote during our referendum campaign. I confirmed to the European Parliament Committee that the Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPO) is responsible for issues connected with the funding of election and referendum campaigns here.

I am aware also that the Conference of Presidents of political groups in the European Parliament issued a statement on 25 September about the funding of those who sought a No vote during our referendum. The statement acknowledged that SIPO is the appropriate body to address these matters.

There are those across Europe who have always opposed the development of the European Union and, in our democratic societies, they have every right to argue their case. The risk for Ireland is that anything that makes it more difficult for us to retain our place at the heart of the Union is likely to be detrimental to our economic prospects. Such positions are diametrically opposed to Ireland's interests within the EU.

The Irish people have consistently shown themselves to favour full Irish engagement in the European Union. The findings of the recent research on the referendum confirms this in that, by a factor of three to one, people believe that Ireland's interests are best pursued by remaining fully involved in the EU rather than by opting to be less involved.

The study also pointed to the importance of improved communications in promoting enhanced knowledge and awareness of EU affairs. Lack of information about the Union makes it easier for opponents to spread half-truths and outright distortions about the Union's policies and intentions. The study also pointed to the importance of improved communications in promoting enhanced knowledge and awareness of EU affairs. Lack of information about the Union makes it easier for opponents to spread half-truths and outright distortions about the Union's policies and intentions. We are now looking at ways in which we can improve the manner in which European issues are communicated. We plan to work closely with the European Commission in this regard.

So called Euro-sceptic ideas, which have long existed in other countries, have not traditionally been part of our European debate and have nothing to offer us today as we seek, against a backdrop of great international economic turbulence, to preserve and build upon the great gains we have made as a member of the Union during the past 35 years.

157. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which it is intended to formulate and co-ordinate a European response to the present impasse with regard to the Lisbon treaty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34370/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): The decision of the Irish people on 12 June has been the subject of considerable discussion with our European Union partners. Most recently, last week, on 1 October, I accompanied the Taoiseach as he travelled to Paris to discuss the matter with the President of the European Council, Nicolas Sarkozy. On Monday of this week, I had a series of meetings in Brussels with Members of the European Parliament and the Commission. Next week's European Council will discuss the issue further, as agreed at the June European Council.

In all of these discussions, we have highlighted the concerns which the Irish electorate raised during the referendum campaign. We wish to see these concerns addressed in a manner which accommodates Ireland's interests and those of the other 26 Member States.

At this stage, no definitive decisions have been taken by the Government regarding the Treaty. I hope that by the December European Council we will be in a position to identify more precisely the issues that need to be addressed and to outline the next steps we intend to take. It would be premature however, at this relatively early stage, to outline the content of any possible response.

Overseas Development Aid.

158. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which it can be verified that overseas development aid is received by those to whom it was intended in each, all or most cases; the procedures in place for such verification; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34371/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): I would like to assure the Deputy that it is of particular importance to me that Irish tax payers' money benefits the poorest and most vulnerable people of the countries in which we operate.

Irish Aid funding is protected by rigorous monitoring, accounting and audit controls which are in place in all countries where we provide development assistance and such controls and systems mean that funding is directed to those areas most in need. In our Programme Countries, Country Strategy Papers (CSPs) are developed in consultation with the national government and in support of their poverty reduction strategy. These papers outline the programmes and projects that Irish Aid will support over a three to five year period. The strategies have a monitoring framework with indicators and targets to measure improvements in basic services.

In addition, Irish Aid is actively engaged with Governments and other donors in national policy and budget allocation discussions. These discussions are aimed at ensuring that funding for basic services and poverty reduction programmes are protected or increased. A number of Programme Countries are introducing special social protection programmes to target those who are chronically poor.

Monitoring of programmes and projects is carried out by national Auditors General, donors and civil society groups on an annual basis. Particular attention is paid to progress in relation to reducing the number of people living below the poverty line and increasing access to basic health, education and water and sanitation.

I am aware that poor governance is a problem in many developing countries and there are concerns regarding corruption. This is a symptom of the level of underdevelopment that exists. We are working with other donors to help strengthen public financial management systems and the institutions of governance, such as the Offices of the Auditor General.

In addition, there are regular audits carried out by independent audit firms whilst Irish Aid has also its own Evaluation and Audit Unit which monitors the assistance provided.

The results of the work of Irish Aid and other partners are clear on the ground. The incidence of extreme poverty is dropping in a number of Programme Countries. Economic growth in Africa is the highest in a generation. More children are at school than ever before. The context remains challenging, but progress is being made, and Ireland is playing its part.

159. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of countries scheduled for debt write-off in the past five years; the extent to which this has been delivered or is outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34372/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): The Government has strongly supported initiatives to ease or cancel the debt burden on developing countries. Importantly, Ireland's bilateral assistance to the developing world is exclusively in the form of grants rather than loans.

There are two main international instruments which address the problem of the debt burden in the developing world, the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI) and the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. The MDRI was agreed by the G8 Countries at Gleneagles in July 2005 with a focus on debt cancellation. It came into effect on 1 July 2006, and provides for 100% relief on eligible debt from the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund for many of the poorest countries in the world, most of them in Africa. The aim is to relieve these countries from the burden of servicing debt and assist them in making progress on the UN Millennium Development Goals, with the overall objective of halving global poverty by 2015. In 2007, the Inter-American Development Bank agreed to provide similar debt relief to the five poorest countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

To date, 25 countries have benefited from debt relief under the MDRI, at a cost of some \$43.5 billion. Ireland's share of the total cost of debt relief provided by the World Bank under the MDRI is €58.64 million. The Government contributed this amount in full in 2006.

The HIPC Initiative is implemented by the World Bank and the IMF. It was launched in 1996 in order to reduce the debt burden of qualifying countries to sustainable levels but does not involve cancellation of debt. Progress on the implementation of the initiative has been relatively slow. However, to date US\$68 billion in debt-service relief has been approved under the initiative for 33 countries, 27 of which are in Africa. Ireland has contributed €20 million towards the cost of implementing this initiative.

Question No. 160 answered with Question No. 14.

Foreign Conflicts.

161. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the extent to which he and his EU or UN colleagues are in discussion in regard to the most sensitive areas in Africa affected by hunger, war and instability; the degree to which a particular plan is being pursued in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34374/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): The reduction of hunger, war and instability in Africa is one of the most important tasks of the international community in the 21st century, and continues to be a priority for both the European Union and the United Nations. In our dialogue with partners in the EU and the UN, Ireland is a strong advocate for the developing world and for international peace and security.

Conflict has many causes and many manifestations, but poverty and inequality have proved to be the most fertile breeding grounds for violence and instability. Most armed conflicts occur in poor countries, and the causes and effect of conflict are exacerbated by poverty and corruption. The risk of corruption, strife and famine is greater where political, economic and administrative systems are weak, and Ireland's development co-operation programme focuses on all of

these risks. Irish Aid supports specific actions designed to promote political stability, including by strengthening government systems and combating inequality. Irish Aid has a specific focus on governance in several programme countries.

The Government established a Hunger Task Force in 2007, with the aim of identifying the particular contribution that Ireland could make to tackle the root causes of food insecurity, particularly in Africa. The Report of the Hunger Task Force, which was presented at the UN in New York in September 2008, highlighted the continued threat posed by hunger, and made several very concrete recommendations on how this threat can be dealt with.

Promoting stability and supporting progress towards peace in Africa requires a huge international effort. UN-authorized peacekeeping missions have a major role in stabilising former and current conflict zones throughout Africa, not least the current EU-led military mission to Chad and the Central African Republic, EUFOR Tchad/RCA, in which the Irish contingent is playing a prominent role. Ireland has a strong tradition of contributing to UN-mandated peace-support missions in Africa. We have also provided support to the UN's Peace Building Fund and have been strongly supportive of the establishment of the Peace Building Commission.

African leadership and responsibility are crucial in addressing the issues of hunger, war and instability, and the African Union represents an important strategic partner for the European Union. Since 2004, the EU has supported the development of African-led peacekeeping in Darfur and elsewhere through its African Peace Facility. Peace, security, good governance and development were among the themes discussed by European and African leaders at the EU-Africa Summit in December 2007, which agreed a comprehensive EU-Africa Strategy to address these and other common challenges.

The challenges facing Africa are enormous. But there is some encouraging news. Many African economies are growing. The work of the International Criminal Court, which Ireland strongly supports, marks a real effort to end impunity for war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. While there are exceptions, notably Somalia, Zimbabwe, and Darfur, many African countries now have less violence and civil strife than has been the case for many years. There is relative peace in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, northern Uganda and southern Sudan, although international engagement will be needed for some time. Through our aid programme, Ireland will continue to address issues of poverty, conflict and instability, and to make a real and lasting difference in the lives of many.

Common Security and Defence Policy.

162. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position in regard to EU emergency battlegroups or response forces; the extent of agreement and formation to date, current operations and future proposals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34375/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): The Battlegroup concept is designed to provide the European Union with the capacity to respond rapidly to emerging crisis situations, within the overall context of the European Union's security and defence policy.

Battlegroups are designed to participate in time-limited missions of 30 days, extendable to a maximum of 120 days, by which time the operation would have concluded, or the Battlegroup been replaced by a larger force. Developments in relation to Battlegroups are reviewed regularly within the European Union.

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The purpose of the EU Battlegroups is to undertake operations (commonly referred to as the Petersberg Tasks which are set out in the Amsterdam Treaty) such as rescue tasks, tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking, in addition to peacekeeping and humanitarian tasks. Battlegroups would probably be deployed on operations at the higher end of the Petersberg spectrum. Battlegroups have been on stand-by on a rotational basis since January 2007, but to date none has been called to deploy.

Ireland provided a contingent of 100 members of the Defence Forces to the Nordic Battlegroup which was on stand-by for the first half of 2008. The contingent comprised specialists in Explosive Ordnance and Improvised Explosive Device disposal, together with a protection detail. Ireland also had a number of posts in both the Force and Operational Headquarters. Sweden, as Framework nation, together with Norway, Finland, and Estonia also participated.

With regard to Ireland's participation in future Battlegroups, we are committed in principle, subject to Government decision, to participation once again in the Nordic Battlegroup, which will be on stand-by for the first six months of 2011. The same five countries will participate, with Sweden again acting as Framework Nation.

Informal discussions have also taken place between staff in the Department of Defence and representatives from Austria, Germany, Czech Republic, Croatia and FYROM regarding Ireland's possible participation in the proposed Austrian/German Battlegroup. This Battlegroup will be on stand-by for the second six months of 2012.

It should be stressed that any deployment of the Battlegroup would require a unanimous decision of the Council of the European Union. Furthermore, deployment of an Irish contingent in a Battlegroup context would be subject to the requirements of the 'triple-lock' of Government decision, Dáil approval, and UN authorisation.

Diplomatic Representation.

163. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of Irish embassies worldwide; the number of new embassies contemplated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34376/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): Ireland has a network of 75 resident diplomatic and consular Missions abroad, as well as the British-Irish Inter-Governmental Secretariat in Belfast and the North-South Ministerial Council Joint Secretariat in Armagh. While the opening of new Embassies abroad is considered by the Government on an ongoing basis, any expansion of our diplomatic network can, as I am sure the Deputy will appreciate, only be undertaken having regard to clear priorities and available resources.

The most recent Embassy to be established was in Malawi in October 2007. The Government decided to establish an Embassy there, after the White Paper on Irish Aid, published in September 2006, designated Malawi as Ireland's ninth programme country.

The successful trade mission, led by the former Taoiseach in January 2007, to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates underlined the potential value to Ireland of having a second resident Embassy in the Gulf region. Accordingly, and in order to take advantage of this potential, the Government in March 2007 agreed that an Embassy be established in the United Arab Emirates. The timing of the establishment of this new Embassy in Abu Dhabi is under consideration. However, this decision must take account of the wider budgetary context, in particular the availability of the necessary resources.

Apart from the United Arab Emirates, there are no plans at present to establish any other new Embassies or Consulates abroad.

Overseas Development Aid.

164. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the progress made with tackling AIDS in each of the African countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34377/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Power): Recent data released by the United Nations Joint Programme on AIDS (UNAIDS) demonstrate that the global HIV prevalence — the number of people living with HIV — has levelled off and that the number of new infections has fallen. This is primarily due to much improved surveillance methodologies, along with some positive impacts of HIV programmes.

However, in 2007 over 33 million people were still living with HIV. Sub-Saharan Africa continues to be the region most severely affected in the world and is home to over 22 million people living with HIV or 68 per cent of the global total. AIDS remains the primary cause of death in Africa.

Ireland has emphasised that the fight against HIV and AIDS is fundamental to poverty and vulnerability reduction. We spend over €100 million annually on combating HIV and other diseases of poverty. Our assistance is targeted at those countries most affected by the pandemic including Lesotho, Zambia, Malawi, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Uganda.

The Government is investing in programmes that are benefiting those most in need, delivering anti-retroviral treatment in countries most affected and providing support to children made vulnerable by AIDS. We also invest in empowering women and girls to protect themselves from infection.

Significant progress has been made in a number of countries in reducing the prevalence of HIV and AIDS. For example, Uganda has succeeded in reducing the rates of infection from 18.3% in 1992 to 6.4% today. Ireland has played its part in this improvement.

There is now better access to anti retroviral treatment for those infected with AIDS. In partnership with the Clinton Foundation, Ireland has increased its funding to the Governments of Mozambique and Lesotho to improve the accessibility of HIV treatment in rural areas and in particular to women and children. As a result of our work in Mozambique, over 78,000 people are now on HIV treatment, up from less than 2,000 people at the end of 2002. In Lesotho, following one year of operation, 4 health facilities have been refurbished and over 2,500 people are accessing HIV treatment including 100 children.

This week Ireland co-hosted with UNICEF the fourth Global Partners' Forum on Children affected by HIV and AIDS which was addressed by the Taoiseach and myself. It successfully identified consensus around the main strategies that need to be employed to improve the lives of children affected by HIV and to reduce the vulnerability of children to HIV.

We are committed to continuing our work to address HIV and AIDS and other communicable diseases and to ensuring that men, women and children get access to quality health and HIV services.

Foreign Conflicts.

165. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the political situation in the south-western Balkans; the extent to which it is expected to achieve political equilibrium

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and stability in the region within the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34378/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): The December 2007 European Council reaffirmed that the future of the Western Balkans lies within the European Union. The countries within that region (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) continue to feature on the agenda of the General Affairs and External Relations Council.

The European Union's Stabilisation and Association process for South-East Europe aims to bring the countries of the region closer to EU standards and principles. The process involves the negotiation of Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) with each of the countries. SAAs focus mainly on trade liberalisation in goods and other economic and trade-related issues, political dialogue, legal approximation, and cooperation in sectors such as industry, environment and energy.

Stabilisation and Association Agreements have now been signed with all of the countries in the region with the exception of Kosovo. The Agreements with Croatia, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are already in effect. Interim Agreements dealing with economic and trade related matters — essentially matters which fall within the exclusive competence of the European Community — are in force with Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina, pending the ratification of the main agreements and their entry into force. The SAA with Serbia was signed on 29 April 2008. An Interim Agreement dealing with economic and trade matters was signed at the same time. The Council welcomed the signature of the SAA and the Interim Agreement as an important step on Serbia's path towards the EU. The Council decided that the ratification process of the SAA by Member States and implementation of the Interim Agreement would begin as soon as the Council decided unanimously that Serbia was cooperating fully with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). In this context, the arrest in Belgrade on 11 June of Stojan Lupljanin, one of the four remaining war crime fugitives charged with crimes committed in Bosnia-Herzegovina, marked a welcome and significant step towards fulfilling the condition of full cooperation with ICTY.

Furthermore, I congratulated President Tadic and the Serbian security forces on the successful arrest on 21 July of the former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, who was indicted in July 1995 by ICTY on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. I would urge the Government of Serbia to build on this success and continue its efforts to finalise full cooperation with ICTY, and hope that the SAA will be ratified as soon as possible.

Negotiations on an SAA with Bosnia-Herzegovina concluded late last year. Signature of the agreement was linked to key reform priorities being advanced. In the light of progress made by Bosnia-Herzegovina in its reform programme, the SAA was signed in Luxembourg on 16 June 2008.

In addition to the Stabilisation and Association Process, the European Union opened negotiations on accession with Croatia in 2005. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has obtained candidate status, although its negotiations on accession have not yet commenced.

Recent developments in the Western Balkans have largely focused on Kosovo and the decision of the Kosovo Assembly to declare independence on 17 February 2008. At the General Affairs and External Relations Council on 18 February, EU Foreign Ministers agreed a common response to Kosovo's declaration of independence, noting the uniqueness of Kosovo's situation, arising from the conflict of the 1990s and the eight years of UN administration which

followed, and reaffirming the EU's willingness to play a leading role in strengthening stability in the region including by means of the planned ESDP rule of law mission, EULEX KOSOVO.

The Council also agreed that Member States would decide, in accordance with national practice and international law, on their relations with Kosovo. Since then, 21 EU Member States, including Ireland, have recognised Kosovo's independence.

With the coming into force of the new Kosovo constitution on 15 June, the focus for the EU is to ensure a smooth transition from the current UN mission (UNMIK) to the EU's EULEX KOSOVO mission, and to ensure that the international presence can operate effectively throughout Kosovo, including Serb majority areas in the North. The EU is working closely with the UN to achieve this.

Question No. 166 answered with Question No. 61.

Performing Arts.

167. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the grant or bursary options open to a person studying dance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34269/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): Responsibility for the promotion of the arts at all levels throughout the country is primarily devolved to the Arts Council. The Arts Council is the principal agency through which State funding is channelled to the arts. Under the Arts Act, 2003, the general functions of the Council include the following: -to stimulate public interest in the arts;to promote knowledge, appreciation and practice of the arts;to assist in improving standards in the arts.

Grants and bursaries for persons studying dance are allocated through the Arts Council and I would refer the Deputy to the Council's website www.artscouncil.ie for details of the Council's funding schemes.

Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla.

168. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Dinny McGinley** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta cén uair a bheidh an pléfháipéar a d'ullmhaigh a Roinn ar chúrsaí fógraíochta dátheangaí faoi alt 9 d'Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 ag dul os comhair an Chomhchoiste um Ghnóthaí Ealaíon, Spóirt, Turasóireachta, Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta arís; cathain a bheidh sé á shíniú; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [34279/08]

170. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Dinny McGinley** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta an n-aontaíonn sé go mbeadh sé go mór ar son leas na Gaeilge timire teanga amháin ar a laghad a fhostú i ngach contae sa tír chun dul i mbun an phobail, sa Ghalltacht agus sa Ghaeltacht araon, le tacaíocht a thabhairt d'iarrachtaí áitiúla leis an nGaeilge a chur chun cinn agus leis an teanga a chothú agus a chomhordú go náisiúnta ar bhonn eagraithe, cuimsitheach; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [34281/08]

172. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Dinny McGinley** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta an mbeidh sé sásta reachtaíocht a dhréachtú chun pacáistiú dátheangach a thugann cothrom na Féinne don Ghaeilge agus don Bhéarla araon ar earraí leithéid bia agus deochanna a thabhairt os comhair na Dála i dtreo sochaí agus timpeallacht atá iomlán dátheangach a chothú sa tír, san earnáil phoiblí agus san earnáil phríobháideach, amhlaidh a dhéantar i gCeanada, sa

[Deputy Dinny McGinley.]

Bheilg agus i dtíortha eile ag a bhfuil níos mó ná teanga oifigiúil amháin nach iad; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [34283/08]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív): Tógfaidh mé Ceisteanna Uimh. 168, 170 agus 172 le chéile.

I dtús báire, beidh áthas ar an Teachta a chloisint go bhfuil Rialacháin faoi alt 9(1) d’Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 déanta agam le déanaí. Mar is eol don Teachta, baineann na Rialacháin sin le húsáid na Gaeilge agus an Bhéarla i bhfógairtí béil réamhthairfeadta, ar stáise-anóireacht agus ar chomharthaíocht ag comhlachtaí poiblí, Ranna Stáit, údaráis áitiúla agus eile. Mar atá mínithe agam cheana féin, rinne mé cinneadh nach mbeadh fógraíocht san áireamh san Rialacháin sin ag an bpointe seo mar nach bhfuilim sásta go bhfuil an réamh-obair iomlán atá riachtanach déanta go fóill. Sa chomhthéacs sin, mar is eol don Teachta, leag mé plé-pháipéar mar gheall ar fhógraíocht faoi bhráid bhaill an Chomhchoiste Oireachtais um Ghnóthaí Ealaíon, Spóirt, Turasóireachta, Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta ar 2 Iúil 2008. Leag an plé-pháipéar amach roinnt roghanna maidir leis an cur chuige a d’fhéadfadh a bheith ann maidir le fógraíocht. Mar a thug mé le fios an lá sin, is plé-pháipéar atá anseo a d’eisigh mé d’aon ghnó le díospóireacht a spreagadh mar go bhfuil cinntí le déanamh maidir leis na roghanna éagsúla a luaitear ann. Tá súil agam go mbeidh deis agam dul ós comhair an Comhchoiste arís réasúnta luath chun tuilleadh plé a dhéanamh ar an ábhar fíor-thábhachtach seo. A luaithe agus a bheidh an plé sin thart, déanfar measúnú ar an mbealach agus an cur chuige is fearr agus is éifeachtaí chun fógraíocht a chlúdach faoi Rialacháin a dhéanfaí faoi alt 9(1).

Maidir leis na Ceisteanna faoi phacáistíú dátheangach agus timirí Gaeilge, tá, mar is eol don Teachta, Straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge á ullmhú faoi láthair. Cé gur “léarscáil bóthair” don treo ceart le dul ar aghaidh a bheidh sa Straitéis sin, agus ní plean sonrath gníomhaíochta, is amhlaidh go mbeidh na réimsí saol éagsúla — na meáin chumarsáide, stádas na Gaeilge, an Ghaeilge sa phobal agus sa chóras oideachais, fáil ar sheirbhísí poiblí i nGaeilge agus mar sin de — clúdaithe ann. Beidh gá gach réimse ar leith acu sin a fhorbairt i bpleananna earnála nuair a bheidh an Straitéis féin ceadaithe ag an Rialtas. Tuigfidh an Teachta, mar sin, go bhfuil sé ró-luath cinneadh den chineál a luann sé a dhéanamh.

Feidhmeannaigh Teanga.

169. D’fhiafraigh **Deputy Dinny McGinley** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta cén fáth nach gcuireann an Roinn dlús leis an scéim faoina raibh an Roinn ag cur maoiniú ar fáil chun feidhmeannaigh teanga a fhostú sna pobail Ghaeltachta; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [34280/08]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív): Cuireadh tús le scéim phiólóteach pleanála teanga sa Ghaeltacht i 2004 nuair a cheadaigh mo Roinnse deontais do roinnt eagraíochtaí pobal-bhunaithe chun a chumasú dóibh tabhairt faoi phleanáil teanga ina gceantair feidhme. Deontais gur fiú beagnach €2m ar fad atá ceadaithe d’fhonn pleananna teanga a ullmhú agus a chur i bhfeidhm ar mhaithe leis an Ghaeilge a threisiú mar theanga teaghlaigh agus pobail. Tá na pleananna á gcur i bhfeidhm faoi láthair agus tá os cionn 50% den airgead íoctha ag mo Roinnse go dáta. Déanfar aon chinneadh maidir le leanúint leis an mbeartas seo i gcomhthéacs na Tuarascála ón Staidéar Teangeolaíochta ar Úsáid na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht agus obair an Choiste Rialtais atá ag déanamh anailíse ar an Tuarascáil sin faoi láthair.

Question No. 170 answered with Question No 168.

An Teanga Gaeilge.

171. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Dinny McGinley** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta an mbeadh sé sásta cothrom na hinfheistíochta a chur ar fáil don Ghaeilge chun lárionad cultúrtha na Gaeilge a thógáil sa phríomhchathair mar chuid de Straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge de chuid an Rialtais; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [34282/08]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív): I dtús báire, ba mhaith liom a mhiniú don Teachta go bhfuil teagmháil rialta idir Conradh na Gaeilge agus mo Roinn-se maidir le lárionad Gaeilge nua a thógáil i gcathair Bhaile Átha Cliath agus go háirithe maidir leis na féidearthachtaí a d'fhéadfadh a bheith ann chun tacú le lár-ionad sóisialta Gaeilge dá leithéid. Sa chomhthéacs sin, tuigim go bhfuil ceannáras Chonradh na Gaeilge ar Shráid Fhearchair ar an margadh le díol faoi láthair mar nach bhfuil an suíomh agus an foirgneamh reatha oiriúnach do riachtanais an lae inniu, cé go bhfuil luach ann a d'fhéadfadh cur go mór le hinmharthanacht an togra chun lár-ionad sóisialta Gaeilge a bhunú.

Maidir leis an Straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge, is “léarscáil bóthair” don treo ceart le dul ar aghaidh a bheidh ansin, agus ní pleán sonrath gníomhaíochta. Is amhlaidh, áfach, go mbeidh na réimsí saol éagsúla — na meáin chumarsáide, stádas na Gaeilge, an Ghaeilge sa phobal agus sa chóras oideachais, fáil ar sheirbhísí poiblí i nGaeilge agus mar sin de — clúdaithe ann agus go mbeidh gá gach réimse ar leith acu sin a fhorbairt i bpleananna earnála nuair a bheidh an Straitéis féin ceadaithe ag an Rialtas.

Question No. 172 answered with Question No. 168.

Conradh na Gaeilge.

173. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Dinny McGinley** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta an gcuirfidh sé tacaíocht agus maoiniú ar fáil le gur féidir le Conradh na Gaeilge an feachtas GLAC LEIS, le daoine óga go háirithe a spreagadh agus a chumasú chun leas a bhaint as na seirbhísí atá Gaeilge á n-ofráil ag an earnáil phoiblí a bhuíochas le hAcht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003, a fhorbairt agus a leathnú i bhfianaise na tuairisce a thug 81% de na rannpháirtithe i gceardlanna eolais an Chonartha sna coláistí samhraidh i mí Iúil 2008 le fios go lorgóidís seirbhís trí Ghaeilge uaireanta, go minic, an-mhinic nó i gcónaí amach anseo tar éis dóibh páirt a ghlacadh i gceardlanna GLAC LEIS an Chonartha (sonraí tugtha); agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [34284/08]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív): Bheinn-se go hiomlán i bhfabhar daoine a spreagadh chun leas a bhaint as na seirbhísí Gaeilge atá á gcur ar fáil anois mar thoradh ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla agus aithním gur gnó lárnach do na heagrachtaí agus na greasáin Gaeilge é seo a dhéanamh. Táim go láidir den tuairim, áfach, gur chóir áit tosaíochta a thabhairt don chúram seo taobh istigh de na hacmhainní atá ag an earnáil Ghaeilge cheana féin.

Mar shampla den chineál tionscnaimh atá ar siúl ina leith sin cheana féin, luaim an scéim GLEO (Gaeilge Labhartha in Earnáil an Oideachais), atá á reáchtáil ag Foras na Gaeilge. Faoin scéim sin, iarrtar ar na scoileanna atá páirteach inti seirbhísí i nGaeilge a lorg agus, sa chomhthéacs sin, tuismitheoirí na bpáistí a ghríosadh chun an rud céanna a dhéanamh.

[Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív.]

Ag cur san áireamh go bhfuil breis agus 200 craobh ag Conradh na Gaeilge fein, agus go bhfuil líon mór coistí ag feidhmiú faoi Ghlór na nGael, Gaelscoileanna, Cumann na bhFiann, Comhluadar agus na Scéimeanna Pobail atá maoinithe ag Foras na Gaeilge, feictear domsa go bhfuil bonn láidir ag an earnáil Gaeilge cheana féin chun tabhairt faoina leithéid d'fheachtas d'fhonn tuilleadh feasachta agus úsáide a bhaint amach i gcomhtéacs Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla.

Is fiú a lua chomh maith go bhfuil Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga ann chun comhairle a chur ar an bpobal maidir le hAcht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla, mar aon leis na seirbhísí agus na cearta atá ag an bpobal ó thaobh na Gaeilge de.

Community Development.

174. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his views on increasing the number of representatives from the national social partners on the board of an urban partnership company (details supplied) from two to four. [34361/08]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív): The Government Decision in relation to the establishment of integrated local development companies provides for the appointment of two representatives from the national social partners to the boards of urban partnership companies such as the one described by the Deputy.

As I have previously indicated, I am willing to consider this matter when all integrated companies and urban partnerships have achieved full compliance with the Government's requirements as set out in Guidelines issued in October 2007.

Social Welfare Benefits.

175. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the estimated average cost to the Exchequer of each 1,000 extra entrants on the live register. [34300/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The estimated annual cost of Jobseeker's Allowance and Jobseeker's Benefit of each 1,000 extra entrants onto the Live Register is around €11.5 million in a full year.

Child Support.

176. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the average length of time for an application for child benefit to be processed; the reason families must wait so long; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34277/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): There is no delay in processing the majority of Child Benefit applications. Awards on behalf of Irish-born children are processed either automatically or in a partially automated way using the child's birth details when they are registered with the General Registrar's Office. Parents are contacted by the Child Benefit office within two days of the registration of their child's birth. The Early Child-care Supplement is paid automatically when Child Benefit is awarded.

Currently there are delays in processing Child Benefit for children born outside Ireland who have come to live in Ireland with their parents or who reside in another EU member state but have an entitlement to Irish Child Benefit under EU regulations.

In the case of non Irish born children resident in Ireland, the process is slow as the customer must satisfy the Habitual Residency condition test and this may entail contacting employers, Department of Justice and other relevant bodies to confirm their status in the state. The residency of the children in Ireland must also be confirmed. This additional complexity, combined with an increase in the volume of applications received in recent years, has led to arrears of claims to be processed. Additional staff resources have been assigned to this area and it is envisaged that all arrears on hand will be cleared during the first half of 2009.

EU nationals who come to work in Ireland but whose families remain in their home country may have an entitlement to Family Benefits in Ireland under EU Regulation 1408/71. Before payment of Child Benefit is made for non-resident children, it is necessary to contact the authorities in the country of residence of the children to confirm details and establish what, if any, family benefits are payable in the home country as this will determine entitlement to Irish payments. This process can take a number of months to complete in normal circumstances.

The number of claims received from EU nationals for non-resident children is down approximately 50% on the same period last year. Applications currently being received are being processed within normal timeframes. The arrears of claims on hand are being processed by additional temporary staff recruited for this purpose and it is anticipated that these applications will all be finalised by mid 2009.

Social Welfare Benefits.

177. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if she has reviewed the rent levels for single persons in the Dublin city area to confirm that there are sufficient properties available within the €130 per week rent ceiling. [34285/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): Rent supplement is administered on behalf of the Department by the Health Service Executive (HSE), as part of the supplementary welfare allowance scheme.

Rent supplement is subject to a limit on the amount of rent that an applicant may incur. Rent limits are set at levels that enable the different eligible household types to secure and retain basic suitable rented accommodation, having regard to the different rental market conditions that prevail in various parts of the State. The objective is to ensure that rent supplement is not paid in respect of overly expensive accommodation having regard to the size of the household.

Setting maximum rent limits higher than are justified by the open market would have a distorting effect on the rental market, leading to a more general rise in rent levels. This in turn would worsen the affordability of rental accommodation unnecessarily, with particular negative impact for those tenants on lower incomes.

A review of rent limits was undertaken earlier this year. The review was informed by analysis of data sourced from the Private Residential Tenancies Board, the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the Community Welfare Service and by the views of statutory and voluntary agencies working in this area.

Data provided by the CSO indicates that the increase in private rent levels began to decelerate at the beginning of 2008 and rent levels declined by almost 5% by August of this year. This deceleration in rent levels is also reflected in the *Daft.ie* rental reports where a decrease of over 5% was reported in the first half of 2008 and this included Dublin city. It is also reported that the supply of available rental accommodation has more than doubled in the last year.

[Deputy Mary Hanafin.]

Given the current downward trend in private rent levels and the fact that the overall housing market is currently in a period of adjustment, increasing rent limits in the rent supplement scheme would send an inappropriate signal to the market where a third or so of private sector tenants receive rent supplement. There is currently no hard evidence that the prescribed upper limits on rent levels supported under the rent supplement scheme are having a detrimental impact on the ability of eligible tenants generally to secure suitable rented accommodation to meet their needs.

Rent levels will continue to be monitored particularly for households that may find it difficult to secure or retain accommodation within the limits in certain areas. The position will be reviewed in January 2009 at which stage the results of the latest Private Rented Index report published by the CSO will be analysed for impact on rent limits.

The Health Service Executive has flexibility to award rent supplement above or below rent limits, having regard to local rent levels or to meet the particular needs of an individual. These discretionary powers ensure that individuals with particular needs can be accommodated within the scheme and specifically protects against homelessness.

178. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if a person (details supplied) in County Kildare will receive financial assistance in relation to rent payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34288/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): Rent supplement is administered on behalf of the Department by the community welfare division of the Health Service Executive (HSE), as part of the supplementary welfare allowance scheme.

The Executive has advised that the person concerned applied for rent supplement in respect of his current address on 3 October 2008. His application has been approved and payment will issue as soon as possible. He has also been given assistance towards a rent deposit for this accommodation.

He also applied for rent supplement on 7 May 2008 in respect of his previous address. However, he did not furnish supporting documentation, as requested by the Community Welfare Officer (CWO) and his application cannot be processed. He should contact that CWO who will again clarify the requirements in respect of this application.

179. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs when a non-contributory old age pension will be granted in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34298/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): An application for State Pension (Non Contributory) was received from the person concerned in the Department on 23 September 2008. The application was forwarded to the local Social Welfare Inspector for investigation on 1 October 2008. The inspector will be in contact with the customer in the near future to arrange an interview. On receipt of the inspector's report a decision will be made and the customer will be notified of the outcome.

180. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the cost to the Exchequer of doubling the rate of the living alone allowance. [34363/08]

181. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the cost to the Exchequer of raising the rate of fuel allowance by €12 per week. [34364/08]

182. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the cost to the Exchequer of raising the qualified child allowances by €4. [34365/08]

183. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the cost to the Exchequer of raising welfare rates by 2.5%, 5%, 7.5% and 10% respectively. [34366/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 180 to 183, inclusive, together.

The information sought by the Deputy is contained in the following table.

Measure	Estimated Cost €m (in a full year)
Double the rate of the living alone allowance	67.8
Increase the rate of fuel allowance by €12 per week	108
Increase the rate of the qualified child increase by €4 per week	75.4
Increase all weekly personal and qualified adult rates of payment by:	
• 2.5%	330.8
• 5%	661.6
• 7.5%	992.5
• 10%	1,323.3

184. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the further assistance that will be offered in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34383/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The supplementary welfare allowance scheme, which includes mortgage interest supplement, is administered on behalf of the Department by the community welfare division of the Health Service Executive. A mortgage interest supplement provides short-term income support to eligible people who are unable to meet their mortgage interest repayments in respect of a house which is their sole place of residence.

Mortgage interest supplement is normally calculated to ensure that a person, after the payment of mortgage interest, has an income equal to the rate of SWA appropriate to their family circumstances less a minimum contribution, currently €13, which recipients are required to pay from their own resources. Many recipients pay more than €13 because recipients are also required, subject to income disregards, to contribute any additional assessable means that they have over and above the appropriate basic SWA rate towards their accommodation costs.

The first €75 of additional income, that is, income above the standard rate of supplementary welfare allowance appropriate to a person's circumstances, is disregarded for mortgage interest supplement purposes, with any additional income above €75 assessed at 75%. This measure ensures that people have a financial incentive to take up education or training opportunities or return to employment.

The Executive has advised that the person concerned had been awarded a mortgage interest supplement of €466.20 per month from 1 August 2008. She has since been awarded family income supplement of €150 per week from 1 October 2008. When this additional income is

[Deputy Mary Hanafin.]

taken into account the revised rate of mortgage interest supplement payable is €194.07 per month from 1 October 2008.

185. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if she will award the necessary credit contributions for qualification for contributory old age pension in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34384/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): According to the records of the Department, the person concerned will not reach 66 until 29 January 2012. He has been provided with a copy of his contribution record together with an information guide on State Pension (Contributory).

In general credited contributions are awarded on foot of periods of illness, unemployment and caring which are reckonable for pension entitlement. If the Deputy supplies information relating to any period for which credited contribution should be awarded, the matter will be further investigated.

Child Support.

186. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs when child benefit will issue in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34388/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): In order to qualify for a range of Social Welfare payments, including Child Benefit, applicants are required to satisfy the Habitual Residence condition (HRC), which was introduced on 1 May 2004.

The HRC requires the applicant to satisfy the deciding officer that they meet certain conditions, including that their centre of interest is in Ireland and that their future intentions, as demonstrated, are to remain in Ireland. The legal right to undertake employment and be self supporting are considered by the deciding officer when the person's centre of interest and future intentions are being examined.

In order for Romanian nationals to work in Ireland, they are required to have a work permit; neither the person referred to nor her partner appear to have such a permit. Both appear to have been in Ireland prior to Romania's accession to the EU in January 2007 but did not register with the Dept of Justice or have work permits for this period.

The Child Benefit application was refused on 14 September 2007 as the Deciding Officer, having considered all the circumstances, did not consider that the person concerned satisfied the HR condition as her centre of interest and future intentions have not been clearly established due to her inability to work legally in Ireland, or alternatively to support herself independently. The person concerned was notified of the decision in writing on 14 September 2007 and given the right of appeal.

A further Child Benefit application was received from the person concerned on 5 August 2008, and this has also been refused as the Deciding Officer does not consider that she satisfies the Habitual Residence Condition. The person concerned was notified of the decision in writing on 7 October 2008 and of her right of appeal.

Official Engagements.

187. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the meetings he has held or the events he has attended with groups or agencies

working for the homeless since coming to office; the number of invitations to such events received by his office in that period; the number of occasions on which he has been represented by a Junior Minister from his Department at such events; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34250/08]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): While it is not possible to compile definitive details of all invitations received and events attended in connection with homeless matters, I as the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the Minister of State at my Department with delegated responsibility for housing matters, and officials of my Department engage with a wide range of interests in the homeless sector. These engagements arise in many different capacities, including through Ministerial attendance at formal events and meetings, and through my Department's role chairing the National Homeless Consultative Committee. These interactions provide a comprehensive platform of engagement between my Department, both at Ministerial and official level, and the interests concerned.

Turbary Rights.

188. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the status of bog cutting for personal use at special areas of conservation on blanket bogs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34274/08]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): At the present time, turf cutting for personal domestic use may continue on blanket bogs Special Areas of Conservation and Natural Heritage Areas, although the use of "sausage" cutting machines is not permitted. However, the conservation status of these designated peatlands is being kept under review.

Housing Grants.

189. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he is satisfied with the time it is taking to approve the home improvement grant for the over 60's; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34345/08]

190. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he will publish the criteria for the home improvement grant for the over 60's on the internet or in the national newspapers in order that people can determine if they qualify for the grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34346/08]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Michael Finneran): I propose to take Questions Nos. 189 and 190 together.

The revised suite of Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability introduced in November 2007 provide a more targeted and integrated response to the housing needs of older people and people with a disability. To announce the launch of the revised suite of grant schemes, my Department placed notices in the national press and on the Department's website, while the local authorities notified the public of the launch of the schemes at local level.

Information on each of the grant schemes, including a brief explanation of the types of works allowable and the applicable means-tests, can still be obtained at my Department's website, www.environ.ie, or from local authority offices.

[Deputy Michael Finneran.]

Local authorities prioritise applications under the Housing Aid for Older People (HAOP) scheme on the basis of the medical needs of the applicant and on the urgency and necessity of the identified works. Special consideration is given to applicants in hospital who require works to be completed in order to facilitate the continuance of their care in their own home, or to facilitate their direct return home. The administration of the suite of Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability, including the prioritisation, processing and approval of individual applications, is a matter for individual local authorities and one in which my Department has no direct function.

The high level of publicity surrounding the revised grant schemes since their launch has led to an increased level of activity being experienced by local authorities this year. In response to the particularly high levels of activity under the revised schemes experienced in 2008 by certain local authorities, my Department recently made supplementary Exchequer allocations totalling €3.6 million towards the operation of these schemes this year. The issue of a further round of supplementary allocations to other local authorities will be considered in the event of further funding becoming available. My Department has re-emphasised to local authorities the importance of prioritisation in assessing grant applications given the level of demand being experienced nationally.

Wildlife Conservation.

191. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the number of deer that have been culled from 1 October 2007 to 1 October 2008 in County Wicklow and the remainder of this State; the way this is organised; the action taken in relation to the deer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34437/08]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): My responsibilities under the Wildlife Acts relate to the conservation of populations of certain protected species including all deer species.

Deer may only be hunted under licence. The open season for most deer species, including Red, Fallow and Sika, operates annually from 1 September to 28 February, depending on the gender and age of deer. However there is a 12-month open season for Muntjac Deer.

Applications for licences to shoot deer under Section 29(1) of the Wildlife Act 1976, as amended, are considered by my Department from 1 August for the following open season. Information on the numbers of deer killed in the previous season is gathered at this stage. It is estimated that 23,699 deer were killed in the State in the 2007/2008 season, of which 10,282 deer were killed in County Wicklow.

Telecommunications Services.

192. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources when contracts will be signed under the national broadband scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34272/08]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department has reached the evaluation stage of the National Broadband Scheme (NBS) procurement process. The closing date for receipt of tenders was 6 October 2008 and two bids were received from Eircom Ltd and Hutchinson 3G Ireland Ltd. The evaluation of the bids is scheduled for completion on 31 October 2008 and the contract is expected to be signed next month. Subject to agreement with the chosen service provider, rollout of services is expected to begin shortly thereafter.

Departmental Expenditure.

193. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the expenditure by his Department in 2008 on public relations; the individual companies involved; the amount paid to each; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34254/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): My Department has not employed external public relations companies in 2008. Public relations advice, where required is provided by my Departments Corporate Affairs Division.

World Trade Organisation Talks.

194. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the situation regarding the World Trade Organisation talks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34255/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The WTO Ministerial meeting convened in July last in Geneva ended without agreement on agriculture and NAMA modalities despite emerging convergence on a range of headline numbers and detailed technical issues. The sticking point was irreconcilable differences between US, India and China on the extent of remedies that developing countries would be allowed to apply to counter import surges in agricultural products that might arise following the import tariff cuts proposed. However, a range of other issues had not at that stage been addressed and no formal agreement had been reached in agriculture on the points under discussion.

In closing the Ministerial conference, DG Lamy and other participants spoke of the need to preserve the progress achieved, notwithstanding the failure to agree on all matters. However the process for moving the negotiations forward from this point is far from clear. Discussions are continuing at official level with meetings among the so-called G7 group of countries (EU, US, Brazil, India, Japan, Australia and China). However, the constraints of the forthcoming US and Indian elections and the appointment of a new Commission are expected to delay serious political decision-making for the foreseeable future. While it cannot be ruled out that attempts will be made to bank the convergence already achieved, the negotiations are conducted according to the premise that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”.

As one of the most open economies in the world, Ireland wanted a comprehensive, ambitious and balanced trade deal. This remains the case. We were strongly committed to supporting trade in the least developed countries and have already given them duty and quota free access to EU markets under the “everything but arms” measure. This also remains the case.

In the negotiations we firmly defended our agriculture interests and also sought the best advantage for our industry and services; the other 150+ countries equally had their ambitions.

I and my colleagues in Government, up to and including the Taoiseach, took every opportunity to outline Ireland’s dissatisfaction at the direction of the negotiations and the serious difficulties that could emerge for Irish agriculture from some of the proposals on the table. We used our position in the negotiations to influence matters and to mitigate the more damaging aspects of the proposals.

The fact that no deal was agreed on this occasion does not cause any immediate disruption in the international trading environment. It simply means that we continue with the current international WTO arrangements. In that respect, we must continue to focus strongly on ensuring that we produce high quality and innovative food products for our valuable export markets in the EU and in other parts of the world. Competitiveness, quality and innovation will continue

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to be the key elements in our agri-food export success, irrespective of any changes in the regulatory trading environment.

Fishing Industry Development.

195. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the outcome of the recent Fisheries Council meeting; the discussions held regarding the operation and review of the Common Fisheries Policy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34256/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): I attended the recent Agriculture and Fisheries Council of Ministers Meeting in Brussels on the 29 September 2008. The main item of interest to Ireland at this Council Meeting was a discussion on a proposal for cod recovery in Community waters. This proposal is one of key importance to Ireland and would involve the introduction of a strict days at sea limitations for fishing vessels operating off the south and west coast of Ireland. I strongly argued that restrictive days at sea were not necessary for the Celtic Sea south and west coast fisheries. I stressed that alternative measures such as closed areas to protect spawning stock could be just as effective. This matter is critical for the Irish whitefish fleet generally and I will be working closely with the Federation of Irish Fishermen over the coming weeks to develop the best possible solution for our fishing industry in the context of the tough measures being proposed by the EU Commission.

An informal discussion to mark the start of the debate on the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy was held with Fisheries Ministers on the margins of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council. The Common Fisheries Policy was formally established in 1983, and has since then been subject to revision every ten years. The latest Reform was agreed in 2002, and is up for review in 2012 at the latest.

Our aim is for a Common Fisheries Policy which results in a strong, sustainable and profitable seafood industry and, most importantly, which provides economic activity for our coastal communities, as set down for Ireland in the Cawley Strategy — Steering A New Course.

I am concerned that there is some pressure at this early stage in the debate for a change in the policy that would promote an Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) regime at European level. I will not support such a policy which promotes the concentration of activity and benefits in the hands of a small number of large companies. Our aim is for a policy which maximises the development of all our coastal communities and for this reason it is vital that quotas and their management are retained under national competence and not moved to a market based mechanism.

This debate on the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy is at a very early stage. The Commission will bring forward a Green Paper for discussion next year.

I will continue to work closely with the FIF (Federation of Irish Fishermen) to progress all matters of importance to the Irish fishing industry and have our national priorities taken on board as far as possible in the discussion on the Reform of the CFP following the publication of the Green Paper.

196. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will arrange a meeting between officials from his Department and a group (details supplied) in County Louth to discuss their concerns. [34261/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): I am happy to arrange a meeting as requested which can be organised through the Fisheries Offices in Clonakilty (023 59500).

Departmental Agencies.

197. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he or his Department had discussions recently with the board of Teagasc in terms of the budget to be allocated to Teagasc in order to continue providing services to farmers in 2009; the financial allocation made to Teagasc in the years 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34262/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): There is routine ongoing contact between my Department and Teagasc in relation to its annual financial allocation. In that context the Department informed Teagasc in July of a revision to its 2008 allocation in view of the Government Decision on required savings in Government Departments and State Agencies.

The financial allocations made to Teagasc by my Department for capital and non-capital purposes in the years 2006, 2007 and 2008 are as follows:

Year	Total € m
2006	134.028
2007	140.450
2008	141.964

The financial allocation to be made to Teagasc for 2009 will be announced in the Budget.

Grant Payments.

198. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the reason a payment to a farmer (details supplied) in County Westmeath under the farm waste management grant scheme has not been awarded; if he will take steps to have same awarded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34268/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The claim for payment lodged by the person named is being processed by my Department. I would expect that payment will be made in the near future provided that the claim is in compliance with the terms and conditions of the Scheme.

Decentralisation Programme.

199. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the operation to date of the decentralisation programme for both Department staff and agencies operating under the aegis of his Department; if he will quantify the number of staff who have relocated directly from his Department or agencies to regional locations; the savings in financial terms in respect of office accommodation previously required which is no longer occupied, due to the numbers of staff decentralised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34291/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The Government decision on the decentralisation of my Department is that some 600 headquarters staff will move to Portlaoise, the local offices in Cork city will move to Fermoy, involving some 100 staff; and the laboratories in Cork and Limerick will move to Macroom, involving up to 100 staff.

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The move of the Fisheries function of my Department to Clonakilty, involving over 80 staff, is now substantially complete. The decision regarding state agencies is that Bord Bia will move to Enniscorthy and Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) will move to Clonakilty.

My Department's original Decentralisation Implementation Plan allowed for a phased movement to Portlaoise. The 2005, 2006 and 2007 advance phases of decentralisation to Portlaoise were completed on schedule. There has been an increase of some 300 full-time posts to bring the total number in Portlaoise to almost 500 since the programme began. To date, the Department has met its targets as set out in its original plan. The initial estimate for completion of the plan was 2008, to coincide with the availability of the permanent accommodation. The Office of Public Works (OPW) announced last December that a consortium, the Macquarie Partnership, has won the tender for the project to build the permanent offices in Portlaoise (as part of a public private partnership including offices in Mullingar and Carlow) and planning permission for the new building has now been granted. A revision to the Department's Decentralisation Implementation Plan is now being considered, to reflect the changes to the timetable and the progress so far, as well as the evolving operating environment. An additional advance phase has been agreed and planning and preparations for this phase are currently underway.

Separate implementation plans for Fermoy and Macroom are in place. The plans allow for a phasing of the recruitment of staff but no physical move until the permanent accommodation is in place. Bord Bia and BIM also have separate implementation plans; no advance moves have taken place.

In total there has been an increase of 297 full-time posts in Portlaoise and 84 in Clonakilty since the programme was announced. Of the 297 who transferred to Portlaoise, 204 were relocated from Dublin; of the 84 who transferred to Clonakilty, 35 were relocated from Dublin.

The acquisition of property is primarily a matter for OPW and they have supplied the following details of the site acquisition at the Department's four locations.

Location	Site Area	Status
Portlaoise	9.13 acres	Purchase completed in 2007
Clonakilty	3.1 acres	Purchase completed in 2005
Macroom	Site of 5 acres identified. Planning issue on appeal to An Bord Pleanála.	Purchase agreed in principle subject to contract, outcome of planning appeal and Government approval
Fermoy	4.1 acres (at Teagasc, Moorepark)	Purchase agreed in principle subject to contract and Government approval.

The Clonakilty offices, which are also due to accommodate BIM, are due to be completed in Quarter 1 2009. The OPW have also identified a site in Enniscorthy for Bord Bia.

Since the commencement of the programme, my Department has vacated accommodation in Hume House, Dublin 4, the annual rent for which was €660,000. Parts of Agriculture House have also been vacated and my Department is liaising with OPW in this regard. The accommodation vacated by Fisheries was in the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources.

All of the foregoing, however, needs to be considered against the background of the Government decision on 8 July last that no further expenditure on the acquisition of accommodation for decentralisation should be sanctioned pending detailed consideration by the Government of two reports: one from the Decentralisation Implementation Group on the feasibility of phased moves by the State Agencies; and one from the Implementation Group of Secretaries

General on the governmental and cross-Departmental issues arising from the need to provide facilities for Minister, Ministers of State and officials while in Dublin on business.

Grant Payments.

200. **Deputy Frank Feighan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the position in the case of a person (details supplied) regarding the sale of forestry. [34351/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The payment in question refers to an Afforestation grant for the establishment of a new forest by the individual in question, rather than the sale of forestry. I understand that there were a number of issues with this application. These have now been resolved and both grant and premium have been paid.

Rural Environment Protection Scheme.

201. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when a person (details supplied) in County Mayo will be called for an oral hearing in respect of a REP scheme appeal. [34358/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): This appeal was received at the Agriculture Appeals Office and was assigned to an Appeals Officer. On examination of the case, it was found necessary to obtain further information from Mayo County Council. On receipt of this new information, the file was forwarded to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to review the case. The necessity of holding an oral hearing will depend on the outcome of this review. When the file is returned to the Appeals Officer, the case will be concluded without undue delay.

Farm Waste Management.

202. **Deputy Frank Feighan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when payment will issue to farmer (details supplied) under the waste management scheme. [34360/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The claim for payment lodged by the person named is being processed by my Department. I would expect that payment will be made in the near future provided that the claim is in compliance with the terms and conditions of the Scheme.

School Transport.

203. **Deputy Phil Hogan** asked the Minister for Education and Science if he will sanction concessionary school transport tickets for persons (details supplied) in County Laois; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34249/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Deputy Seán Haughey): Under the terms of my Department's Post Primary School Transport Scheme, a pupil is eligible for transport if s/he resides 4.8 kilometres or more from her/his local post primary education centre.

The scheme is not designed to facilitate parents who choose to send their children to a post-primary centre outside of the catchment area in which they reside. However, children who are fully eligible for transport to the post-primary centre in the catchment area in which they reside, may apply for transport on a concessionary basis to a post-primary centre outside of their own

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catchment area — otherwise known as catchment boundary transport. These children can only be facilitated if spare seats are available on the bus after all other eligible children travelling to their local post-primary centre have been catered for. Such children have to make their own way to the nearest pick up point within that catchment area.

The Transport Liaison Officer for Co. Carlow and Bus Éireann have advised that the transport service in question is operating to capacity. The family referred to by the Deputy, in the details supplied, should continue to liaise with Bus Éireann regarding the availability of spare seats on the bus.

Departmental Expenditure.

204. **Deputy Brian Hayes** asked the Minister for Education and Science the expenditure by his Department on various design teams since the year 2000 on school building projects which have not, to date, gone for construction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34257/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): Design team fees are paid following the completion of stages as a project works its way through architectural planning. Given the number of projects involved and the time it takes for each project to progress through the stages of architectural planning incurring fee payments at each stage along the way, the information sought by the Deputy is not readily available and would require an inordinate amount of staff time to assemble.

In general, more than 50% of design team fees on any single project are drawn down in stages before the project actually goes to construction stage. There are currently over 360 major projects progressing through the various stages of architectural planning. Most of these will have incurred fees to design teams in the normal course of that progression but most will not yet have gone on site.

School Transport.

205. **Deputy Phil Hogan** asked the Minister for Education and Science if he will sanction concessionary bus tickets for persons (details supplied) in County Kilkenny; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34259/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Deputy Seán Haughey): Under the terms of my Department’s Post Primary School Transport Scheme, a pupil is eligible for transport if she/he resides 4.8 kilometres or more from her/his local post primary education centre.

The scheme is not designed to facilitate parents who choose to send their children to a post-primary centre outside of the catchment area in which they reside. However, children who are fully eligible for transport to the post-primary centre in the catchment area in which they reside, may apply for transport on a concessionary basis to a post-primary centre outside of their own catchment area — otherwise known as catchment boundary transport.

These children can only be facilitated if spare seats are available on the bus after all other eligible children travelling to their local post-primary centre have been catered for. Such children have to make their own way to the nearest pick up point within that catchment area.

The Transport Liaison Officer for Co. Kilkenny and Bus Éireann have advised that the transport service in question is operating to capacity. The families referred to by the Deputy,

in the details supplied, should continue to liaise with Bus Éireann regarding the availability of spare seats on the bus.

Schools Recognition.

206. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Education and Science when he expects to publish the review of procedures for recognising primary schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34270/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): As the Deputy will be aware, I have recently announced a review of the procedures for the establishment of new primary schools under the Commission on School Accommodation.

I intend to establish a Technical Working Group under the Commission to undertake a full review of the criteria and procedures for the recognition of new primary schools. This working group will begin work in the coming weeks and it is expected that the review of procedures for recognising primary schools will be completed and revised arrangements in place within a two year timeframe.

207. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Education and Science the reason he refused an application by the founding committee of a school (details supplied) for the use of buildings located in Blanchardstown Hospital as temporary accommodation from September 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34271/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): The Department was made aware of proposals to establish a new Gaelscoil to serve Tyrrellstown/Hollystown in August 2008. A formal ‘Notification of Intent’ to establish this new school was received from the proposed Patron, An Foras Patrúnachta in September 2008.

However, as the Deputy will be aware, I announced a review of the procedures for recognising primary schools on 14 September last. In the interim period, it is not planned to recognise any new primary schools except in areas where increases in pupil numbers that cannot be catered for in existing schools require the provision of new schools. This means that new schools will not be established for reasons not related to demographic growth in areas where there is already sufficient school accommodation or where the increases can be catered for by extending the existing school accommodation.

The application to establish a new Gaelscoil to serve Tyrrellstown/Hollystown will be considered in this context. If the school receives provisional recognition the provision of suitable temporary accommodation is a matter for the Patron/Board of Management. In that context and on the basis that the school has not yet received recognition, the founding Committees application for direct provision of accommodation by the Department was refused.

Third Level Grants.

208. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Education and Science if his attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied) in County Laois; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34296/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): The decision on eligibility for third level grants is a matter for the relevant assessing authority — i.e. the local authority or VEC. These bodies do not refer individual applications to my Department except, in excep-

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tional cases, where, for example, advice or instruction regarding a particular clause in the relevant scheme is required.

If an individual applicant considers that she/he has been unjustly refused a maintenance grant, or that the rate of grant awarded is not the correct one, she/he may appeal, in the first instance, to the relevant local authority or VEC.

Where an individual applicant has had an appeal turned down, in writing, by the relevant local authority or VEC, and remains of the view that the body has not interpreted the schemes correctly in his/her case, an appeal form outlining the position may be submitted by the applicant to my Department.

Alternatively, as already indicated, the local authority or VEC may, itself, in exceptional circumstances, seek clarification on issues from my Department.

The Special Rate of Maintenance Grant referred to by the Deputy is available to students in receipt of the ordinary maintenance grant under each of my Department’s four maintenance grant schemes. In order to qualify for the special rate of maintenance grant a candidate must meet a number of conditions, including the following:

1. An applicant must qualify for the ordinary maintenance grant.
2. Total reckonable income in the relevant tax year must not exceed the lower income limits as set out in the relevant Maintenance Grant Schemes and, where applicable, net of Child Dependent Increase payments paid by the Department of Social and Family Affairs.
3. As at the prescribed date — i.e. 31 December each year — the source of income must include one of the eligible long-term Social Welfare payments.

The prescribed income limit for the special rate of maintenance grant for the academic year 2007/2008 is €20,147.

It is not proposed to depart from the existing arrangements for the determination of the eligibility threshold.

Departmental Funding.

209. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Education and Science if his Department has received an EWS application from a community school (details supplied) in County Kilkenny; and if he will approve the application without further delay in view of the works which are needed to this school. [34297/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): My Department has received an application for emergency funding from the school in question and additional information in relation to this application has recently been received. This information is currently under consideration by officials in my Department.

The Management Authority of the school in question will be informed of the outcome in due course.

Schools Building Programme.

210. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Education and Science the number of primary school building projects which have been banded 1.1 by his Department for priority

in the new school building programme announced on a multi-annual basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34307/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): All applications for capital funding are assessed against published prioritisation criteria to determine the extent and type of need presenting based on the demographics of an area, proposed housing developments, condition of buildings, site capacity etc. leading ultimately to an appropriate accommodation solution. Projects are then selected for inclusion in the School Building and Modernisation Programme on the basis of priority of need. This is reflected in the band rating assigned to a project.

Currently, there are 105 projects in architectural planning which have a band rating of 1.1.

Funding Applications.

211. **Deputy Frank Feighan** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position in the case of a school (details supplied) in County Leitrim which has applied for dormant account funding. [34338/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): There is no record of an application for dormant accounts funding by the school referred to by the Deputy having been received in my Department.

Departmental Programmes.

212. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education and Science if the small schools initiative and permanent accommodation initiative are still in operation; if he will provide details of these initiatives including the expenditure under each initiative since their introduction in 2003; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34357/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): The two Devolved Schemes, the Small Schools Scheme and the Permanent Accommodation Scheme, were originally introduced on a pilot basis for 38 schools in 2003. Due to the positive feedback from schools, they were extended to cover 699 more schools between the years of 2004 and 2007. The purpose of these devolved schemes are to devolve funding to individual school authorities to undertake refurbishment of existing buildings and/or smaller extensions which will address the school’s long term accommodation needs.

Under the terms of the Schemes, school authorities are empowered to manage these works with detailed guidance from, and minimal interaction with, the Department. Devolving funding to school management authorities allows them to have control of their projects, assists in moving projects more quickly to tender and construction and can also deliver better value for money. Nevertheless, schools are required to meet all design, consultancy and procurement procedures as laid out in my Departments guidelines.

The two schemes are still in operation with total expenditure under both schemes reaching €220 m to date.

Schools Building Projects.

213. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Science when his Department will provide a new school building for a primary school (details supplied) in

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County Cork which has a band rating of 1.1 and is designated as a developing area by his Department's developing areas unit. [34412/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O'Keeffe): The school to which the Deputy refers to has an application for a new school on a new site with the Department. A suitable site has been identified for the school in question. The site comprises of three plots of land with three separate vendors. Officials from my Department are in contact with key stakeholders with a view to exploring the options open to advancing the proposed acquisition.

The progression of this project will be considered in the context of the capital budget available to my Department for school buildings generally. In light of the many competing demands on the capital budget of my Department, it is not possible to give an indicative timeframe for the acquisition of the site at this time followed by progression of the project.

In the meantime temporary accommodation for the school has been approved by my Department as an interim measure to facilitate increased enrolments for Sept 2008.

School Accommodation.

214. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Education and Science if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there are 31 places available to children to commence their schooling at a school (details supplied) in 2009 and that there are 19 other children from the locality who have been denied a place at the school; his plans to ensure that these children can attend the school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34416/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O'Keeffe): The school to which the Deputy refers to has an application for a new school on a new site with the Department. A suitable site has been identified for the school in question. The site comprises of three plots of land with three separate vendors. Officials from my Department are in contact with key stakeholders with a view to exploring the options open to advancing the proposed acquisition.

The progression of this project will be considered in the context of the capital budget available to my Department for school buildings generally. In light of the many competing demands on the capital budget of my Department, it is not possible to give an indicative timeframe for the acquisition of the site at this time followed by progression of the project .

It is open to the Board of Management to apply for additional temporary accommodation for September 2009 to accommodate any increase in numbers, should they arise.