



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 24 Meán Fómhair 2013

Tuesday, 24 September 2013

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Common Agricultural Policy Reform

49. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding Common Agricultural Policy reform; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39744/13]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): Political agreement between the three European institutions on reform of the Common Agricultural Policy was reached under the Irish Presidency in June, with final details expected to be agreed with the European Parliament, hopefully this afternoon. There is a final trialogue between the Parliament, the Commission and the Council which finalised its position yesterday in terms of those negotiations.

The reform addresses three broad themes. First, there is a greater emphasis on sustainability and on further strengthening the environmental credentials of the CAP, through the greening of direct payments and the requirement to support agri-environmental measures in rural development programmes. Second, generational renewal is given a much greater focus, with new and enhanced support for young farmers under both pillars of the CAP and third, there is a continuing move towards greater market orientation, through the phasing out of production quotas for key products and the use of market support measures as a safety net in the event of severe market disturbance. In addition, considerable flexibility is granted to member states under the reform to pursue targeted policies under both Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 that are suited to their individual circumstances and agricultural production systems. Most importantly from an Irish perspective, this extends to the way in which direct payments are to be redistributed between

farmers, which will allow us to achieve the twin objectives of making the direct payments system fairer for those currently on low payments, while not undermining the efforts of those on higher payments to develop their farming enterprises.

It is up to member states now to get on with the implementation of the reform. I launched a consultation process with all the relevant stakeholders and other interested parties in July and by the closing date of last Friday, 20 September, 37 responses had been received. I and my Department will consider these submissions over the coming weeks and I intend to formulate and publicise the final shape of the new direct payments system. In my answer here it states “towards the end of 2013” but I hope to do it considerably earlier than that.

In regard to Pillar 2, preparatory work for the next Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 is already well under way. An initial stakeholder consultation process was launched in 2012 and written submissions were received from over 80 stakeholders. A second consultation was held in July where stakeholders attended a full-day workshop. Based on the outcome of these processes, the drafting of a new programme will be advanced in my Department before the end of the year.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Like the Minister, I also wish those involved in today’s discussions well. In the interests of farmers I hope they come to a conclusion. Can the Minister confirm that there will be full co-funding of Pillar 2 payments from the Exchequer? Does he propose providing a national top-up as sought by some of the farming organisations? Will he confirm that it is not proposed to fund the forestry expansion scheme and premia from the rural development programme and that it will continue to be fully funded from the Exchequer?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy’s questions are all very relevant. I, too, hope we can conclude the discussions and finalisation of the agreement with the European Parliament today. What is currently being finalised relates to multi-annual financial framework decisions by Heads of States in terms of issues such as transfer between pillars and a number of other issues around capping, in which I know Deputy Martin Ferris also has an interest. I hope we can reach final agreement with the Parliament on those issues which remain outstanding.

On the co-financing issue, about which I have been asked repeatedly, there are a number of different co-financing rates available to Ireland because the Commission is trying to encourage member states to ensure they spend money on particular issues. For example, a 75% co-funding rate will be applied to environmental schemes and a co-funding rate of 53% will be applied to other schemes. It is no surprise that I would expect the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to ensure that, first, all of the money is drawn down and, second, that we maximise the highest level of co-funding available for Ireland. We need to take this into account, of course, but my first priority is to ensure we are spending as much money as we can in rural Ireland on the schemes that can give us the biggest bang for our buck. It is too early for me to say we will have a 50:50 co-funding of all expenditure. However, I can assure the Deputy we will be ensuring all of the EU money available under Pillar 2 will be fully drawn down and we will co-fund to the extent necessary to ensure that happens and, one hopes, in the years ahead, go well beyond that, as previous Governments did when they added significant top-ups from the Exchequer to rural development programmes.

On the forestry issue, it is unlikely we will include forestry expenditure in the rural development programmes. However, I do not wish to rule anything out until such time as our approach has been finalised following the public consultation.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I welcome the firm commitment that all EU funds will be drawn down. Obviously, we want to get as much money as possible, but we also need to look at what schemes will provide the best bang for farmers' buck. That is a matter we can debate in more detail some other day in another forum. It should be recognised that the Minister has stated clearly that there will be full drawdown of EU funds.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Yes.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: In regard to Pillar 1, can the Minister confirm that he does not propose to go down the route of regionalisation or the reduction coefficient? Will he outline the objective basis on which he favours a variable greening as opposed to paying everybody the same amount for the same work in terms of ecology?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I do not propose to make any absolutes today in terms of commitments because I believe that would make a farce of the consultation process. Deputies will be aware of my views on most of these issues, which may or may not change following conclusion of the consultation process. I would be very slow to introduce a reduction coefficient to parts of the country. The reason Ireland fought hard for acceptance of the redistribution model is because we want to try to keep the entire country under the same payment model rather than take money from people because they farm in mountainous areas and so on. I am not inclined to do that unless there are very persuasive arguments to do so. The same reasoning would apply to breaking Ireland up into different regions and giving different payments per hectare within different regions. I believe that would cause a great deal of division within Irish agriculture and I do not want to do that unless I have to. I think that is unlikely to happen but one cannot rule anything out.

On variable greening, we have made the case that if one is to incentivise farmers to adopt the new greening measures, those who receive the highest payments - generally, the most productive farmers - need to be offered an incentive to abide by the greening measures. This should be done by linking the payment to their single farm payment. To do otherwise could result in farmers on high single farm payments receiving a very small greening payment. This would have little, if any, incentive attached to it if the amount were small. On the other hand, a farmer on a low single farm payment who had a much higher greening payment in percentage terms would have a much stronger incentive to comply with the greening criteria. It makes more sense to link the greening and single farm payments. Setting the level of the former at 30% of the latter creates an incentive for every farmer to comply.

Stocking Densities

50. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on whether the statistics on stocking density do not support the claim that higher rates of single farm payment reflect much higher levels of productivity; if he will take this into account when deciding on which model to use to determine the new farm payments system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39616/13]

Deputy Simon Coveney: My Department has used stocking density as one measure of agricultural productivity. While stocking density does not represent all the elements of agricultural productivity, it is a tangible and precise measurement of activity for which data from my Department are readily available. I am aware that Deputies have received these data.

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Previous analysis by my Department has found that, using average results per payment category, farmers on payment rates per hectare above the national average have roughly double the stocking density of those below the average. However, they also show that the stocking density of farms on the very highest payment rates - for example, more than €500 per hectare - is not significantly higher than the stocking density of farms just above the national average. This data suggests that while some level of convergence is justified, a complete flattening of direct payments, as originally proposed by the European Commission, is not justified.

Following the successful completion of the negotiations on reform of the Common Agricultural Policy under the Irish Presidency, I launched a consultation process with all relevant stakeholders to ascertain their views on the most appropriate application of the direct payment regulation in light of Ireland's unique agricultural profile and circumstances. As I indicated, the final date for submissions on the consultative paper was 20 September. The process of analysing all submissions will now begin in conjunction with the ongoing modelling of the various options that are available to Ireland.

There is an ongoing and divisive discussion on this issue. Farmers who are gaining from the new measures wish to maximise their gains, while farmers who are losing want to minimise their losses. I have been transparent in this matter and have travelled around the country selling the new model, under which payments will be redistributed gradually over time. Farmers in receipt of the highest payment will be asked to meet the cost of increases for those in receipt of the lowest payments. We added to this mechanism in the final agreement by guaranteeing a minimum payment of at least 60% of the average.

We have also included an option of introducing a maximum payment per hectare, an issue in which the Deputy has shown an interest, having asked questions on it previously. While I support this option in principle, I do not wish to give an absolute commitment until the consultation process has been completed. By the time the current Common Agricultural Policy has run its course, we will have seen a dramatic redistribution of supports among farmers. This will be done in a fair and gradual manner. While the most productive farmers will, in general, continue to have the highest payments, the gap between the highest and lowest payments will be much narrower.

Deputy Martin Ferris: The statistics on stocking density show significant differences in respect of those in receipt of higher payments and those on lower payments. For instance, farmers with an average single farm payment of €282 per hectare have an average stocking density of 1.47, whereas those in receipt of an average payment of €1,180 per hectare have an average stocking density of 1.92. Slightly more than 200 farmers receive a single farm payment in excess of €100,000 per annum and the amount paid to this group is €33 million per annum. A further 1,800 farmers receive a single farm payment of between €50,000 and €100,000. The small number of recipients on higher payments receive more in total than the 52,000 farmers who receive payments of less than €5,000 per annum. Would the Minister not agree that it is unfair to have that kind of disparity between those over €100,000 and those less than €5,000?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The straight answer is "yes" that it is unfair and we will change it. However, I am not sure we will change it to the extent that the Deputy would like. We must work within the parameters of the rules that have been agreed under the CAP. At yesterday's meeting the Council of Ministers made a final decision on the capping of payments. Some very large member states have taken a very strong stand against any mandatory capping of payments. States such as Ireland have argued that there should be capping. So we will be able to

introduce a voluntary cap for payments over €150,000 - not under that - if that is agreed with the Parliament today. We could also introduce a per-hectare cap on payment, which we may well decide to do. I am very much open to considering that as I have said previously. Should farmers receive payments of more than, for example, €700 when there are also farmers on a minimum payment of €145 to €150 per hectare? Those are the kinds of questions we can tease out in the consultation process, but I am looking at the issue.

Currently, at the start of this process, there are farmers on €40 per hectare and farmers on €1,400 per hectare. At the end of this process the likely scenario is that no one will be on less than €145 to €150 per hectare and very few, if any, will be on more than €700 per hectare. There is a significant squeezing towards the average while also recognising that the most productive farmers in the country need the supports to allow them to grow and expand.

Deputy Martin Ferris: I welcome what the Minister said about bringing the payments closer together and trying to look after weaker farmers to allow them to be viable and survive. Is capping the payment at €150,000 written stone or can it be negotiated? Do individual states have the flexibility to introduce their own cap on payments? It is not right for anyone to get more than €100,000. We should reduce that figure. It does not make any sense that 200 farmers get more than €100,000, totalling €33 million. We should have the flexibility to reduce the CAP payment ourselves. I welcome that the Minister is raising the minimum and reducing the overall payment.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is important for people to know what is possible and what is not possible. We have previously discussed putting a ceiling on payments of €100,000. In principle I agreed with that and I am on the record as having said that. We now have an agreement with other Ministers. Some countries, in particular Germany and the UK, wanted no capping at all and have only agreed to a 5% degressive payment over €150,000, which represents very limited capping. We have also agreed that on a voluntary basis member states may have a degressive payment of up to 100% - in other words no payment above €150,000. However, there is no provision allowing us to introduce a cap under that. The reason is that we have a Common Market in which big farmers are competing with big farmers in other parts of Europe in the same marketplace. There was a view that we need to try to maintain a level playing field on direct payments available for farmers. I would not have had an issue if the agreement at ministerial level was for a cap at €100,000. However, that is not the position - the position is €150,000. We will decide whether we choose to reduce payments above that figure or to cap payments at that figure, as we will decide everything else at the end of the consultation process.

Common Agricultural Policy Negotiations

51. **Deputy John Halligan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in view of the conclusion of the recent Common Agricultural Policy negotiations, if he will confirm if Ireland will retain its current funding levels under Pillar 1 and Pillar 2; if the level of funding has been reduced; if he will further confirm the level of funding has been approved for Ireland under each pillar; if his Department has begun the process of determining what the elements of the new programme will be; the elements of the current programme which are to be retained; if he will further confirm when his proposed programme for implementation for 2014 to 2020 will be put to the commission for their consideration; the timeline for delivery of commitments arising from same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39615/13]

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Deputy Simon Coveney: The European Council on 7 and 8 February agreed the multi-annual financial framework for the period 2014 to 2020. The overall EU budget was cut by about 7% compared with the Commission's original proposals, and by 3.5% compared with the current MFF for the period 2007 to 2013. By the way, that was seen as a triumph at the time given the fact that a year ago many people were talking about cuts of up to 30% to the Common Agricultural Policy budget.

In so far as Ireland is concerned, the projected annual average commitment for direct payments in the 2014 to 2020 period is approximately €1.214 billion. This implies a reduction of 3.3% on the 2013 allocation of €1.255 billion. The annual average commitment for rural development is €313 million in current prices, implying a reduction of 11% on the 2013 allocation of €352 million. I will add a caveat to these figures. Although the European Parliament has assented to the multi-annual financial framework related issues on CAP reform are being finalised and negotiated this afternoon and I have not got an update from that meeting yet. I am giving the figures assuming that they will agree today.

As I have said in answers to previous questions, we have initiated a consultation process on how we spend that money, who gets it, where it goes, what schemes we should introduce to help farmers get more money from the marketplace, how to help a new generation of farmer expand and get land and how to support vulnerable sectors and farmers on land that cannot allow them to benefit from growth and expansion under the food harvest plan. That is the position. There has been a reduction in terms of the overall CAP spend, but in his negotiations on the MFF, I believe the Taoiseach managed to limit the damage significantly, and that has been recognised by all the farming bodies.

Deputy John Halligan: The issue of how money is to be redistributed is a burning one for farmers, now more than ever. From speaking to farmers in my constituency, it is clear they need certainty on their payments. We all know it is crucial that the Minister delivers an outcome that protects the interests of farmers and their families. While I understand there is agreement in principle, can the Minister clarify whether Irish farmers will get the minimum of €150 per hectare under the reforms or at least 60% of the national average payment? Will he confirm that no farmer will lose more than 28% of the current payment?

Deputy Simon Coveney: They are easy questions to answer. First of all, there will be a minimum payment. One of the big negotiating issues with the Commission during the six months of our Presidency was around this mandatory minimum payment; it is not voluntary. In any country, whatever the average payment, if that country is not going to go to a flat rate payment model, as the Commission would like, and if that country is going to introduce the convergence model that Ireland designed and for which it managed to get support, under that model the country must ensure no farmer getting a direct payment gets less than 60% of the average payment in that country. That is a welcome development. If that figure had been too high, I believe it would have posed significant problems in Ireland and I reckon 60% is approximately the right figure. This means that the 60% figure will be somewhere between €145 and €150 per hectare.

The second question Deputy Halligan asked was whether no farmer would lose more than 28% of his payment. There is a voluntary measure that can be introduced in Ireland or anywhere else whereby a country can limit the losses to any one farmer of 30% of his direct payment. In my view, we should not use that in Ireland. The reason is that if a farmer is on €1,500 per hectare at the moment and we limited what he could lose to 30%, he would still be on €1,000 per

hectare, which is indefensible. The result of having that limit would mean that people who are closer to the average payment would have to lose more to compensate. The 30% figure under the convergence model does not make much sense in terms of fairness.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister but I must call Deputy Halligan.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Consequently, while I do not propose to use that, the Department will implement the mandatory minimum payment.

Deputy John Halligan: I thank the Minister and acknowledge it is good to have a minimum payment to bring all farmers up to an acceptable level of direct supports. However, my information is that while approximately 60,000 farmers will gain under the reforms, another 50,000 farmers will lose out. The Minister might confirm this, although it may be difficult for him to provide an immediate answer, and should clarify these figures or indicate by how much the aforementioned 50,000 farmers will lose out.

Deputy Simon Coveney: As I stated, this has been the topic for many debates nationwide that I have attended, as have other Deputies. However, there are more winners than losers in this regard because of the way in which money is distributed at present. As farmers who get less than the average payment get a smaller payment than do those who are above the average, there are more farmers in the former category and therefore, there are more winners than losers in the context of people seeing an increase in their single farm payment. However, the important issue is the level of losses being incurred by those who are above the average to bring up everyone else who is under the average. These will be significantly less than most people thought possible under these negotiations. One will see an average loss of somewhere between 8% and 12% for most farmers over a seven-year period, which is not dramatic.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Unless one is in receipt of an extremely high payment, one will not see significant losses in any single year. Moreover, even if one is in receipt of a very high payment, it still is staged over a seven-year period. However, the majority of farmers are in or around the average, that is, somewhere between €200 and €400 per hectare. These farmers will not see a significant redistribution one way or the other.

Agriculture Schemes Administration

52. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason farmers were written to in recent months informing them that they had an over claim of hectares for the last number of years under the single farm payment and disadvantaged schemes; the reason this only came to light now despite aerial photographs and digitisation; if these farmers will be expected to repay any overpayments made to them; if there will be any penalties applied; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39745/13]

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am glad this question has been tabled because it gives me the opportunity to clarify an issue about which I suspect many farmers will ask me tomorrow at the ploughing championships. The Deputy will be fully aware of the importance of payments made under the single payment scheme, the disadvantaged areas scheme and other direct payment schemes to the annual income of Irish farmers. My Department is bound, under EU regula-

tions, to maintain the accuracy of the land parcel identification system, LPIS, which underpins the processing of applications under these schemes, as well as the rural environment protection scheme, REPS, and the agri-environment options scheme, AEOS.

At the start of each year, my Department issues colour maps of all land parcels declared by farmers in the previous year together with a covering letter. In that letter farmers are reminded to examine each map carefully and to identify and exclude from their application all ineligible features such as buildings, farmyards, scrub, roadways, forests, lakes and so on included in the land parcels. There is, therefore, an onus on all farmers to ensure the area of land declared by them as eligible for payment under the direct payment system is accurate. They also are given the means to do so by making available the ortho-photos to them on an annual basis. These requirements are also made clear in the terms and conditions of the schemes, which accompany the preprinted application form issued to all farmers at the commencement of the application period each year. In view of the size and structure of farm enterprises in Ireland, farmers are fully aware of all of the non-eligible areas of their holdings. In addition to any changes submitted by farmers and to ensure the integrity of the LPIS, my Department continuously reviews the eligibility of lands claimed by farmers for the single payment scheme and other direct payment schemes.

This is the important part. As part of the clearance process, a bilateral meeting was held on 25 July between the European Commission clearance auditors and my Department. At that meeting it was agreed that to avoid a significant correction - which means fines or disallowances - this Department would be obliged first, to review its entire LPIS database and deal with ineligible features, in other words to re-digitise, second, to establish any overpayments due to the over-declaration and seek refund from the farmers involved since 2009 and third, to prepare a report of its findings to the Commission by 15 December.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

This is a mammoth task but my Department is making efforts to ensure it will be completed in a manner that satisfies the Commission. The Department is currently reviewing all land parcels claimed in respect of the 2009 to 2012 direct payment scheme years. This effectively means a review of all 950,000 land parcels for each of four scheme years. As a result of this phase of this review, any payments made to farmers in respect of claimed areas, which were found to be ineligible, must be reimbursed.

If farmers are not satisfied with the determination made in their case, my intention is to introduce a robust and comprehensive appeal process. In the first instance, applicants will be entitled to have their case reviewed by submitting their appeal on the form provided by my Department. If they are not satisfied with the outcome of the review, they can appeal their case to the independent land eligibility appeals committee. This committee will consist of an independent chairman and appeal officers from the agriculture appeals office.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I thank the Minister for his reply, but it will not satisfy many farmers. Most farmers thought they had passed the test for 2008, 2009 and 2010, that the Department had double-checked their homework for those years and that if they adhered to what the Department had agreed in the digitisation and examination of the maps, following all the letters they had received in the last few years, that the maps were in order. Elderly farmers, in particular, thought they were in order because their homework had been passed. They then received a letter in July stating that they might have been overpaid from 2008 to 2010. No map

accompanied the letter. I have a copy of the letter with me if the Minister wishes to see it. The letter did not say on what basis the overpayment was being calculated. Having written to the Department and eventually getting the maps, the Department wrote back to the farmers to say it was not the years 2008 to 2010 but the years 2009 to 2012. The Minister should bear in mind that in a case where one has a farm of 10 hectares, 0.3 of a hectare is the 3% limit of error one is allowed. It is not a huge amount of land. Is it legally possible for the State to carry this burden rather than the farmer?

Deputy Simon Coveney: No, it is not. I will explain how and why this happened. Every year we look at maps that have been used for applications and assess approximately one-quarter of them. Where there are inaccuracies and land that is not eligible for payment, we ask farmers to correct them. That is normal practice. However, the Commission is not satisfied with the way this has been done and has asked us to look at every land parcel in the country, with no exception. We now have a far more accurate mapping system using a new technology which is, essentially, satellite imagery. The maps farmers have been using until about a year ago were made from photographs taken by airplanes flying at high altitude. The satellite technology is much more accurate. The maps are crystal clear now, as opposed to being a little fuzzy in terms of detail. As a result of that, we now have no excuses regarding the accuracy of the amount of land that is eligible and ineligible. This is public money that is being spent. We cannot stand over a situation where public money has been spent on paying farmers for land that was not eligible for payments, so we must ask for it back.

As to whether the Commission is serious about this, if we do not do it, significant fines will be imposed on us. The Commission has fined the UK €58 million, Poland €30 million, Denmark €11.45 million, Spain €132 million, Italy €111 million, Greece €104 million and France €62 million for this reason. I can understand why farmers might well be irritated by being asked to make repayments on land on which they should not have received payments, but they would be far more irritated if I had to take money away from their schemes to pay the type of fines that other European countries have had to pay because they were not compliant. For that reason, we will be compliant.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: In the Minister's first reply he used the words "disallowance" and "fine" interchangeably.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Yes.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: There a difference between a disallowance of a recoument and a fine. If the Minister cannot provide the details now, will he forward to me the exact basis on which this country could be either disallowed or fined if we decided to correct the maps but not to collect the money back over five years and impose huge penalties year after year, because the Department had passed the payments and people thought they were in order? Will the Minister confirm that it is perfectly in order for those farmers affected to make informal appeals and formal appeals and to seek oral hearings in respect of the formal appeals? Will he also confirm that it will be open to them, on the basis that bad procedures were used, to take their cases to the Ombudsman? I will be recommending that each and every farmer involved should pursue this matter all the way to the Ombudsman. This was a case of bad practice and now, five years later, people are being pursued for money.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It would be highly irresponsible to encourage farmers to take the course the Deputy has just described because it would be a waste of their time and resources

were they to do so. The legalities relating to this matter are very clear. The rules are outlined to farmers when they complete the relevant forms each year.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Let us see what the Ombudsman thinks.

Deputy Simon Coveney: If a farmer makes an application in respect of land that is not eligible, the onus is on him or her to correct the position. We are following up on this matter and we have the technology to do so much more accurately than was the case in the past. We are required by the Commission to do it in respect of every land parcel throughout the country rather than simply proceeding, as was previously the case, on the basis of a random sample. I advise farmers not to listen to Deputy Ó Cuív when he suggests they go to the Ombudsman because they will be wasting their time. I do not want to waste people's time, particularly that of busy farmers.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I can-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: The second issue is that a disallowance essentially amounts to the same thing as a fine. The Deputy was in government for a period and he clearly does not understand how the relationship between the Commission and my Department works in the context of disallowances. If we obtain a disallowance, we are obliged to pay it back. A disallowance is money which the Commission has given us and which it wants back.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is the €1.4 million.

Deputy Simon Coveney: As a result of its level of compliance, Ireland has one of the lowest rates of disallowance-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The disallowance is €1.4 million.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----among the more senior member states. The position is that we must address and correct this situation. We must also correct the maps and recoup money which should not have been given out to farmers because the land in respect of which it was drawn down was not eligible. If we do that, we will avoid the kind of disallowances the countries to which I referred earlier have suffered. Ultimately, it will be farmers who will suffer if disallowances are imposed upon us because I will be obliged to remove the requisite moneys from my Department's budget.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It would be €1.4 million.

Agri-Environment Options Scheme Reopening

53. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the scheme with which he intends to replace REPS 4. [39671/13]

(Deputy Simon Coveney): The rural environment protection scheme, REPS, 4 came into operation in Ireland in August 2007 and closed to applicants in July 2009. It was one of the measures introduced under the rural development plan 2007 to 2013. There are currently just over 29,000 participants in REPS 4 and their contracts will continue until the expiry of the five year contract period in each case. The final 851 applicants will be exiting the scheme in 2015. The REPS scheme was replaced by the agri-environment options scheme, AEOS, in

2010 as part of the rural development plan. AEOS currently has 20,000 active participants. I am pleased to state that the revised Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, for the period 2014 to 2020 gives priority to agri-environment schemes and requires that the new rural development plan must include such a scheme. I fully support this position. These schemes recognise the vital role that farmers play in delivering public goods through the adoption of environmentally friendly farming practices. The Deputy will be able to discover the numbers involved, etc. from the remainder of the formal reply.

Farmers are inquiring with regard to what it is proposed to do regarding the putting in place an environmental scheme for next year. I have considered this matter and am of the view that it would not make sense to introduce another AEOS next year because by the time farmers make applications and have them approved, it will be the middle of the year. Six months after that we will be introducing a new rural development programme which will incorporate a much more substantial environmental scheme in any event. Next year will essentially be a bridge year. I would rather concentrate on getting right the environment scheme we will have as part of the rural development programme, having a proper consultation process to do this and introducing the scheme from the start of 2015, as opposed to introducing some kind of temporary arrangement for next year. That means that farmers coming out of the REPS will see a reduction in their income which would have been made up under REPS 4. However, when they came into it, they knew it was a five year scheme. People were calling for an extension of, or a rollover year for, REPS 4, but if we had done that, it would have been very unfair on people who had come out of REPS 2 and REPS 3 and did not get that extension. We do not propose to do this.

Deputy Martin Ferris: The importance of REPS 4 and all of these schemes, particularly in the west and areas in which there is more marginal land, has meant the survival of the family farm. The Minister has referred to the environmental schemes and the new scheme he hopes to bring in, but there will be a gap of approximately six or eight months. What will happen to people who will have no scheme payment coming to them during that period? Where does that leave them? Farmers will be out of pocket for that period. That is my reading of it, if I am reading it correctly. A scheme to replace it which would kick in right away would make the difference between people surviving and being able to continue and leaving the industry. Has the Minister taken this into account?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy will see those decisions in the upcoming budget. We have to make choices in terms of where we will spend money next year and we will have an opportunity to debate the agriculture budget in the coming weeks. I agree with the Deputy that a REP scheme or an AEO scheme is very important for family farm incomes, not only in the west but also throughout the country. However, the schemes are not about providing income support. Environmental schemes are about paying farmers to do things they otherwise would not do in protecting the environment or to compensate them for loss of income as a result of doing things to protect the environment. That was what the REPS was about. It was a very popular and generous scheme and I would have liked to have continued it and not gone near the AEOS, but we could not afford to do this. The previous Government made the decision to replace the REPS with the AEOS and we continued that policy. However, the question we now need to ask ourselves, as we redesign a new rural development programme for the next six or seven years, is whether it would make sense to introduce a scheme which would probably only last for a six month period and might not even have payments next year as another version of the AEOS when we know that it would be replaced by a more comprehensive approach towards having an environment scheme from the start of 2015. That is why it is very unlikely we will

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see a replacement scheme for REPS 4 in the immediate future. Instead, we will look for a more comprehensive response in the rural development programme which, as I said, will start from January 2015.

Deputy Martin Ferris: We are talking about the more dependent section of farming. In last year's budget we saw cuts to the farm assist scheme. Will the Minister encourage the relevant Minister to ensure the cuts to the farm assist scheme are reversed as many people will find themselves out of pocket to quite a substantial degree because of what is coming down the road?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy has said some farmers will find themselves out of pocket because of what is coming down the road, but some farmers will see increases in their income because of what is coming down the road. The Deputy should wait to see the full budget before passing judgment. I think there will be some positive news for farmers in the budget, as well as some frustrations, in particular for those coming out of the REPS. It is important to state I do not make the decisions on the farm assist scheme, but, of course, I sit at the Cabinet table. The decisions were made last year because there had been a dramatic increase in the number of applicants for understandable reasons. We had had a particularly difficult 12 month period from the point of view of weather conditions and a certain sector of farming was under a lot of financial pressure for a period of time. The Department of Social Protection made the changes in eligibility after it decided it had to try to manage that budget. Of course I will have a conversation with my Cabinet colleague on farm assist this year. I do not want to make any promises in this area as it is not my call.

Other Questions

Live Exports

54. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he is taking to support a live cattle trade; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39442/13]

Deputy Simon Coveney: I strongly support the development and exploitation of all available markets for Irish meat and livestock exports. Along with officials in my Department, I have worked tirelessly over the last two years to ensure Irish exporters have access to as many global markets as possible. The markets outside the EU that are currently open to live cattle exports from Ireland are Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya. The resumption of live cattle exports from Ireland to Libya earlier this year was welcome as it provided alternative market outlets for certain categories of livestock, thereby serving a market demand and providing increased competition in the marketplace here for cattle. Applications for the approval of ships for the carriage of cattle by sea must be approved by my Department in accordance with the Diseases of Animals (Carriage of Cattle by Sea) Orders 1996 and 1998. My Department facilitates the export of live cattle by ensuring such applications are processed expeditiously.

Detailed inspections are required before approval is given to ships transporting animals. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine continues to work with all of those involved, including farmers and transporters, to facilitate trade and ensure all such trade is carried out to the highest animal health and welfare standards.

There are no delays occurring in the approval stage. Approvals are issued once all provisions of the legislation are met. Nine applications for approval have been received in total. To date, two ships have been fully approved. Three shipments containing cattle and three shipments containing both sheep and cattle have gone to Libya. A total of 10,991 cattle and 21,443 sheep have been exported. Some 1,879 cattle and 16,565 sheep were exported in July. Just over 2,000 cattle have been exported so far this month. I appreciate that some people have concerns about animal welfare standards in cases of live cattle exports. It is important to emphasise that our standards are higher than those required in any other EU country. We go way beyond the requirements of EU legislation in terms of things like the stability of the vessels involved. Most live cattle exports from Europe go across the Mediterranean at times of the year that are not particularly stormy. That is very different from bringing cattle from Ireland to north Africa in February, which involves travelling across the Bay of Biscay and into the Mediterranean. Our high standards, which are in place for good reasons and are based on sound animal welfare concerns, make it expensive and difficult for live cattle exporters to get all the papers in place for the operation of their ships.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I thank the Minister for his reply. I accept the need for Ireland to have higher standards than other EU countries. In view of that, what assistance, if any, does his Department provide to private enterprises that are trying to operate these vessels? He mentioned that nine vessels have sought approval, but could he tell me how many vessels are operational at the moment? If he does not have a response to that question, that is fair enough. I can get a response at a later stage. How long does it take for a vessel to be approved? Last May seven vessels were up for approval. Two had been approved and some others were awaiting approval. How regularly do they have to be approved? Does licensing take place on a yearly basis or on a per trip basis? The Minister listed five countries outside the EU to which live cattle are exported. Do we have a possibility of exporting live cattle to any other countries? It is an important element of the industry, particularly from a competition point of view.

Deputy Simon Coveney: There are opportunities across north Africa. There is demand across north Africa, particularly in Libya, and I understand there is demand in Egypt and Lebanon. The business case needs to be put together. The higher the price of beef in Ireland, the more difficult it is to put a business case for transporting animals long distances to sell them at a price that is higher than one would get in the mart or factory. It is important to say that in general we should be encouraging the slaughter of the maximum number of animals in Ireland rather than having too many animals on live cattle export ships. The jobs in the beef sector - in processing, packaging, marketing and added value - are important, but the advantage of having a live cattle outlet is that, as farmers would say, it keeps the factories honest. If prices fall, there is always the option and if there are certain categories of animal that do not have a good outlet in the mart or factory, there is an option to export them live.

In respect of the approval process, we work with the companies that are planning a live cattle export trade. Our vets work very closely with them to get the ship right. It is quite a hands-on approach. We are as helpful as we can be. It is not the case that we are dictating to them. It is a question of trying to work with companies to get their ships compliant. Some of the older vessels are not and will not be compliant because we must meet the welfare standards

that I have a responsibility to insist upon.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I note the Minister said in the past that exploiting market access is an issue for the industry, not the Department. I am aware, as is he, that Bord Bia is there to assist in the marketing of Irish produce. I do not expect that we will be exporting cattle to the US any time soon but I note, and I stand to be corrected, that there is only one person from Bord Bia based in the US. Will the Minister give a commitment to take a look at this issue? The food and drinks industry is a very important part of our economy, and to have only one person located in the US - I believe he or she may be based in Chicago - is insufficient. It is something the Minister could look at in conjunction with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will take brief questions from Deputies Wallace and Ó Cuív.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I am surprised the Minister is promoting the export of live cattle. When we export live cattle there is very little in it for the Exchequer, and we are certainly not creating any jobs. The Minister will probably agree that the cattle we are selling to Libya and Egypt are generally of a poor grade and are usually surplus from the dairy farmers who are looking to supplement their herd and are ending up with Friesian bulls that nobody here wants. It might make far more sense for the Department to educate the dairy farmer, who should be running a continental bull with his herd and using artificial insemination to make sure he is getting the Friesian cow replacements he wants. Letting a Friesian bull run with all his herd to get his Friesian heifers does not make sense if he is left with, for want of a better word, scrap that only the Egyptians and Libyans will take. If we use continental bulls, the calves will be of far better quality.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I agree with the Minister that in an ideal world, for job maximisation, we would slaughter all the cattle here. However, as the Minister knows, the market in Ireland is dominated by a small number of major players and the price they offer here compared to the UK - sometimes by the same companies - can be considerably different. Can he explain how it is that cattle cannot be transported by boat from Dublin or Dún Laoghaire to Holyhead when there is apparently no difficulty in transporting them from Larne to Stranraer or Cairnryan? My belief is that a very small number going over there and availing of the higher prices in the UK would ensure that the same prices were available to farmers here. Could the Minister facilitate and ensure that this is opened up in the spirit of free trade within the European Union?

3 o'clock

Deputy Simon Coveney: There were a lot of questions but I will try to answer them. On the Bord Bia issue, Deputy Timmins is right. We could do with many more people in that organisation. Last year we doubled the number of Bord Bia representatives in Asia to two; where there had been one person based in Shanghai there are now two. Bord Bia is very anxious to expand its presence. It does a phenomenal job given the number of people it has, and must be one of the best recruiters of talent because all the Bord Bia people I know are very impressive in the jobs they do. However, they are stretched. I am very much involved in a hands-on way in opening and developing new markets. In a few weeks' time I will be going to the Gulf states - Qatar, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia. There will probably be 50 Irish food companies coming with us, just as happened in China last year, and many will sign contracts while we are there. In this process the Department works very closely with both Bord Bia and Enterprise Ireland. The latter has taken a much more significant role in helping to develop and expand the

food industry and in that regard is working hand in hand with Bord Bia. They are doing a very good job together but I would like to have more people. I have made that case and Deputies may see some announcements in that regard in the not too distant future.

I bow to Deputy Wallace's knowledge on cattle breeding. He is right. If one is breeding for bull beef one may well decide to use continental cattle on one's dairy cows but most dairy herd farmers in the country - certainly many of them - are looking for high-quality replacement heifers to grow their herds and prepare for an absence of dairy quotas post 2015. If that is one's priority one will be looking for top-quality dairy breeding, and as a by-product one will get male calves that need an outlet. It depends on what one is looking for. Last week I opened a top-quality AI bull stud just outside Mallow. A commercial dairy or beef farmer now has a fantastic choice in terms of the bulls they can use to improve the quality of their herds from both a dairy and a beef point of view. I would say our breeding programme is as impressive, if not more so, than that of any other country in the world.

Deputy Ó Cuív asked why we are not exporting live cattle to the UK. There is an issue in regard to the carriage of live animals by roll-on roll-off ferries. Many of the companies do not want to do this. There is an ongoing discussion and I would need to check the most recent update in this respect. It is also important to put into context beef prices in Ireland. For the vast majority of this year we were significantly above the average EU price - about 15% more at times, overall somewhere between 5% and 15%. Recent reductions have brought this figure down but we are still above the average price at EU level. Irish beef does not go just to the UK but goes all over Europe and to some 160 countries in total. The UK has a very different beef market because by and large it supplies its own market. Given that, it is not acceptable to have for any prolonged period a significant differential between Irish and British beef prices, and we are looking at that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The next question is in the name of Deputy Niall Collins.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Is Deputy Collins present?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The question is nominated by Deputy Ó Cuív.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thought new rules required the Deputy in question to be present.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Not yet.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: A question was asked previously without the Deputy being present.

Disadvantaged Areas Scheme Applications

55. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applications received under the disadvantaged areas scheme in 2013; the number of applications that have been examined and cleared for payment; the number of applications that have been examined where issues have arisen and if the farmers have been contacted in relation to these issues; the number that remain to be examined and the latest date that the examination of these applications will be complete; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39522/13]

Deputy Simon Coveney: Payments under the 2013 disadvantaged areas scheme will begin

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issuing, on target, tomorrow, 25 September. While there is no regulatory date by which payments must commence, it is generally recognised - and indeed acknowledged in the farmers' charter - that the third week in September of any given year is the earliest feasible payment date, given the volume and complexity of processing involved. Although payments will begin issuing tomorrow, I should emphasise that payments runs thereafter continue on a twice-weekly basis, with individual cases being paid as they are confirmed eligible.

However, many applicants who declare land situated in a disadvantaged area are not eligible for payment under the scheme. Many of these applicants do not maintain any animals, and those who do do not keep sufficient livestock to meet the minimum stocking density of 0.15 livestock units per hectare. This is a normal feature of the disadvantaged area scheme. For example, in excess of 5,000 applicants under the 2012 DAS scheme were found to be non-compliant, as they had insufficient stocking density on their holdings. The figure for 2013 is almost 10,000, in addition to which there are in excess of 6,000 applicants who held no stock during 2013. However, many of those currently showing as having insufficient stock will ultimately satisfy the requirement. With the minimum retention period being seven consecutive months, there will be a steady flow of cases each month where compliance with this retention period will be confirmed, thereby allowing payments to be made.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

In addition, in excess of 15,000 applications have been identified with area related issues. These are being addressed and resolved through direct correspondence with the individual applicants, in line with normal procedures. As individual cases are resolved, they will be processed further immediately, with a view to payment being made as soon as possible thereafter.

In so far as the initial payment run is concerned, I can confirm that payments worth more than €125 million are issuing tomorrow to more than 60,000 applicants, and payments will continue to be made on a twice-weekly basis thereafter. I am confident that by year end, the cumulative value of payments that will have issued under the 2013 scheme will be in the region of €190 million.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: How many applications were received? That was part of the question. How many applications have been examined? That was part of the question. I understand from the Minister's answer that 60,000 have been cleared for payment. How many applications have been examined where issues have arisen? I did not get that answer. What number of farmers have been contacted to date? Stocking density is not the only issue that arises with the DAS. Other issues arise. The Department has had these applications for four months, since 15 May. How many farmers have been contacted? There were many specific questions here, but I did not get an answer to many of them. How many have been contacted in respect of issues with the DAS, and not just in respect of issues with stocking density?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will see what exact data I can get for the Deputy, but I have given quite a lot of detail on the number of farmers who are not eligible at the moment but who have applied. I will try to get more detail, but the Deputy will struggle to find any other country in the European Union that is paying out the percentages that we are paying to farmers this week. All of the farmers who are eligible for payments are receiving them this week. We are early on this and we are making as many payments as possible, but there are complications with many applications and we will work through them and try to get them sorted as quickly as we can. There will be two payments made each week from now on so that we can finalise as many

payments as possible before the end of the year. The Deputy knows that is perfectly normal. In fact, we are probably ahead of schedule.

Fishing Industry Development

56. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide the details of any instruction or discussions he has had with Bord Iascaigh Mhara in relation to its strategic direction; if he was informed by the agency of its plan to seek licences for the development of major fin fish farms; if he agreed to this strategic approach; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39519/13]

(Deputy Simon Coveney): On 17 July, I launched Bord Iascaigh Mhara's new strategy for the seafood sector over the next five years, from 2013 to 2017. The name of BIM's strategy document is Capturing Ireland's Share of the Global Seafood Opportunity. This strategy highlights opportunities for growth in the seafood sector and sets out a clear path for Ireland to make the most of these opportunities. BIM's strategy is designed to underpin the targets and objectives set out in the Government's Food Harvest 2020 national food production plan which calls for the Irish seafood sector to increase its revenue and employment through measures such as expanding production, enhancing competitiveness and improved marketing methods to take advantage of the growing demand for seafood. BIM's strategy aims to capitalise on the opportunity presented by the global demand for seafood by expanding production, building scale and enhancing competitiveness in the Irish seafood sector.

I am confident that BIM's strategy for the next five years, and the actions outlined in it, will serve to lead the Irish seafood sector to new levels of output, employment and prosperity. These will allow the industry to capitalise fully on the market opportunities that are being offered by the encouraging long-term global trends in the sector.

The need to maximise the potential for Ireland's aquaculture sector as part of an overall drive for increased output in the seafood sector has been the subject of much debate in recent years. It is a key goal of Food Harvest 2020 as well as Bord Iascaigh Mhara's five-year strategy. Increasing European aquaculture production is a significant element of the new Common Fisheries Policy, which was successfully brokered during the Irish Presidency.

As part of our consideration of means to develop and expand Ireland's aquaculture sector, I asked Bord Iascaigh Mhara, in conjunction with the Marine Institute, to investigate suitable sites for fish farming production in deep waters offshore. BIM subsequently submitted an aquaculture licence application to my Department in respect of a proposed site near Inis Oírr in Galway Bay.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The application and its accompanying environmental impact statement, EIS, are being considered by my Department in conjunction with its scientific and technical advisers, in accordance with the provisions of the Fisheries (Amendment) Act 1997 and the Foreshore Act 1933, as amended. As the application is under active consideration as part of the statutory process, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this time.

I am on record as saying that the strategic approach in deep sea aquaculture development

has potential to deliver much needed jobs in coastal communities. However, it is important to note that, as Minister, I have two distinct roles in respect of such applications. I have a developmental role in seeking to enhance Ireland's production of seafood and I have a quite separate regulatory role that requires me to reach determinations in respect of aquaculture licence applications, based on the wider public interest and all relevant national and EU legislation. I take the division between these two roles seriously in respect of all aquaculture licence applications and I assure the Deputy that the distinction is always strictly observed.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister has stated that he asked BIM to identify suitable aquaculture sites, BIM then made an application and he became the decision maker. Effectively, he had become the judge in his own court.

Has the EU been in contact with the Department about documentation that was forwarded from Inland Fisheries Ireland, IFI, to the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and then to the Minister's Department for submission to the EU, but which was withheld?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy should check his accuracy. Documentation from IFI concerning this issue was not withheld. The Deputy referred to the work undertaken in respect of lice and the impact of salmon farming on wild salmon. There was an oral hearing with the Commission that involved the IFI documentation, although there were media reports to the contrary. My Department has written to the newspaper concerned to clarify that point.

I am not a judge in my own court. We have a broad strategy for considering opportunities for expansion in the aquaculture sector. In this light, I have asked BIM to find suitable sites and requested that the Marine Institute help it. I have never pushed one site over another. I have asked independent bodies to consider suitable sites and told BIM that, if it made an application, it would be viewed as any other applicant and we would apply the rigour of the rules to its application. This is happening.

If anyone is in any doubt about how rigorous we are in respect of the application to which the Deputy is referring, recommendations have still not been put on my desk. This is due to the amount of work involved in testing the application robustly before any report or recommendation comes my way as the person who must make a decision. Even if an applicant or objector does not agree with my decision at the end of the process - let us wait to see what that decision is - an independent appeals process can be followed. There is no problem with independence as regards this application.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are running short on time. I will allow brief questions from Deputies Ó Cuív and Wallace.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Does the Minister not agree that, no matter how one dresses it up, his proposing a policy, asking for applications and then judging them does not create confidence in the process? We in politics must consider all of the processes that we operate if we are to ensure public confidence in same. Does the Minister not agree it would be much more satisfactory if decision making on individual licence applications was independent of the policy maker, namely, the Minister?

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Minister is familiar with an issue that I have raised with him previously concerning a request from Special Bannow Bay Shellfish Limited, which applied in 2010 for a licence in respect of new sites for oysters at Bannow Bay and Woodstown. It is still

waiting on an appropriate assessment, as per the regulation. This is difficult to credit three years later. All of the oysters are exported and there is a serious problem with youth unemployment in the area, which this initiative would alleviate in some small way. The company has been informed that places in Donegal and Dungarvan have jumped the queue for assessment. It seems to believe that it is not big enough or good enough. Some people might argue that the Minister has been better for the big farmer than the small farmer. They wonder whether he is also better for the big fishers than he is for the smaller fishers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must call the Minister to conclude.

Deputy Mick Wallace: This company has not been treated well. It asked the Minister for a meeting last December. He is a busy man, but it would be great if he could meet the company.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is raising a different issue.

Deputy Simon Coveney: A totally different issue. Following a request, I spoke to the individual concerned on the farm in question. That was unusual, but I wanted to understand his concerns. Just like small and large farms, we are trying to allow small and large companies to grow.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Minister was supposed to get back to him but did not.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Let me answer the question that the Deputy asked. A process is required. Unfortunately, previous governments did not put in place a proper and robust aquaculture licensing system. The Commission took Ireland to court on this matter and won. We are required to put in place a gold-plated system that we should have implemented many years ago but did not. A part of the process involves an assessment all of Natura and special area of conservation, SAC, sites, amounting to every harbour on our coastline with one or two exceptions. We have fast-tracked the process and I have made decisions on more than 100 aquaculture licensing applications. However, I can only do this as the bays get assessed. The bay in question has not been assessed yet, but we will get to it as quickly as possible.

Regarding Deputy Ó Cuív's commentary on the independence of my Department in terms of aquaculture licence applications, we have put in place a template that ensures that people applying for fish farm or aquaculture licences know by what they must abide. We simply determine whether they meet the requirements. To make the case that, given my advocacy of growth in the aquaculture sector, I am not balanced when making licensing decisions is nonsense. We have just discussed-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I never said that.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: It is the first time that there has been transparency in that Department.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Let me answer the question.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Deputy Ó Cuív knows what went on in that Department for

years.

Deputy Simon Coveney: If Deputy Ó Cuív's rationale-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Dinny McGinley: There was no transparency at all. Deputy Ó Cuív knows well what went on in that Department.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, the Minister has the floor.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I said that it did not look good.

Deputy Simon Coveney: As in many cases, we are cleaning up the poor governance of the past. This is the truth. If we were to work by the Deputy's rationale in respect of, for example, live cattle exports, the development of which I have been trying to assist, we would not be able to license ships in that sector because we would be compromised. One can take the argument to the nth degree.

The regulations and rules are clear. We now have a strict and robust licensing system. I would argue that it is more robust than the systems found anywhere else in Europe. We will apply it to large and small aquaculture licence proposals. The process will take its course and an independent decision will be made on that basis.

Topical Issue 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 27A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Michael Healy-Rae - the decision by the HSE to withdraw the service of one of the two ambulances that service the Killarney area; (2) Deputy Patrick O'Donovan - the need to engage with the local community and employee representatives of Andersen Ireland to explore all options of saving the jobs in Rathkeale, County Limerick; (3) Deputy Joan Collins - the need to discuss the application of prescription charges; (4) Deputy Thomas P. Broughan - the need to address the financial problems being experienced by the St. Michael's House Group; (5) Deputy Brendan Griffin - the economic benefits and importance of the 9% VAT rate for tourism-related businesses; (6) Deputy Heather Humphreys - the need to extend the deadline of 1 October 2013 for the introduction of new regulations for the declaration of non-use of motor vehicles; (7) Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin - the need to discuss the difficulties surrounding newly qualified teachers being unable to access teaching hours and complete their statutory probation periods post qualification; (8) Deputy Kevin Humphreys - the need to make Flexiseq gel, a treatment for osteoarthritis, available to those on the medical card scheme; (9) Deputy Jerry Buttimer - the need to investigate the recent ambulance breakdown on the N7; (10) Deputies Brian Stanley and Michael Colreavy - the need for regulations to govern the construction of wind farms; (11) Deputy Charlie McConalogue - the need to discuss the decision by the ASTI

to reject the Haddington Road agreement; (12) Deputy Derek Keating - the need to address the increasing problem of bullying in national schools; (13) Deputy Dessie Ellis - the rising numbers of people seeking help from homeless services; (14) Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin - the need to reverse the HSE-imposed cuts to funding to St. Michael's House; (15) Deputy Finian McGrath - cuts to disability services at St. Michael's House; (16) Deputy Mick Wallace - to discuss the downgrading of domestic violence services in Wexford; (17) Deputy Clare Daly - to discuss the night-time closure of the women's refuge in Wexford; (18) Deputy Joe McHugh - the role of Greencastle post office, County Donegal; (19) Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - the need to re-open the education fund for survivors of the Magdalen laundries; and (20) Deputy Robert Troy - the need to take action to help Irish couples whose prospective adoptions have been jeopardised by a change in Russian adoption law.

The matters raised by Deputies Aodhán Ó Ríordáin; Charlie McConalogue; Joe McHugh; and Brian Stanley and Michael Colreavy have been selected for discussion.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: People throughout the country are receiving letters notifying them of a review of their medical card eligibility and entitlements. In many cases, medical cards are being taken away from people, which causes great anxiety and distress to them. Within this general cull of medical cards there has been a particularly nasty focus on those with serious illnesses who had discretionary medical cards. They may have been over the income threshold but because of the seriousness of their medical conditions, including cancer and motor neurone disease, they were in receipt of a discretionary medical card.

The figures tell the story. A few years ago, about 80,000 people were in receipt of discretionary medical cards but that figure has now fallen to 56,000. That reduction of 24,000 discretionary medical cards within the system affects young children with multiple complex conditions, many adults with severe illnesses, as well as incapacitated senior citizens. It is a nasty, underhand and sneaky attack whose bottom line is to save money. It is hitting the most medically compromised within our health service. It is hitting patients who can least afford to lose their medical cards because of the additional expense and costs associated with their illnesses and medical conditions.

There have been ongoing official denials about this matter from the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste - as late as last Thursday - and the HSE. I was struck, however, by a letter published in *The Irish Times* on 25 July 2013 from Professor Orla Hardiman.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Micheál Martin: She said she had read with interest a statement from the HSE indicating that those with severe and life-threatening illnesses would continue to receive medical cards. Professor Hardiman wrote:

I am puzzled by the disparity between the policy as enunciated and our recent experience in the motor neurone disease clinic. Within the past few months, I have drafted many letters to the HSE in support of appeals by people with advanced motor neurone disease who have

been refused medical cards.

Will the Taoiseach reverse this policy and restore discretionary medical cards to those who have had them taken away?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Martin for his question. There has not been any change in the policy that is adopted here. The number of people with free access to GP care is now the highest in the history of the State. Some 43% of people now have access to free GP care, while 40.7% have medical cards and 2.72% have GP visit cards. In the past two and a half years, there have been an extra 250,000 people with access to and eligibility for free GP care. As of 1 August 2013, some 1.866 million people have a full medical card and a further 131,000 have a GP visit card, which is a total of 1.991 million.

When the Government was elected to office, discretionary medical card applications were not routinely assessed by medical personnel. The Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, instructed the HSE to establish a clinical panel to assist in the processing of applications for discretionary medical cards. This process allows for medical professionals to have an input into granting a medical card to people who exceed the income guidelines but who face difficult personal circumstances, such as a particular illness. We all know people who are in that category. Discretionary medical cards are awarded to people who are unable, without undue hardship, to arrange GP services for themselves and their families.

The number of discretionary medical cards has fallen because more than 22,000 such card holders now qualify for an ordinary medical card as they now meet the income eligibility. Since 2011, 22,584 individuals who were previously recorded on the medical card register as having eligibility for discretionary medical cards are now registered as ordinary medical card holders because they meet the income eligibility.

The HSE is entitled to award medical cards only in accordance with the Health Act 1970, so applicants must be assessed. The Act states that persons who are “unable without undue hardship to arrange [GP] ... services for themselves and for their [families]” qualify for a medical card. Therefore there is not, and never has been, an automatic entitlement to a medical card for persons with a specific illness. That is the position as outlined in the Health Act 1970, to which I have referred. There is no legal basis for what people might call a cancer medical card or a motor neurone disease card. Of course, that does not mean that in applying the assessment, those people do not qualify under particular circumstances for a medical card.

There is also the question of discretionary medical cards in emergency situations. A system has been put in place for the provision of emergency medical cards for patients who are seriously ill and who are in urgent need of medical care that they cannot afford. Emergency medical cards are issued by the HSE within 24 hours of receipt of the required patient details and a letter of confirmation of the patient’s condition from a doctor or medical consultant.

With the exception of terminally ill patients, the HSE issues all emergency cards on the basis that the patient is eligible for a medical card on the basis of means or undue hardship, and that the applicant will follow up with a full application within a number of weeks of receiving that emergency card. As a result, medical cards are issued to a named individual with a limited eligibility for a period of six months. This is always applied with the flexibility that community welfare officers used to have.

There is a slightly different interpretation of discretionary medical cards for persons who are

terminally ill. Once the terminal illness is, unfortunately, verified, patients are given an emergency medical card for a period of six months. Given the nature, urgency and sensitivity of that issue, the HSE has put in place an expeditious process to ensure such people receive those cards as quickly as possible, and rightly so. Therefore, the HSE ensures the system responds as quickly as possible to the variety of circumstances and complexities that such individuals face in what are traumatic personal situations.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am not talking about the general population because the number of medical cards currently being issued is a function of joblessness. High unemployment equals higher numbers of medical cards being issued. I asked the Taoiseach a specific question on discretionary medical cards. In many ways, however, his answer is in denial of the reality on the ground. I quoted Professor Orla Hardiman from the motor neurone disease clinic as stating: “I have drafted many letters to the HSE in support of appeals by people with advanced motor neurone disease who have been refused medical cards.” That rubbishes everything that Taoiseach has just said. Professor Hardiman added: “I have also written many letters for people in the terminal stages of their illness, whose medical cards have been withdrawn for reasons that are entirely unclear.”

That letter was published in *The Irish Times* on 25 July 2013. In an article on 7 August 2013 by Paul Cullen dealing with this specific issue, Professor Hardiman again rubbished claims that emergency medical cards were issued to terminally ill patients within 24 hours, stating they were “simply untrue”.

Files in my constituency office include that of a 12 year old boy with serious health issues who was refused a medical card. In addition, a six year old boy with very complex medical issues was refused a medical card. A number of adults with complex medical issues have also been refused medical cards. I am not talking about holding on to their discretionary medical cards. The cards were taken from them or applications were refused.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should put a supplementary question.

Deputy Micheál Martin: People who hear responses from the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the HSE cannot equate them with the reality on the ground. That is the experience of most Deputies here also, given the numbers of people who have come to them in the past year. Last year’s budget signalled that about 40,000 medical cards would be taken out of the system. It is those who are medically most compromised who are suffering. There is no point telling me there has not been a change: there has been a change and most people on the ground are experiencing it. The Taoiseach needs to dig deep and ensure this change is reversed.

The Taoiseach: I am sure Deputy Martin will agree that following the change to central processing, applications for medical cards or discretionary medical cards are now all treated on the same basis. For years we had a situation whereby individual community welfare officers, based on their assessment, could make a recommendation for the issuing of a medical card as applied under the old health board system. Any Deputy who served in this House will have engaged in that process in respect of cases brought to their attention by people in different circumstances seeking to be awarded a medical card.

In the case of applications for discretionary medical cards or in respect of persons with a serious or terminal illness as I have already stated a process is in place for the issuance of an emergency card for a six month period but it must be based on medical evidence. The Deputy

mentioned a particular case. I would like him to make the details of that case known to me, if possible.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is systemic.

Deputy Finian McGrath: There are many such cases.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is almost up.

The Taoiseach: As an elected representative, particular claims are also made to me. The bottom line is that more than 22,000 people who previously held discretionary medical cards do not now have them because they are eligible for an ordinary medical card. Since this Government took office, more than 250,000 additional people who previously did not have a medical card have been awarded one. We now have the highest ever number of medical card holders in the history of the State. The Government wants to proceed to a process whereby we have the best health system, which will respond quickly to the needs of people in any of the categories mentioned by the Deputy.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The National Ploughing Championships got under way this morning. Tá mé fíorchinnté go n-aontóidh an Taoiseach liom nuair a guím ádh mór ar na heagraíochtaí agus na rannpháirtithe uilig a glacfaidh páirt sa chomórtas ar feadh an trí lá ar a mbeidh sé ar siúl. Some 200,000 people are expected to attend the ploughing championships, which is worth an estimated €36 million to industry and the economy. It is a sign of great vibrancy and resilience. Mar is eol don Taoiseach, tá tuath na hÉireann faoi ionsaí. All is not well in rural Ireland. The Government's austerity policies have perpetuated huge levels of unemployment, emigration and poverty in rural communities. Austerity is stripping communities of essential services, including schools, guidance counsellors, hospitals, post offices and Garda stations. New taxes and charges such as the property tax, VAT increases, motor tax increases and septic tank charges have increased this pressure.

In marked contrast to the positivity of the ploughing championships the social fabric of rural Ireland is being undermined by a growth in isolation and loneliness. The Taoiseach will be aware that the second largest numbers for suicide are among those working in agriculture. What is the Government's plan for rural Ireland? Is it more cuts? Will the forthcoming budget provide for further cuts in the lifestyle, values and infrastructure of people residing in the countryside? Why not take the opportunity to instead establish a jobs retention fund for small businesses, to provide incentives for local producers and initiatives which give people hope, young people job opportunities and emigrants a reason to return? Perhaps the Taoiseach will outline the Government's strategy for the future of rural Ireland?

The Taoiseach: I hope Deputy Adams will attend the ploughing championships during the course of the week. It is an expression of modern Irishness and the evolution of the former Spring Show into a magnificent showcase for Irish industry with particular reference to the agri-sector. As pointed out on a number of occasions by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Coveney, exports this year and next year will reach the €10 billion target, which is a magnificent achievement in terms of systems, competency, professionalism and standards in the Irish agri-sector.

The engagement we have had with the different representatives of the farming communities and the outcome of Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in so far as reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, is concerned and the implications therein for

Ireland point to a very bright future, assuming we can meet the targets we have set ourselves. However, there are issues outstanding, including land transfer, which is an issue for younger farmers in the knowledge that when quotas are abolished, there will be further increased opportunities for development of productivity off-land. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, has met with the different groups in respect of their particular concerns about specific agricultural schemes, which in the context of preparation of the forthcoming budget, the Minister considers very important.

I should point out to Deputy Adams that the real issues are productivity off-land and the provision of jobs in rural and small town Ireland as distinct from large urban Ireland. The capacity of ConnectIreland to deliver to more outward regions is strong. For example, the recent announcement of ten jobs in Kinvara and other jobs in Longford and Portarlington, in which locations we would not normally expect IDA delivery. It is not true to say that the tragic phenomenon of suicide is confined to rural Ireland: it is a phenomenon right across the country. Money has been ring-fenced to allow the Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, deal with that phenomenon. The Deputy will be aware a great deal is happening in that regard.

We are ahead of all the benchmarks set for the agricultural programme for 2020 and intend to remain so. Ireland's reputation as a grass-based agri-economy allows us to make further advances. The Deputy will be aware of the negotiations with the Chinese Government following the strategic partnership agreement and that interest has been expressed by Japan and a number of other North African countries in further expansion of the Irish agri-sector. Given from where we have come and the reform of the CAP achieved by Ireland during its Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the future, while challenging, looks bright. One can never know what natural calamities might occur but in so far as the Irish agri-sector is concerned, its development into the future is the central priority of Government.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I asked the Taoiseach to outline the Government's strategy for rural Ireland on this the opening day of the ploughing championships but he has declined to do so. For the record, I did not say that rural Ireland was bearing the brunt of suicide. I know that is not the case. What I said was that the second largest numbers for suicide are among those working in agriculture. That needs to be examined and corrected.

I am a supporter of ConnectIreland and try in my own small way to advance that project. The ploughing championships is an exhibition of what is best about rural values, the meitheal and cabhair na gcomharsan but that is not reflected in the Government's policies. It is these policies that are stripping away essential services across the countryside. The biggest indictment - I am not articulate enough to explain this - is the communal and societal damage and hurt inflicted on families by the scourge of emigration, which is particularly felt in rural Ireland. One cannot walk the length of oneself in rural Ireland without meeting someone whose son, daughter or two or three sons or daughters, whom they reared and put through education, have emigrated to play their hurling and football in Brisbane, Melbourne, Toronto or Manchester. What the Government needs to do is reverse this. Austerity is not working. If the policies of austerity underpinning the Government were to underpin the values of society, we would not have a ploughing championship or credit union movement and there would be no Cumann Lúthchleas Gael or all-Ireland football or hurling finals. I appeal to the Taoiseach to use the budget as an opportunity to reverse austerity and to adopt policies which get people back to work and our young people home again, grow small businesses and make society reflect the values that will be evident in Stradbally in the next few days.

The Taoiseach: We all share the fundamental principles which make Irish people different from many other peoples. Imprinted in our DNA is an understanding of interdependence and interconnection. This is because of emigration, which did not start in the past ten years but has been taking place for many centuries. This is one of the reasons the capacity to involve the vast majority of the Irish diaspora and avail of their experience, ideas and assistance is being worked on as an issue for further discussion at the economic forum which will be held in the near future.

Submissions are being received by the Ministers for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Hogan, and Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Coveney, from the chairman of the group dealing with rural development, Mr. Pat Spillane. The group will look at the questions which are causing anxiety and concern and try to address them. This will mean being able to provide access to credit for small and medium enterprises, listening to entrepreneurs who have ideas about making it easier for people to get off the live register and enter the world of work, including part-time employment, and generating ideas for transport, communications, broadband and other such facilities.

One of the priorities for rural areas is to harvest to the best potential what our land can produce to the highest standard and to be part of the movement towards reaching a target of €10 billion in agricultural exports. It also means enhancing basic opportunities, with access to employment and job opportunities being spread around the country. This is not easy to achieve in a short time.

I had the privilege of meeting 500 Irish people in China. They live there by choice and will decide to return in their own good time, based on experience. As I stated, there are Irish communities in San Francisco, Seattle, Boston, Birmingham and elsewhere and they followed those who went before them. What we can do is reverse the economic mess we inherited, provide an opportunity to restore our economy to a good, strong and healthy position, emerge from the bailout, fly again independently and become masters of our destiny. This is what the Government has been doing since we were privileged to be elected to office two and a half years ago.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The austerity policies introduced by the Fianna Fáil Party and continued by the current Government, despite a commitment given during the general election campaign not to do so, are hitting individuals and families on low and fixed incomes very hard. A survey on income and living conditions carried out by the Central Statistics Office in February 2013 found that one quarter of the population experienced two or more types of enforced deprivation in 2011, the Government's first year in office. This figure was higher than the figure for 2010. Fuel poverty, which is one form of enforced deprivation, is having a particularly devastating effect on elderly people, the sick, those in poverty and individuals and families on fixed incomes. It has increased in the Government's term of office, during which savage increases in energy prices have been permitted. I remind the Taoiseach that electricity prices increased by 14.8% in 2011 and 5.9% in 2012 and will increase again in October, while gas prices increased by 22% in 2011 and 8.5% in 2012 and are also due to be increased in October. According to the National Consumer Agency, it costs approximately €1,000 to fill a tank of home heating oil, with the cost increasing by 18% in 2012 alone. These increases could be described as indirect attacks on the living standards of ordinary people. They are condoned by the Government, which has deliberately increased fuel poverty by introducing direct cuts to living standards since taking office in 2011. These included a reduction in the number of free electricity units from 2,400 to 1,800, which was introduced when the Government was barely a wet week in office, and a cut in the duration of the free fuel allowances from 32 weeks to 26 weeks in the 2012 budget.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy must ask a question.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Government cut free electricity units in the 2013 budget and increased carbon tax on solid fuel, which will also double next year.

Elderly people and those on low incomes are caught in a pincer movement as they seek to deal with increased prices and taxes and Government cuts in benefits and allowances. As a result, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is spending €6 million per annum to help people keep their homes warm and lights on. Age Action Ireland, a national charity for elderly people, has stated that people must choose between heating their homes and buying food and elderly people are going to bed as early as 7 p.m. to stay warm or switching off their heating and heading for the nearest shopping centre where they can sit for hours in a warm atmosphere.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should put a question to the Taoiseach.

Deputy Seamus Healy: This is unacceptable. Government policies are damaging the fabric of society. Surely the Government must abandon its approach to the elderly and those on fixed incomes by reversing the cuts to fuel and energy allowances introduced since it took office in 2011.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy did not ask a question. He made a number of observations for which I thank him.

Deputy Joe Higgins: He asked whether the Government will reverse its cuts.

The Taoiseach: He made a statement that we should reverse the cuts; he did not ask a question.

Deputy Healy, like other Deputies, is in contact with people in his constituency. The Government is not immune to the difficulties people have to face and has been cognisant of them as we have attempted to make decisions, difficult as they are, to sort out the economic situation. Only this morning, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, pointed to the need for the Government to reflect, in so far as it can, the difficulties and tribulations people are having. It is not the case that we are abandoning people who are in difficult circumstances to their lot. We have moved from a point where 250,000 jobs were lost in a three year period, Ireland's access to international markets was blocked, interest rates for Government borrowing stood at 15% and the country had no strategy to deal with these matters to a point where the position has been reversed and 3,000 jobs per month are being created in the private sector.

Owing to the way in which the memorandum of understanding was framed, the Ministers, Deputies Noonan and Howlin, were able, in their early engagement with the troika, to negotiate to have the minimum wage reinstated. In addition, the Minister for Finance was able to remove 330,000 people from the universal social charge in the budget. There was no increase in income tax and no reductions in primary social welfare rates in budget 2012 and budget 2013, while mortgage interest was increased for those who purchased homes between 2004 and 2008.

While I understand the nature of the surveys to which the Deputy referred, a great deal of assistance is available. Community effort in helping people in difficulty has never been at a higher level. Clearly the biggest debt that most families face is mortgage debt and the Government has resolved to help families that are struggling through a range of actions that are now in place and we expect them to be delivered on. These matters have been the focus of Government

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and will again be the focus of what we have to do in preparing the budget for 2014 as a stepping stone to emerging from the bailout, to send out that signal further enhanced, if one likes, by the outlook upgrade by the ratings agency, Moody's, last week which had a direct impact on bond yield spreads. People may not realise these matters impact on the country. As its reputation as a location for investment improves, it impacts on the jobs situation, which is the ultimate goal, being the biggest catalyst to restoring the health of the economy. In that sense as the Minister, Deputy Noonan, pointed out in terms of the budget for this year, these matters are of concern to Government and hopefully can be reflected in the fairest way possible.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Healy who has one minute.

Deputy Seamus Healy: In case the Taoiseach did not understand the question, I will ask it again. Will the Government reverse the cuts to the energy units and the free-fuel scheme that have been made by the Government since 2011? What I have heard suggests the Government has lost touch with reality completely. I am sure the Taoiseach is aware of very important research directed by Professor Goodman of the Dublin Institute of Technology, peer reviewed, publicly funded and launched by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Rabbitte. That research has shocking findings. It found, for instance, that there was an excess of winter-----

An Ceann Comhairle: It is a supplementary question.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I am asking the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has only one minute.

Deputy Seamus Healy: There are 1,281 excess winter deaths and the majority of those deaths arise from cold-related conditions, such as respiratory illnesses. Crucially that research found that this death rate is among the highest in Europe and even higher than in Scandinavian countries which are much colder in winter than Ireland. These are absolutely shocking findings that were researched and peer reviewed, and launched by a Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Seamus Healy: In view of those findings, will the Government now reverse the cuts to the fuel allowance, particularly its duration which was cut by six weeks? Will it reverse the cuts to the energy units of the household benefits package implemented by this Government?

The Taoiseach: We have a general policy of attempting to make homes more comfortable, warmer and better insulated. Some time ago the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, announced the allocation of €50 million for that purpose.

I do not accept the Deputy's assertion that we have lost touch with reality. Very much on the contrary, we engage with people on a very regular basis about the situation in which they find themselves. It is not a situation of their making, but it is a situation that arose because of how our country was allowed to drift. We need to correct that drift and that is what we are doing.

I cannot give a direct answer to the Deputy's question about the reversal of changes in the free-fuel scheme or energy units in the household benefits package. The Minister, Deputy Rabbitte, referred to this in the energy area. The question the Deputy asked is a matter of budgetary policy and I will not answer it now. As the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, pointed out,

the Government needs to be cognisant of the difficulties and hardship that many people experience. While we have a difficult job to do in presenting a budget for 2014, we intend to do that in the fairest way possible and to show in so far as can be done a degree of flexibility where it can be applied. However, I cannot answer any individual question about the budget. That is a matter for collective decision by the Cabinet over the coming weeks.

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Seanad Referendum

1. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if officials from his Department are working on the Seanad referendum campaign and, if so, the number of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39047/13]

2. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if officials in his Department prepared extensive notes on the Seanad Éireann referendum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39495/13]

3. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if officials in his Department who work in the Government Information Service are monitoring and rebutting comments made in the media on the Seanad Éireann referendum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39496/13]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, together.

These questions relate to work undertaken by my Department regarding the Government's proposal to amend the Constitution to abolish Seanad Éireann.

The legislation to abolish the Seanad has been passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas and is now before the people. They will make their decision on 4 October. As my Department has responsibility within Government for constitutional matters, the legislation on Seanad abolition was prepared by my Department. My Department set up a small unit to deal with the proposal to abolish the Seanad. This unit was initially staffed on a part-time basis. It now consists of two full-time staff - an assistant principal and a clerical officer - within my Department's protocol and general division. Other members of staff are available to assist on a part-time basis as required.

The officials in my Department provide appropriate support to me, as the member of the Government who brought forward the legislation. The legislation was, of course, drafted by the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, in conjunction with my Department and approved by the Attorney General before it was submitted to the Government. While the workload involved was significant during the period of preparation of the legislation and during the passage of the legislation through both Houses of the Oireachtas, it has diminished very significantly since the referendum campaign itself commenced.

The bulk of the documentation in my Department, therefore, relates to the preparation of the legislation and the Oireachtas debates. The officials in my Department operate in accordance

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with the law relating to referendums and in accordance with relevant court judgments. Once the polling date was set, an instruction issued to all relevant staff setting out the implications of the McKenna judgment and the restrictions that apply to the Civil Service during a referendum campaign.

As the Government is not conducting an information campaign, the amount of work required by officials in my Department is greatly reduced by comparison with previous referendums. In fact, reflecting that position, one of the staff members is currently on annual leave.

As Deputies are aware, the provision of public information is a matter for the Referendum Commission. My Department has put in place arrangements for funding the commission with respect to the Seanad referendum. The total funding allocated is €1.8 million. A further allocation has been provided by the Department of Justice and Equality in respect of the court of appeal referendum. The funding provided to the commission by the Government has enabled it to run a very comprehensive public information campaign.

My officials circulate articles in the daily print media within the Department and provide information relating to the proposed constitutional amendment, as required. They also compile a factual bulletin every few days briefly summarising recent developments in the referendum campaign and containing a short summary of the main proposals in the referendum Bill. The Government information services, as with press offices in all Departments, provides a series of services to Government, including a media monitoring service which is a basic function of any efficiently run Government press operation.

If the proposal to abolish the Seanad is approved by the people, I envisage that the staff currently assigned to the protocol and general division to deal with the legislation will remain in place to work on the implementation of the people's decision and associated Dáil reform measures.

4 o'clock

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. I tabled three questions on this issue. The Taoiseach has made many claims in recent weeks, including that he believes in being accountable to the Dáil. He even held a press conference recently where he brandished the Constitution and said it was only to the Dáil that he was accountable. I invite the Taoiseach to practice some of what he has been preaching lately in that regard.

Will the Taoiseach explain to me the basis of a claim he made during the passage of the legislation in the House? When proposing Seanad abolition in the House, and many times since, he said that abolishing the Seanad would save €20 million per annum. At the time he did not say that was its cost, he said it would actually save that amount. Further, the Taoiseach has said that he would hire 350 extra teachers with the savings. The problem is that no other person has said that would be the saving. It is important that we do not misquote what staff of the Oireachtas have been saying. No other person has said that would actually be the saving. The €20 million costs figure includes pensions, which will continue to be paid, and services shared with the Dáil, which will be retained. As we know, many millions of that figure have to do with ongoing expenditure not purely related to the Seanad. In the spirit of the Taoiseach's commitment to start being accountable to the House, can he now withdraw his false statement to the House to the effect that €20 million will be saved as a result of the abolition of the Seanad?

The Taoiseach: The answer to Deputy Martin's question is "No". The total running costs

of the Seanad have been estimated independently by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission to be in the region of €20 million per annum. That is based on the 2012 out-turn and includes all direct and apportioned or indirect costs. Direct costs relating to Seanad Members' salaries, expenses and staff costs amount to €8.8 million. Indirect pay and non-pay costs of the supporting sections, that is, the information and communications technology section, the office of the superintendent and the procedural and support sections amount to €9.3 million. There is also the annual cost of approximately €2 million in pensions. The pensions for former Members are paid by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission under subhead 2.1, grant-in-aid in respect of ciste pinsean Thithe an Oireachais. Clearly, the amount of money involved, between direct and indirect savings, is the only figure that has been put out by an independent entity, that is, the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission. It is based on the commission's figures that the saving of €20 million on the abolition of the Seanad will take place.

Clearly, if the people decide to approve the referendum question and abolish the Seanad - I hope they will - it will mean that from the commencement of the next Government there will be no further Senators elected and therefore the direct costs of that will not apply. Pensions do apply, of course. However, in the case of that becoming a fact and the Seanad being abolished, no more than with the amalgamation and redeployment that has occurred in so many areas of the public service generally, persons currently working in areas associated with the Seanad will be deployed and work elsewhere. These figures stand up. They are the figures set out by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission and I do not intend to reverse that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The commission and others are clear that it is not possible to estimate the actual amount of net annual savings that would arise if the Seanad was abolished. A strong caveat has been entered. The Taoiseach is now the only person, along with others in Fine Gael, who is sticking to the untruth and the dishonesty that has been perpetrated in respect of a claim which is patently false. No other person outside the Fine Gael Party, other than perhaps some Labour Party acolytes or others on the "Yes" side of this campaign, has dared to suggest that the actual saving would be €20 million, unless the Taoiseach is suggesting that he will in some way stop all pensions relating to the Seanad, lock up half of Leinster House, turn off the heat or many other things that would be necessary. Furthermore, the cost will be €14 million in terms of running the referendum.

It is a con job. The Taoiseach has decided to go on the attack on this issue. This is his major plank in terms of the abolition of the Seanad. He is adopting tactics that would make Libertas or Youth Defence blush. He keeps repeating the mantra. His view is that even if it is untrue, it does not matter. He will simply carry on, keep on regardless and keep up the untruths because that is all that matters now for the duration of the campaign. Let us reflect on previous referendums and changes to our Constitution. I do not believe any former Taoiseach would continue to uphold a blatant untruth like this. The Taoiseach should take the opportunity afforded to him in the House to change that.

I wish to ask the Taoiseach about the notes prepared for him in respect of his speech and the various speeches as the legislation went through. Will the Taoiseach make those available to Members, as well as other documentation relating to the special unit established by the Taoiseach in preparation for the abolition of the Seanad? Will the Taoiseach make all that documentation public or available and share it with other Members? I asked for it some time ago in advance of the legislation. It is important that the Taoiseach would make it public and available not only to Members but to the public in general.

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The Taoiseach: I do not accept Deputy Martin's assertion that this is a con job.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am referring to the €20 million.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Martin has made statements about the abolition, retention and reform of the Seanad. He has not been consistent in his view about Seanad Éireann. He made an assertion recently to the effect that every party in the House campaigned with the statement that they would give the people an opportunity to vote on reform. Deputy Martin will recall that four years ago I set out a view on this that was very clear and that was in fact the view of all the parties before the last election, including Deputy Martin's party. It was that a referendum of the people would be held to ask them for their approval to abolish Seanad Éireann. Many people thought it would never happen, many people thought it was a con job and many people thought it was some sort of political gimmick or stunt that would not actually apply, but now they know because the question will be answered by the people on 4 October. It is far from being a concept of a political power grab. In fact, there is nothing more democratic than asking the people for their approval to a question on whether they want to abolish the Seanad or keep it. I hope that they will answer that question very strongly.

The €20 million is not a figure created by any political party or individual. It is a statement of the costs, indirect costs and pension requirements set out by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission. It is completely independent of my party, Deputy Martin's party and every other party in the House. I accept the commission's figures and I stand by them.

This is not just about this particular issue. This is part of the process, as we have discussed before, of changing the way politics operates in the House.

Deputy Micheál Martin: My questions were about the costs and the Taoiseach's false claim.

The Taoiseach: Article 28.4 of the Constitution makes it clear that this House has the constitutional responsibility to hold this Government or any other government to account. This is where the authority is vested, but it has never been translated into a factual demonstration of the involvement of the people in a real way. However, that is what will happen with the changes in the way this House, Dáil Éireann, will be reformed. It follows on reducing the number of Deputies, dealing with the question of Ministers' salaries and pensions, limiting corporate and political donations, regulating lobbying and the changes that are being introduced to reform the way the House actually operates. It relates to the broader impact of how we interact and engage with the European Union. Central to this will be the demonstrable change in the way committees are operated and run and the way they engage with people. I do not accept Deputy Martin's view or what he has said.

As I understand it, all the information Deputy Martin has looked for is available under freedom of information and I do not have a problem in supplying it.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Without having to go through freedom of information, will the Taoiseach make it available?

The Taoiseach: Yes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, through the Chair.

The Taoiseach: I do not have any difficulty in putting that-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am not asking the Taoiseach whether he has difficulty.

The Taoiseach: I do not have any difficulty in making available that information on the website of the Department. There is nothing to hide in it in any event.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Will the Taoiseach do that?

The Taoiseach: As I indicated to the Deputy, in the case of every Minister in every Government-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach did not do it all along.

The Taoiseach: -----who has responsibility for a legislative item, it is that Department and officials of that Department who prepare the proposition and, thereafter, the Parliamentary Counsel actually drafts the legislation. As the Department of the Taoiseach deals with protocol, constitutional matters and so on, the aforementioned small number of officials - who already are working in other areas in the Department - worked on that proposition and proposal and the Bill was then prepared by the Parliamentary Counsel. Consequently, I have no difficulty in making available information that is available anyway. In fact, I will forward it to the Deputy.

Deputy Gerry Adams: As the Taoiseach is aware, Sinn Féin seeks the abolition of the Seanad in its current form. However, it takes serious issue with the manner in which the Taoiseach has dealt with this matter. I have asked him a number of times to include this matter for discussion in the Constitutional Convention but he has refused to do so. I attended the Constitutional Convention session at which the citizen delegates were limited to discussing electoral reform. In his response to Teachta Martin, the Taoiseach stated this is about changing the way politics works. My party has put forward a number of proposals for political reform that it has sent to the Government. I ask the Taoiseach to examine them seriously because I have not been consulted on the political reforms the Taoiseach claims to wish to bring in. While one reads a lot of these in the media and promises have been made a number of times that leaders of the Opposition will be brought in, consulted, engaged in discussions and be part of the process, this has not happened. Sinn Féin is putting forward proposals to introduce equality proofing for spending priorities, to look at how the Parliament, the Executive and public bodies work, to extend votes in presidential elections to citizens living in the North and to Irish citizens living and working abroad, as well as bringing into this Chamber speaking rights - for those who want them - for Northern MPs. This a large pile of stuff on which the Taoiseach could easily consult Sinn Féin in the first instance and then bring it forward to this Chamber.

I must state I find hard to take seriously Teachta Martin on this issue. Since 1970, there have been 12 reports that proposed reform of the Seanad, not one of which was implemented. Teachta Martin was in government for 14 years and Fianna Fáil did nothing to reform the Seanad but in many ways, it used it to reward political cronies. During the last election campaign, its manifesto called for the abolition of the Seanad and it received a mandate to do so-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is not correct. The Deputy should read it.

Deputy Gerry Adams: -----but it now seeks to retain it. No democrat can defend the current position in which a small minority elects the Seanad. There is no universal franchise, some folks have multiple votes but the vast majority of people have no say.

Has the Government sought legal advice on the conduct of its campaign and in the role of

departmental officials or of the Government Information Service? I listened intently to the Taoiseach's initial response and he will be aware that the Supreme Court found unanimously that parts of the Government campaign for the children's referendum were not fair, equal or impartial and that the Government had acted in clear disregard of the McKenna principles. Have these lessons been learned and what has the Government done to ensure citizens receive independent and unbiased information in order that they can make an informed decision on polling day?

The Taoiseach: I certainly agree with Deputy Adams on one point, which is that for more than 50 years, the political process failed to deal with report after report regarding the potential of Seanad Éireann or its reformation. I examined this issue myself and it is impossible to reform a system that would still be discriminatory and minority-based and still would not involve people in the manner in which this House operates. It is not a situation in which one would seek to have some sort of subset of Dáil Éireann set up in which everyone, including those abroad, would have some measure of votes. Consequently, the question posed is a straight question as to whether one wishes to keep it or to abolish it. I hope people answer that question strongly on the abolition side.

I have answered Deputy Adams previously on the reason this matter did not go before the Constitutional Convention. The Constitutional Convention was part of the programme for Government, as agreed by the two parties in government, to engage with citizens in an analysis of various issues relating to Bunreacht na hÉireann with the intention that the Constitutional Convention, which has worked well in a thoroughly engaging and comprehensive fashion, would make known its views on a range of issues for consideration by the Government. In the case of the abolition of the Seanad, however, the Government already was clear as to what it wished to do. The Government made a decision and an agreement as part of the programme to put this question to the people. Consequently, from a Government point of view, it was not necessary to have an engagement with the Constitutional Convention for its consideration because a decision already had been made in this regard.

As I often have pointed out, a five year period is relatively very short for a Government that has an entire programme to implement, given the unprecedented scale of economic deprivation and calamity that afflicted us. Deputy Adams mentioned the conduct of the campaign and officials working on papers, and one should be clear that the small unit in the protocol section of the Department of the Taoiseach, three of them, was charged with the production and work on the proposal to give effect to the abolition of the Seanad. This is normal for any Minister or any Department and this is what happens. When such a proposal is worked up, it is sent off to the Parliamentary Counsel and the legislation is drafted on that basis. The Government is not running a campaign here because this case was taken to the court arising from the children's referendum and the Government clearly obliged immediately in respect of the findings of the court. Consequently, there is no Government campaign in respect of the abolition of the Seanad although the parties in government and members of those parties obviously do campaign. In that sense, there is not a formal Government campaign and it does not apply. The Government abides fully by the decisions of the court arising from the children's referendum.

As I indicated in response to Deputy Martin, the volume of work involved for the very small unit in the Department of the Taoiseach which worked on the proposal to give effect to the abolition of the Seanad, that is, on the question being asked, has diminished greatly because there is no further engagement from that perspective. Consequently, I reiterate there is no Government campaign and, therefore, there is no requirement for legal advice in respect of any of

that. It does not apply. The parties in government run their own campaigns nationwide and it is perfectly normal for officials in whatever Department is sponsoring legislation to work on the preparation of a proposal to be put in a referendum.

I also inform Deputy Adams that all the officials involved were notified by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government and, to be clear in this regard, the legal advice from the Office of the Attorney General in respect of the application of the principles of the McKenna judgment applies here. During the referendum, the Government has a right and a duty to give information to clarify situations or to give explanations and deal with unforeseen matters in emergencies. The Government is not entitled to expend public moneys for the purpose of promoting a campaign for a particular outcome. The McKenna case concerned money specifically voted to the Government for the referendum campaign. Neither the McKenna decision nor any other decision determines that departmental resources may not be used by a Minister in a referendum campaign. It still is permissible for the Civil Service, in support of the Government's policy and leadership role, to continue to provide information and material to Ministers in the form of speeches or reports of briefing material, including during the referendum campaign itself. Were I to attend a public meeting dealing with a referendum that had been organised by my own party, I would not have any material for that supplied to me by the people working in the Department because it is not a departmental meeting. Under the instruction it received, the Civil Service can never go beyond its normal activities so as to ensure it never promotes, directly or indirectly, a particular outcome in a referendum or indulges in what might be termed partisan propaganda. The letter from the Department of the Taoiseach on 31 July is also very clear that on no account can civil servants provide support for or participate in party political events connected to the referendum campaign, nor should statements made at party or campaign events be referred to on Government websites. Government resources which are normally available to Ministers, such as Government websites, can refer to statements made by members of the Government in their ministerial capacity, but any passages in statements that advocate a "Yes" vote, for example, should be and must be redacted. That is consistent with the practice in previous referenda.

The principal officer and the two persons working there do their job in respect of the normal promotion of the proposal by the sponsoring Department and me as the sponsoring Minister in this case. That goes to the Parliamentary Counsel, who drafts the legislation. I wish to be perfectly clear about that.

Deputy Joe Higgins: I would not be surprised if the Taoiseach needed to have some of his staff working on the referendum. I remind the Taoiseach that he now stands for the abolition of the Seanad but for the 30 years that I and a few others, both in this House and outside, demanded the end of that undemocratic, elitist institution, he was busily working the system to get his cronies in here and to continue the undemocratic rule of the 1%. He might lend another member of staff to the leader of Fianna Fáil to remind him of what he was saying two and a half years ago, when he was castigating that 75 year old institution for its ineffectiveness. Now, apparently, he is championing its continuance. Is it any wonder the people are cynical?

The cost is not the key plank in this. It is the question of the democratic rights of every citizen. Does the Taoiseach agree that he has no credibility whatsoever in proposing to get rid of an undemocratic institution, having submitted the Irish people to the two most undemocratic institutions in Europe, the financial markets and the troika, and having submitted to their demands that the Irish people should carry the burden of private debts of speculators, bankers and bondholders? The Taoiseach has submitted the Irish people to that huge, undemocratic attack

on people's economic rights, living standards and so forth, but now he stands as a champion of democracy. When I call on people to vote "Yes" to abolish the undemocratic and elitist institution that is the Seanad, the biggest obstacle to winning that is the hypocrisy and lack of credibility of the two Government parties proposing it.

The Taoiseach: On the point about my standing for the abolition of the Seanad, this is the first time I have had an opportunity to do something about it. I made it perfectly clear when I spoke about this matter a number of years ago, that I would carry out an in-depth analysis of Seanad Éireann. Before the previous general election, we made our position clear, as all parties did, for abolition of the Seanad. We have carried that policy through to the question being asked on 4 October. I do not speak for the voting records of anyone in the Seanad. I have encouraged Members elected from my party and Government Members to turn up there, but some of the activities in the Seanad have not done public representation in general any justice.

The people have answered the question about the financial markets. They answered very clearly, 60% to 40%, in respect of the fiscal stability treaty, despite the fact that the Government was dealing with an unprecedented economic situation in this country. People in Ireland, in the most democratic way of all, by way of secret ballot in a referendum, gave a strong endorsement of being linked to the euro and the European Union because of the opportunity and potential that a market of 500 million people can provide and because of the way this country has been transformed over the past 40 years, under all Governments, by virtue of the assistance, co-operation and help it received from the European Union. As I said earlier, the engagement of the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform with the troika has brought about a situation where we have been able to honour the contracts our sovereign country entered into previously, with some details changed because of our concern for those who are more vulnerable than others and the emphasis the Government has on using whatever flexibility and assets there might be for job creation and getting people back to work, which is where the economic salvation of the country lies.

I thank the Deputy for the clarity of his stance in respect of the abolition of the Seanad. I hope that on 4 October the people give a resounding "Yes" to the question being asked.

Deputy Micheál Martin: These questions relate to the issue of savings of €20 million, the background to that and the basis on which the Taoiseach made that claim to the Dáil during the passage of that legislation. Regardless of how the Taoiseach tries to get around it, there is no basis for making the false claim that the abolition of the Seanad will save €20 million. Indeed, the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission said it is not possible to estimate the amount of net savings that would arise if the Seanad were abolished and that while there would be savings relating to salary costs, parliamentary printing, ICT and support costs, there would be substantial increases in the pension costs and redundancy payments. The Referendum Commission has been unable to substantiate or support the €20 million claim.

The Taoiseach has been a Member of this House for 38 years and he spent 34 of them as a staunch advocate and defender of the Seanad. In advance of stating his commitment to abolish the Seanad, he put forward a detailed proposal to the MacGill Summer School for the reform of the Seanad. The Taoiseach can reform the Seanad if he wishes. The people should have been given the option of a reformed Seanad directly elected by the people. That option is available if the Taoiseach wants it. As regards our position, I made it clear during the general election, which the Taoiseach and my opponents refuse to quote, that fundamental reform of the Government, how the Government is formed, the Dáil and, indeed, of the electoral system would be

required if Seanad Éireann were to be abolished. None of that has happened. Our position was clearly stated on page 30 of our manifesto.

Accountability in this House has been reduced since the Taoiseach took office. The property tax legislation went through this House in 24 hours. The Government rammed it through so quickly that nobody could table an amendment. Last Christmas, nobody could table an amendment on the child benefit cut-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Perhaps the Deputy would put his question.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----because it was rammed through in 24 hours. The same happened with the respite care grant. David Farrell, a noted political scientist, told a gathering last week that Dáil Éireann is the weakest parliament in Europe. The Taoiseach is trying to get rid of the Upper House but the people might have something to say about that. People are very worried about an excessive concentration of power in the hands of a small group of Ministers. That is what will happen. It has happened with the Economic Management Council. A small group of Ministers will end up running the Dáil, which will become a mere rubber-stamp for their activities, as it has been for the past two and a half years. That will be the real democratic deficit.

There is no official basis for the €20 million savings which the Taoiseach has claimed. He has put a false proposition to the people.

The Taoiseach: I reject that. These figures were provided by the House of the Oireachtas Commission-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: They were not.

The Taoiseach: They are not a claim made by a politician. They are the figures contained in the formal letter from the House of the Oireachtas Commission setting out the direct, indirect and pension costs accruing to the running of the Seanad. I do not accept what Deputy Martin has said in any circumstances. Clearly, when an entity is abolished, merged or changed, direct and indirect costs move on, just as this debate has moved on.

The Deputy says I have been defending the set-up in Seanad Éireann for 34 years. When I addressed this matter, I made it perfectly clear that I would consider it in some detail in order to identify the various possibilities. This is the first time in my life - as head of Government - that I have the opportunity to engage with people and ask them a direct question.

The Deputy commented that one of the things the Government could do immediately would be to reduce the number of Ministers of State. He has asked me to do this.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I did not say that at all.

The Taoiseach: Did I not read the Deputy's words on the matter earlier today?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach should answer the question. He is just filibustering.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy stated that reducing the number of Ministers of State would result in savings for the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin.

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Deputy Micheál Martin: About what is the Taoiseach talking?

The Taoiseach: Ministers of State are not appointed by the Taoiseach, they are appointed by the Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: We should return to discussing the Seanad. We have already spent 35 minutes on these questions.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy sat at the Cabinet table but he did not open his mouth - perhaps he did but, as far as I can ascertain, there is no record of him doing so - when the Government of which he was a member appointed 20 Ministers of State-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: Is the Taoiseach's Government leading the purge?

The Taoiseach: -----and went on a spending spree in respect of appointing chairmen, vice chairmen and convenors of committees, etc.

Deputy Martin also made a point regarding an over-concentration of power. This is absolute nonsense.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, it is not. The Taoiseach need only ask the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Burton, whether it is nonsense.

The Taoiseach: The Economic Management Council, which I chair and on which the Tánaiste, Deputy Gilmore, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, and the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, serve, is merely a vehicle-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach should ask the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Burton, and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Coveney, about the matter.

The Taoiseach: -----to streamline matters which must be brought before the Government for collective decision and are, therefore, the subject of collective responsibility. Many years ago, perhaps before the Deputy became a Member of the House, the late Deputies Jack Lynch, George Colley and Martin O'Donoghue and former Deputy Des O'Malley had their own quartet which dealt with all - or the vast majority of - matters relating to the budget. Perhaps Deputy Martin's memory has slipped a little in that regard, I am not sure. However, I assure him that the Economic Management Council does not represent a concentration of power.

Last week the Deputy claimed that the council's actions reflect those of Mussolini and today he states that they mirror the antics of Libertas. I must inform him that this is the fairest and most democratic way to obtain results from people. The political process failed to obtain such results in the past because those in it did not have the courage to recommend decisions. In addition, the various reports that were compiled were never implemented. This is no over-concentration of power-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is a gross-----

The Taoiseach: -----it is a genuine attempt to proceed in such a way so as to ensure that the people will be far more engaged and that this House, under Article 28.4 of the Constitution, will be seen to be able to live up to its responsibilities. In the period 1977 to 1979, the Lynch, Colley, O'Malley and O'Donoghue quartet ruled the roost in so far as the preparation and

implementation of the budget was concerned. That was long before the economic management council was ever heard of and it was a time when those to whom I refer had their own cabal which dealt with matters in the context of how politics was delivered. I recall this because I was a Member of the House at the time.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach was a member of that Cabinet, was he?

The Taoiseach: No, I was not a member of it. The Deputy sat at the Cabinet table-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: Not in 1977. I was still doing the leaving certificate.

The Taoiseach: -----and allowed 20 Ministers of State to be appointed. It was a case of “Have one for yourself and have some responsibility assigned to you, whatever it might be”.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Will the Taoiseach engage in a debate with me on the matter?

The Taoiseach: I am engaging in a debate with the Deputy now.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach is not doing so.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have spent 38 minutes on these questions.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is because the Ceann Comhairle is allowing the Taoiseach to go on and on.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will take final supplementaries from Deputies Adams and Mathews and I will then move on. Deputy McHugh has tabled two questions in the next group and he is waiting to hear the reply.

Deputy Joe Higgins: So the Taoiseach is saying that the “gang of four” is a reflection of an honourable tradition in Irish politics.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Sinn Féin is calling for a “Yes” vote in both referendums. For the reasons to which I referred earlier, that is the right thing to do. However, I agree with An Teachta Higgins’ assertion that one of the big problems which exists on the hustings is the Government’s support for this position. The reason it is a problem is reflected what the Taoiseach stated earlier, namely, that it was not necessary to refer this issue to the Constitutional Convention because the decision had already been taken. What does that say about the role of the Opposition? I attended the discussions the Taoiseach chaired on the Constitutional Convention - I do not recall An Teachta Martin being present but he may have been - and I made this very point. The Taoiseach’s earlier utterance goes to the very nub of the matter, namely, what is the role of the Opposition and how does it get its point of view across? The latter is difficult and the Government Chief Whip has stated that its record of political reform is deplorable. It is not, therefore, just a question of being able to ventilate our views, it is a matter of trying to encourage the Government to take them on board. Citizens should vote “Yes” in both referendums but the Government has no credibility in respect of the need for root-and-branch political reform of this quite dysfunctional institution.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I have been a Member of the Oireachtas for two and a half years.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is grand, Deputy.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I am just offering a little preamble. Deputy Martin has been here

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for 24 years, while the Taoiseach has been a Member for almost 40 years. Considering the obstacles and the limitations which apply and the nature of the Whip system, I am of the view that the Seanad has done a very good job in the time I have been here. Many amendments to legislation have been made in the Upper House, which has the capability to delay Bills from being signed into law for 90 days.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy have a question?

Deputy Peter Mathews: The latter provides a chance to pause and reflect.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have speeches from anyone. We have spent almost 40 minutes on these questions.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I accept that. Why the haste in making a decision on this matter? I do not think abolition is a good idea. Senator Feargal Quinn introduced what became the Construction Contracts Act in the Upper House.

An Ceann Comhairle: At this point I must ask for the Deputy's co-operation.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I hear what the Ceann Comhairle is saying but this is a very important matter. Senator Crown has introduced two Bills in the past two and a half years.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is very important but it is not as important as Standing Orders.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I wish to place on record my view that this could be a very grave and great mistake.

The Taoiseach: I take Deputy Adams' point. The role of the Opposition is to hold the Government of the day to account. That role is defined in Article 28.4 of Bunreacht na hÉireann which states that it is the constitutional duty of the Dáil to hold the Government - the Executive - to account.

Deputy Gerry Adams: We try to do that.

The Taoiseach: There have been examples during the past ten years whereby issues raised by the Opposition have seen the Government held to account. We want to enhance the position in this regard because, in the interests of the people and our democracy, all Governments need to be held to account.

The second point I must make in respect of this matter is that Governments must make decisions. It is no secret that I have informed members of my party and the Cabinet that for 15 years all one could do was make propositions. It is different when one is obliged to make decisions and then stand over them. From that point of view, the Constitutional Convention's responsibility is not to make decisions. I accept that it makes decisions about recommendations. However, the Government is obliged to decide, on the basis of those recommendations, what it wants to do.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Taoiseach would not even allow the convention to discuss the matter.

The Taoiseach: If the Constitutional Convention were to consider the question of the Seanad and state that it should be retained-----

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Taoiseach would not let it do so.

The Taoiseach: -----the Government would then say that it did not agree and that it was going to proceed to hold a referendum. In this instance the views of the parties in government were very clear prior to the general election and these were reflected in the programme for Government. The Government has also been clear in the decisions it has made in the context of asking the question. There was no need for reflection on the Government's view on this matter. I commend the Constitutional Convention on the way in which it has gone about its business.

I do not accept Deputy Mathews' proposition.

Deputy Peter Mathews: It was an observation.

The Taoiseach: No, it was not. The Seanad was never a second House. It was, rather, a break on the proceedings of the Dáil. While it has the right to delay legislation, this mechanism has only been used in very rare circumstances.

Deputy Peter Mathews: It is one of the three parts of the Oireachtas.

The Taoiseach: My problem with the Seanad is that the founding principles of engagement and representation of civic society on which it was based were never adhered to there. This is because the Upper House was hijacked by the political process, including my party.

Deputy Peter Mathews: What about the Whip system?

Deputy Joe Higgins: The Taoiseach did not say anything about the matter for 35 years.

The Taoiseach: That is one of the reasons the majority of persons I, as Taoiseach, was able to appoint to the Seanad are completely and utterly independent of politics. Those individuals have not been asked by me to vote in favour or support the Government on particular issues since their appointment. That has not always been the case.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I am just trying to take an honest and forthright look at the matter.

The Taoiseach: There were occasions in the past where people were rewarded with appointment to the Seanad on the basis of services they had previously rendered. What we want to do in this House with the revamped committee system is to engage with civic society and the sectors of civic society which were left out of the analysis, preparation, consideration and implementation of the laws of our land. Nothing can be more democratic or fair than that. That is another reason we can manage our affairs much more effectively, much more transparently and in a much more accountable fashion without having a second House which does not have constitutional responsibility to hold the Government to account. That is what the people demand.

Deputy Peter Mathews: It has a constitutional basis.

Northern Ireland Issues

4. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Taoiseach if he has discussed with the British Prime Minister this summer's Northern Ireland stimulus package as announced by the British Government; if the Irish Government will measure the impact of the Northern stimulus package on the Border counties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39052/13]

5. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Taoiseach if he has discussed with the British Prime Minister this summer's Northern Ireland stimulus package as announced by the British Government; if the Irish Government will consider the package with reference to Strand II of the Good Friday Agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39053/13]

6. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach when the next North-South Ministerial Council is taking place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39054/13]

7. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he has been asked to meet relatives of those killed in the Omagh bombing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39060/13]

8. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach the contacts he has had with the British Prime Minister David Cameron in relation to the issue of contentious parades in the North of Ireland since Dáil Éireann adjourned for the summer recess. [39068/13]

9. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach the contacts he has had with political leaders in the North of Ireland in relation to the issue of contentious parades since Dáil Éireann adjourned for the summer recess; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39069/13]

10. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach his plans to meet with US envoy to the North of Ireland, Dr. Richard Haass. [39073/13]

11. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach the contact he has had with the British Prime Minister during the summer recess. [39076/13]

12. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach the contact he has had with political leaders in the North since the summer recess. [39082/13]

13. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach his plans to meet with the First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness. [39083/13]

14. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach when he last had discussions with British Prime Minister Cameron; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39084/13]

15. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach when he last visited Northern Ireland; if there are plans for future visits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39085/13]

16. **Deputy Joe Higgins** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on any recent meetings with the political leaders in Northern Ireland. [39142/13]

17. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he has met or has plans to meet Dr. Richard Haass; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39492/13]

18. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if officials in his Department will be meeting Dr. Richard Haass; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39493/13]

19. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he has met representatives from the Unionist parties recently; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39494/13]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 4 to 19, inclusive, together.

The events of recent months surrounding disputes over parades in particular and the tensions and disorder they have provoked, alongside the unresolved issues of how to deal with the

past, are exerting a harmful and even regressive effect on politics and community relations in Northern Ireland.

That is why I very much welcome the commencement of the all-party talks under the independent chairmanship of former US Envoy to Northern Ireland, Dr. Richard Haass, to consider and make recommendations on these contentious issues. As Dr. Haass has publically stated, Northern Ireland has been transformed as a result of the Good Friday and St. Andrews Agreements. Issues such as flags, parades and the past are deep rooted issues that need to be addressed. Dr. Haass brings to bear a wealth of skill and experience on these issues. However, people and their political leaders will need to be prepared to move ground and compromise if these talks are to succeed. I issue a call to all parties to approach these talks in a spirit of genuine compromise to enable a clear way forward or road map to be found on all of the contentious issues - flags, parades and the past.

The Tánaiste will meet Dr. Haass in New York tomorrow. I understand Dr. Haass will visit Dublin next month and I will avail of the opportunity to meet with him at that time.

I have not discussed Northern Ireland's stimulus package or the parades issue with Prime Minister Cameron since the summer recess.

I met the First Minister and Deputy First Minister at the North-South Ministerial Council plenary which I hosted in Dublin Castle in July. We had an open and a very productive discussion across a range of issues that are important to people in all parts of this island. We recapped on the achievements of the Irish EU Presidency and the good co-operation between both jurisdictions during the Presidency. We will continue to engage closely on European Union issues in the future.

We discussed the Northern Ireland Executive's strategy for good relations and the economic package agreed between the British Government and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. This is important work in delivering the forward-looking, prosperous and reconciled society we all wish to see in Northern Ireland. I took the opportunity to again congratulate the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on their achievement for all the people of Northern Ireland.

We also discussed the fiscal and economic challenges facing both jurisdictions and the opportunities for more practical co-operation. We discussed youth employment and how we might work together to tackle this issue which is of vital importance to both jurisdictions. The meeting provided an opportunity for me to update the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the round table discussions on youth employment hosted by Chancellor Merkel in Berlin on 3 July and also to outline the major steps taken on youth employment under the Irish Presidency.

The Council received an update on the current state of play in regard to the remaining elements of the St. Andrews review. Officials have initiated a work programme and will conclude their work and present proposals to the next North-South Ministerial Council institutional meeting in the autumn.

I have already reported to the House on my most recent visit to Northern Ireland to attend the British-Irish Council summit in June. I will visit Armagh to attend the next North-South Ministerial Council plenary in November where I expect to meet the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I also hope to visit Belfast in the near future.

I have not met any other political leaders in the North since the summer recess. The Tánaiste

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visited Belfast on 29 August and met a range of community contacts, including the business sector and has also had discussions with political leaders including at the British Irish Association Conference. He met the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 23 September, when they focused on the need for a clear way forward to emerge from the all-party talks on contentious issues in Northern Ireland being chaired by Dr. Richard Haass and how the two Governments can best support that process.

I have received a request to meet relatives of those killed in the Omagh bombing and I am open to meeting them in due course when that is appropriate. As I have previously stated, what happened at Omagh was a brutal act of mass murder. The criminal terrorists who carried it out had no sense of humanity and displayed a complete disregard for life. For the families of those who were killed in the atrocity at Omagh, the pain of that loss can never go away.

As the House is aware, my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality, met the Omagh support and self-help group in July 2012 and received a copy of the document they have compiled on events surrounding the Omagh bombing in August 1998. He received a presentation from them on the matters raised and on their call for a public inquiry. I met them briefly in the corridor on the day they were making one of those presentations. The Minister is currently in the process of finalising his consideration of the issues that have been raised by the group. He hopes to be in a position to conclude this process soon and once a conclusion has been reached he will communicate directly with the Omagh group.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I thank the Taoiseach for a comprehensive response. The 15th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement is a time for us to reflect. Obviously, the process is very much in its infancy. We are all very aware of the challenges which arose this summer and of the work which still needs to be done. I would like to acknowledge the participation of Dr. Richard Haass in very important consultation around flags, emblems and the legacy issues of Northern Ireland.

I would like to focus on the Border conversation. Colleagues who represent Border constituencies, including Deputy Gerry Adams, sometimes exclude other colleagues, whether from counties Clare or Kerry, when we start to talk about the Border. There is an opportunity to extend the conversation to other counties. People from Cushendall to Cahirciveen signed up to the Good Friday Agreement and there is a role for local authorities to be more proactive and to engage more in terms of joint participation North and South. However, I do not know how we will go about that. It is not about setting up another mechanism. The Taoiseach and I are in agreement that we do not want another mechanism or another bureaucratic piece of machinery, as there are plenty of them. The North-South Ministerial Council has its job to do.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputy put his questions because we are short on time?

Deputy Joe McHugh: Community groups are doing good work.

Can we look at leadership within local authorities? I refer to the likes of Peter Hynes in the Taoiseach's county and Seamus Neely in my county who are all doing good work in their own right. Can we have greater participation among local authority leadership North and South? I would like to name one person because the mechanism is in place in Northern Ireland. Derek McCallan is the chief executive officer of Northern Ireland Local Government Association. We, in the South, need to reach out, whether at the level of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport or the

Department of Health, and look for leaders in the local authority sector.

Can we embrace the Good Friday Agreement which was democratically supported by people in every county in the Twenty-Six Counties and in the Six Counties 15 years later? Can we create some sort of political partnership panel, involving local authority leadership at a civic level? Democracy at local level is the closest reach people have to democracy. We should consider the adoption of a strategic approach, not just to Border issues but also to North-South integration. Aspects of North-South integration in areas like transport, health and education are at the kernel of the Good Friday Agreement. The Minister, Deputy Quinn, has said he wants to co-operate. There is no participatory democratic way of doing that at local authority level. I would like the Taoiseach to reach out to our counterparts in Northern Ireland in that regard.

An Ceann Comhairle: As there are just five minutes and 27 seconds remaining in this slot, I suggest that the three Deputies who are seeking to ask questions might ask them all together before I call the Taoiseach to reply. Otherwise, we will run out of time.

Deputy Gerry Adams: On a brief point of order, the situation in the North, which is undergoing some turbulence at the moment, is quite serious. I would like us to return to this issue on another day. Today's session is not sufficient for me.

An Ceann Comhairle: I appreciate that, but we spent 40 or 50 minutes on the Seanad.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I understand that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I tried to bring some sense to it, but people were making all sorts of statements.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Part of the problem, a Cheann Comhairle, is that-----

An Ceann Comhairle: If you want to arrange statements on Northern Ireland, do it through the Whips.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No.

An Ceann Comhairle: I would not have a problem with that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I do not want to do so.

An Ceann Comhairle: We had better not waste any more time.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thought the Ceann Comhairle was going to go around. Seven of these 15 questions are in my name.

An Ceann Comhairle: I appreciate that. I cannot do anything about it, Deputy.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I know you cannot. I am not saying anything to you at all, in fact. I was merely making the point that the Taoiseach could have done this differently,

An Ceann Comhairle: Can the Deputy get on with putting a question?

Deputy Micheál Martin: If the Taoiseach really wanted accountability to the House, rather than including in the same group 15 questions about diverse issues like the Omagh bombing,

capital investment, the Haass talks and contacts with the British Prime Minister, he could have segregated them. I would like to register with the Taoiseach a strong protest about the manner in which he has grouped these questions. It reduces accountability and reduces the potential for any meaningful treatment of the issues. The Taoiseach keeps going on about accountability to this House. This is the opposite of accountability.

An Ceann Comhairle: Would you put this question and allow others to speak?

Deputy Micheál Martin: It has been clear to anyone paying attention that this Government has disengaged significantly from matters relating to Northern Ireland and there is a growing-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, there is a telephone ringing in the Chamber.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Sorry.

Deputy Joe Higgins: The Deputy should throw his telephone in a lake. It has been going off all day.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: He should switch it off.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The amount of negative commentary about the level of this engagement has increased. I ask the Taoiseach to comment on that. The *Irish News* recently pointed out that the non-involvement of our Government in a formal way in discussions on the economic development of the North and the stimulus package, or indeed the Haass talks, is without precedent in almost 30 years. That is something that needs a response. I would like to hear the Taoiseach's views on what the *Irish News* reported because I believe it is true. The only people who appear to be happy are the DUP and Sinn Féin, both of which agree that Dublin should not have a role in the announcement of a new economic pact for Northern Ireland. The failure to look at the totality of the island from an economic perspective is a central aspect of the North-South issue. This is reflected in a practical way in the lack of engagement on the Narrow Water Bridge project. Can the Taoiseach update us on any initiative being taken by the Government on that project in the context of the stimulus package? We need to ensure we can draw down European funding so that this vital North-South link is developed.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I would like to repudiate absolutely Deputy Martin's assertion that the DUP and Sinn Féin are the only people who are happy. Sinn Féin is most unhappy about the situation. The Deputy must know that the difficulties in the North are not caused by Sinn Féin. These have not been good months for the political process. It is clear that there is a crisis within political loyalism and Unionism. We have seen months of organised sectarian violence on the streets of Belfast. The mayor of Belfast was attacked and assaulted while carrying out his civic duties. Hundreds of members of the PSNI have been injured. When Martin McGuinness stood shoulder to shoulder with Peter Robinson and the chief constable after so-called dissidents killed PSNI officers and British soldiers, he was leading in an assertive, robust and clear manner. Why has Peter Robinson not stood shoulder to shoulder with Martin McGuinness and done exactly the same thing? The renegeing on the programme for Government commitment to the development of the site of the old prison in Long Kesh, as set out in the infamous letter

from the USA, is clearly a big problem. There are many issues. There have been some recent arrests. I have done my best to brief the Government privately and in these sessions on all of these matters. The interventions of the British Secretary of State, Theresa Villiers, over the summer months were most unhelpful. Obviously, we have to do a great deal of work to encourage unionism in all of its manifestations to be part of this process for change. The Government, as a co-guarantor, has a duty and an obligation to make sure the British Government keeps to its obligations too. To the best of my knowledge, Deputy Martin has not reached out to the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister by asking for a meeting with them on these matters. It is reasonable to expect all leaders in this Chamber to try to be up to date on what is happening in the North-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am very up to date.

Deputy Gerry Adams: -----as opposed to trying to score party political points against Sinn Féin. I commend to the Taoiseach the need for the Government to be very alert and vigilant. It needs to be reasonable and clear about how we proceed. There is an international agreement, as Deputy McHugh has said, and the Government has a responsibility to ensure it is upheld.

Deputy Joe Higgins: Is it not clear that this year's sectarian tensions point to significant sections of Protestant and Catholic working-class populations, especially the young members of those populations, being seriously alienated? Is it not clear that the Good Friday Agreement has not delivered for them by bringing an end to unemployment, poverty, the housing crisis and other problems? How it could be otherwise when the power-sharing Executive is merely a conveyor belt for Tory-Liberal austerity, as our Government is in conjunction with the troika? Is it not the truth that the main political parties played the sectarian card on a regular basis this summer and used marches and emblems, etc., to do so? That is the reality. Can I put it to the Taoiseach that it must be a bad joke to bring in a right-wing member of the American Republican Party to bring the communities of Northern Ireland together? The American Republican Party has fostered more inequality and polarisation and imposed unequal suffering on the American people since slavery and has not done anything for the North of Ireland. Is it not clear that sectarianism cannot be overcome other than by working-class communities coming together to direct their energies to mobilising for the eradication of the problems and policies that create such poverty and hardship?

The Taoiseach: Deputy McHugh made a point about the further potential for North-South engagement. As a Border Deputy, he will be well aware that the facilities which now exist, including the North-South Ministerial Council, the non-formal connections between Ministers and Ministers of State on cross-Border issues and the connections between agencies and organisations on either side of the Border, have increased greatly over recent years. I met the Deputy and a number of councillor representatives from North and South earlier in the summer, and this speaks volumes in this regard as well.

I commend the Ceann Comhairle on the work he did, along with the Speaker, in putting together the North-South Parliamentary Forum. As the forum is a political tier, it does not relate directly to the local authority system. It has some potential if it finds its feet and if it can develop in the way we would think. There are many community engagements that are very fruitful. I met members of a choral society from Ballymena earlier this year. It has been twinned with a similar group in my home town since 1969. While the connections might not have been as strong as they should have been in the intervening years, a very strong connection is building up again, purely on the basis of community and social activities, including music, culture

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and everything else. This is certainly something we can look at on the basis of what Deputy McHugh has said. I am not sure a sort of formal structure for local authorities is the way to go here because, as the Deputy knows, a great deal of cross-Border activity applies at the moment.

Deputy Martin raised the question of Narrow Water Bridge. The bridge order was signed by Minister Wilson on 28 May last. Louth County Council announced on 9 July that the Narrow Water Bridge proposal was on hold because of cost issues regarding the extent of the tenders received. As the Deputy knows, funding was approved by the Irish Government, by the Northern Ireland Executive, which issued the bridge order, and by the EU.

5 o'clock

There is a deal of discussion about this in which Deputy Adams has an interest. I would like to see what the conclusion of those negotiations and discussions might be.

The Minister for Finance is meeting with the First Minister this Friday in Stormont. Obviously, this arises from issues discussed at the North-South Ministerial Council and the engagements between Ministers here and their colleague Ministers and the Executive in general. We were able to negotiate €150 million under the peace dividend arising out of our Presidency of the Union for areas dealing with sensitive community issues in Northern Ireland. That is an issue on which we were glad to work with our colleagues in Northern Ireland and to have approval given for it.

I do not take the Deputy's point about Dr. Haass. He is very experienced in dealing with complex negotiations and will add greatly to the capacity of the Executive and negotiations to deal with parades, the past and other sensitive issues. I commend the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on being able to put that together and on the close association and collaboration they both showed in New York quite recently. That is something we should commend in terms of its potential. I point back to the years when George Mitchell gave six months of his life in very difficult circumstances to working through the very sensitive and complex negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement. That was with the *imprimatur* of all the political personalities in the US, including Dr. Haass, so I see real potential in that and hope we can develop it in the time ahead.

There are a range of issues we need to discuss, be they the Maze Prison, the good relations strategy, the Parades Commission and the question of the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement. Perhaps it might be appropriate if leaders who do not want them all bunched together had the capacity to table priority questions to the Taoiseach. I do not dictate what questions come in here. Every Deputy in the House has the same right in terms of asking questions of the Taoiseach of the day. Obviously, we could spend the entire week going through a whole load of these.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Dáil Éireann
Order of Business

The Taoiseach: It is proposed to take No.14, motion re membership of committee, and No. 22, statements of appreciation in respect of the life and work of Seamus Heaney.

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that: the Dáil shall sit later than 9 p.m. and shall adjourn on the adjournment of Private Members' business, which shall be No. 114, motion re education, and which shall take place at 7.30 p.m. or on the conclusion of Topical Issues, whichever is the later; No. 14 shall be decided without debate; and the proceedings on No. 22 shall be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 90 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply: the statement of the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and leaders of Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Technical Group, or a person nominated in their stead, who shall be called upon in that order and who may share their time, shall not exceed ten minutes in each case; the statement of a Minister or Minister of State and of the main spokespersons for Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Technical Group, who shall be called upon in that order and who may share their time, shall not exceed ten minutes in each case, and the order shall resume thereafter with Topical Issues.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three proposals to be put to the House. Is the proposal that the Dáil shall sit later than 9 p.m. agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with No. 14, motion re membership of committee, agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing for No. 22, statements of appreciation in respect of the life and work of Seamus Heaney, agreed to? Agreed.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have two issues to raise. In the programme for Government, the Government committed itself to overhauling the top level appointments committee, TLAC. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform committed himself to legislation in that respect, particularly with regard to the issue of the appointment of the successor to outgoing Clerk of the Dáil, Kieran Coughlan, who is Secretary General of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission. Could the Taoiseach confirm or clarify the position in respect of that? Will legislation be brought to forward to govern that appointment? Will it be through an independent panel or through TLAC?

Can the Taoiseach confirm when the heads of the health (general practitioner medical service) Bill, which provides for the extension of a publicly funded GP service, will be published and whether discussions have commenced with the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO?

The Taoiseach: The health (general practitioner medical service) Bill will be discussed at a Cabinet sub-committee in the next fortnight. It is being presented by the Minister of State with responsibility for primary care, Deputy White.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Have discussions commenced with the IMO?

The Taoiseach: The Minister of State will report to the Cabinet sub-committee on whatever progress has been made or whatever discussions have taken place.

Legislation has not yet been prepared in respect of the question of the appointment of a Clerk of the Dáil. There is legislation governing this going back as far as 1959, and I am of the view that this should be an open competition. Clearly, the Ceann Comhairle of the day has responsibilities under the Act and in accordance with his or her requirement to consult the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission. We must have discussions with the Ceann Comhairle

about that process.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I have a few very brief issues to raise. In respect of voted expenditure in health, does the Taoiseach expect that there will be a supplementary budget for health this year? Could he clarify what progress has been made on the issue of bilateral cochlear implants for deaf children?

In respect of Narrow Water Bridge, the Taoiseach knows the funding from Europe is time limited and it was not clear to me where the process is at this time. Could the Taoiseach clarify this, if it is possible?

Would it be possible to have or consider having a special debate about the current situation in the North? That is not to say it is all doom and gloom. It is not, but there are issues of grave concern and it might be better to have some of them ventilated in this Chamber. Could the Taoiseach consider the possibility of that in the upcoming period?

The Taoiseach: I do not have any objection to a debate on North-South issues. It might be useful at an appropriate time. A number of contacts are being made with the First Minister, Deputy First Minister and different Ministers, and that might help the process in so far as up-to-date information about particular issues is concerned.

I answered a question from Deputy Martin about Narrow Water Bridge. I am very conscious that it is time limited. I am also conscious of the impact of this on North-South community connections, with this being the first physical connection across the lough. Discussions are taking place arising from the cost issue identified by Louth County Council, and I would like to see those completed.

I will have to come back to Deputy Adams in respect of the implants question. I pointed out last week that the overrun in the health Vote has been significantly reduced from what it was last year. The Minister for Health has made it clear to the Department and the HSE that he expects any overruns to be reigned in. From that perspective, he has had direct contact with the agencies of the Department and I hope that can be achieved.

Deputy Robert Dowds: In the context of Arthur's day taking place this week, will the Taoiseach bring forward the sale of alcohol Bill? I see it is listed. Does the Taoiseach agree with me that we should encourage a boycott of Arthur's day to give hospital staff and gardaí a break on that night?

The Taoiseach: I understand the matters to which Deputy Dowds referred will be the subject of a presentation by the Minister of State, Deputy Alex White, at the Cabinet sub-committee next Monday. However, it does not take a particular day for there to be, in accident and emergency wards around this country, a situation which, to put it mildly, is not very nice. Some 2,000 beds every night are occupied in our country because of the consequences of drink. This is not because of any individual firm or any individual day, but is part of our culture. It needs to change because of the impact it is having on people's health, the way it wrecks families and because of the societal change it brings about, not to mention the cost involved. I am sure this will form part of the presentation of the Minister of State.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: On promised legislation, in respect of the National Treasury Management Agency Bills Nos. 1 and 2, which are scheduled for this session, is it intended that they be passed before the end of this session and when are they expected to be introduced in the

House? Is it intended to bring the regulation of lobbying Bill, promised under section B of the schedule, before the House in the near future?

The Taoiseach: I believe there are 27 Bills on the A list for this session, including both NTMA Bills. Work has gone quite some distance on the regulation of lobbying Bill to which the Deputy refers but it will be early next year before it is introduced.

Deputy Joan Collins: We were promised we would see a White Paper on housing in the autumn, in particular on the issue of shared ownership. Where does that stand? Can submissions be made and, if so, when?

The Taoiseach: I will have to return to the Deputy on that. The Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, is dealing with it and I will advise the Deputy on the position.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I refer to a two-part issue which was raised last week by my colleague, Deputy Denis Naughten, in respect of secondary legislation and section 22 of the Finance Act 2012. This concerns the employment investment incentive scheme which awaits approval by the European Commission. How does this scheme, which has an impact for 230,000 SMEs in this country, stand? In the past the mid-Leinster region and counties Dublin and Cork have been excluded from the scheme, previously known as the business expansion scheme, or BES. Will the Taoiseach consider including those areas?

I refer to No. 30 on the Order Paper, resumed statements on the Action Plan for Jobs. Will the Taoiseach give a commitment that Government time will be given to this in the near future? He might enlighten us on reports of an announcement of a task force, or such development, on employment - if there is anything to impart. Given the directive issued by the Ceann Comhairle on speaking time during the Government period, I hope that when the time comes for statements on the action plan the spirit of the directive will be adhered to, unlike today. We do not want to have to make an issue of this if we are later precluded from contributing to statements.

The Taoiseach: The question raised by the Deputy was also raised by Deputy Naughten, and is due for answer in a parliamentary question tomorrow. I do not have the details of that answer. The business expansion scheme, BES, is related, including exclusion of particular areas.

The Ceann Comhairle has clarified the position on speaking rights. We have an action plan, No. 2, for jobs, containing 332 action points, which is being implemented and overseen by the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, along with the Department of the Taoiseach. This will to ensure it is time-lined and implemented effectively. It is paying dividends. The challenge for all of us is to get the effect of the plan known to business, the business community, chambers of commerce and people who are involved in setting up the many individual start-up companies on a monthly basis.

Deputy Timmins is aware of the improvement in the situation whereby 3,000 jobs are being created every month. We need to build on these foundations to get our people back to work.

Deputy Ray Butler: I refer to two Bills. When will the greyhound Bill be published? I welcome the strategic plan for the industry for the coming five years. I am sure many Deputies are seeing many people in their constituency offices in respect of a housing Bill that would strengthen the regulation framework for social housing, provide statutory underpinning for a new scheme of housing assistance payments, a new housing agency and other matters. This issue did not arise overnight. We have a serious problem with social housing. We see the value

we got from our schools, with €30 million for schools development arising from the strategic plan. Social housing must be brought in the same way and we must push for it. We will never have a better time to start building social housing and we must look at this. The previous Government did nothing for 14 years.

The Taoiseach: I have spoken to the Minister of State, Deputy Tom Hayes, about the greyhound industry, in which he takes a passionate interest. I will have him advise the House as to the progress being made on the preparation of that legislation. The Deputy is aware that the Government wishes to deal with housing assistance payments as an incentive to getting people off the live register and back to work without experiencing a complete break from the current system if they take up a job. The Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, is dealing with this, with the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, and I will ask her to advise Deputy Butler on the current position.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I refer to three pieces of legislation. The noise nuisance Bill has been long promised. When the Green Party existed in this Chamber it promised that Bill would help to address some of the problems people in cities have with their neighbours. In the same vein is the housing (miscellaneous provisions) Bill which was promised for later this year to address issues concerning the power of local authorities to evict those involved in anti-social behaviour or criminal activity. Is there any indication of a time for this? There is also the national paediatric hospital development board (amendment) Bill. The Government recently announced the name of the person who will lead that board but the actual board does not yet have the long-promised legislative backing from the Government. When will we see that, with a view to progress being made on the national paediatric hospital?

The Taoiseach: I do not have a date for the noise nuisance Bill. I have referred to the housing Bill. Work has been undertaken on the national paediatric hospital development board (amendment) Bill which will be the subject of discussion at Cabinet sub-committee in the near future. The Minister for Health will outline the progress being made.

I believe all information on the legislative programme is available on the Whips' website. I would like to see this updated so that when work is progressed in the preparation of Bills Deputies will automatically be informed.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: When does the Taoiseach expect the publication of the public health (alcohol) Bill? This is to provide for the inclusion of health advice and warnings on alcohol containers such as bottles and cans, and to outline the dangers of consuming alcohol during pregnancy.

I thank the Taoiseach for coming to Dundalk last night, where he was more than welcome.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is doing a great job. I already answered that question. The Minister of State, Deputy Alex White, will engage with the Cabinet sub-committee next week in regard to this matter.

Deputy Frank Feighan: When is the Constituency Commission report on European electoral constituencies expected to be published?

Deputy Robert Troy: It is getting hot in Roscommon.

The Taoiseach: I believe that report will issue in the coming week or so. I will confirm this

when I have the news from the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government.

Deputy Robert Troy: In its programme for Government the Government gave a commitment on Dáil reform, stating that Ministers would answer parliamentary questions during periods of recess. We are just back from our third period of recess and we still have no facility for raising important issues in our constituencies and nationally by way of parliamentary questions. Is this another commitment to Dáil reform that will lie in tatters? When will we see the facility for answering parliamentary questions during the recess period?

The Environment and Public Health (Wind Turbines) Bill 2012 was initiated by a Government backbencher, Deputy Penrose, and is supported by all his colleagues in my constituency. When will the Government be in a position to allocate time to debate this extremely important and contentious issue - the erection of wind turbines in the midlands - in the House?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Troy is well aware of the potential of the natural facility we have in terms of mean wind speeds in particular locations around the country, including many locations in the west. There is an issue of contention balanced against this potential source of energy and jobs for the future. I am sure the issue has been raised already under the Topical Issues debate. It can be debated at committees and the engagement of civic society is part of that. The matter can be raised by the Deputy's party Whip at a Whips' meeting, if that is appropriate.

I have had discussions and arguments with Deputies Martin and Adams about Dáil reform. I want to sit down with the leaders of the parties.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach has been saying that for two years. He has not sat down with anybody.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Troy is talking about Ministers being able to provide answers to questions during recess periods. This has never happened before. I have ideas about how it might happen now, but this country effectively closes down in August in delivering elements of the public service in this respect. I am quite sure that the leader of the Deputy's party will raise it with me when I have the chance to talk to him.

Deputy Robert Troy: Is the Taoiseach going to commit to his own programme for Government?

Electoral (Amendment) (Hours of Polling) Bill 2013: First Stage

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to set voting hours for Dáil Elections, Dáil Bye-Elections, Presidential Elections, European Parliament Elections, Local Government Elections and Referenda as being 7.00 a.m. to 10.00 p.m. and for that purpose to amend the Electoral Act 1992, Presidential Elections Act 1993, Referendum Act 1994, European Parliament Elections Act 1997, the Local Government Act 2001 and to provide for related matters.

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An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe): No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Membership of Committees: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I move:

That Deputy Peadar Tóibín be discharged from the Select Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation and that Deputy Jonathan O'Brien be appointed in substitution for him.

Question put and agreed to.

An Appreciation of the Life and Work of Seamus Heaney: Statements

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery members of the late Seamus Heaney's family. You are very welcome and it is a great honour to have you here.

The Taoiseach: I would like to welcome Michael, Seamus's secretary, Susan, and her husband, Ciarán, to the House.

As Friday mornings go, it was busy. Those with young families were out early, buying the last of the books and lurid lunchboxes. Everybody here was making calls, lists and readying offices for the start of the new term, all of us noticing the change in the light. All day, word of his death broke radio schedules, consciousness and the heart of a nation. It was, indeed, sad news. There would be no one now to keep the gap from Joyce's salt strand to Molly Bloom's rhododendrons and roses, or the Fianna's Binn Éadair. From that day, there would be no man marooned in his own loft, a birch planted 20 years ago between him and the Irish Sea, searching, as he put it, "for that one piece of language that fits exactly". And as he sought, so he found.

It is almost two years now since Seamus, Marie, Michael, Christopher and Catherine Ann gifted us those finds in the Heaney archive. Again, the light was changing. It was Advent, the winter solstice, in fact. On that day, we were given a gift beyond precious metal, incense or ointment, or all they signify. It was a gift from one who could disarm kings, inspire presidents, heal hurts, break hearts, make cures at Troy, burials at Thebes and miracles out of all of us, and out of all that we are and were and could be, at Anahorish, or on a tube in London, or watching our fathers dig, or peeling potatoes with our mother, or as a new family of Europeans, united

through the unstrange word at the Fionn Uisce, the Beacons at Bealtaine. For him, it was only all and ever about memory and “the state of us”.

So much has been written and said about Seamus Heaney in the last 26 days: oceans - continents - of words. In the media there was the particular eloquence of Theo Dorgan, Fintan O’Toole and Andrew O’Hagan. In the church at his requiem mass, we held our breath, the building itself seeming to catch itself and to listen, as Paul Muldoon shared his impeccable and devastating observations on heartbreak, general and particular, on the matter of Seamus Heaney’s beauty, on the matter of his being kind and decent, and the greater business of his being the first and eternal champion of his daughter, Catherine Ann. In that moment Paul Muldoon made them every father and every daughter, because every father and daughter, present or watching, recognised in the story and its telling the power of something that was not just a life gift but a birthright. Inevitably, the politics of birthright was the backdrop to so much of Heaney’s work.

In the days since his death, the lines about “hope and history” have rhymed across the world, as private and public figures reacted to the news. For me, however, it is what Seamus Heaney says about his translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* that best sums up his very particular and considered view of the poetic and the political:

Poetry, let us say, whether it belongs to an old political dispensation or aspires to express a new one, has to be a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify.

Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it, and out of which it is generated.

Across the world Seamus Heaney was and is seen not alone as Ireland’s better self, but, I believe, its best self possible. It is a self alive to and alive with what he called “the potency of myth”. In June, he spoke to the Paris *Revue de Belles-lettres* about “journeys to the underworld”, not alone in Dante, but also Virgil and Homer:

The potency of the myth was [he said] a way of imagining something ongoing ... Christian myth is so contentious and exhausted ... I find that there were underworld journeys where the shades of the people you knew are met. I find it deeply, archetypally satisfactory. You don’t need to believe in an “afterlife” but you get some kind of satisfaction ... I find Virgil simply beautiful, the various encounters with the lost people.

Today, I am certain he has met them, for they are his people as they are ours, those links in the human chain. Today, we miss and mourn and yet celebrate the incomparable Seamus Heaney. We give thanks joyously, graciously and humbly for the gift of him in our national life. He who was our voice, our hearth, our “home”.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): Seamus Heaney was a great poet. Perhaps he had me in this place in mind when he wrote the following in 1985 at the request of Ms Mary Lawlor of Amnesty International Ireland to mark international human rights day. It has since inspired a generation of human rights activists. Amnesty International’s highest award, the ambassador of conscience, is inspired by his work. Members probably know it. It is called From the Republic of Conscience. It reads:

When I landed in the republic of conscience

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it was so noiseless when the engines stopped
I could hear a curlew high above the runway.
At immigration, the clerk was an old man
who produced a wallet from his homespun coat
and showed me a photograph of my grandfather.
The woman in customs asked me to declare
the words of our traditional cures and charms
to heal dumbness and avert the evil eye.
No porters. No interpreter. No taxi.
You carried your own burden and very soon
your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared.
Fog is a dreaded omen there but lightning
spells universal good and parents hangs
waddled infants in trees during thunderstorms.
Salt is their precious mineral. And seashells
are held to the ear during births and funerals.
The base of all inks and pigments is seawater.
Their sacred symbol is a stylised boat.
The sail is an ear, the mast a sloping pen,
the hull a mouth-shape, the keel an open eye.
At their inauguration, public leaders
must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep
to atone for their presumption to hold office –
and to affirm their faith that all life sprang
from salt in tears which the sky-god wept
after he dreamt his solitude was endless.
I came back from that frugal republic
with my two arms the one length, the customs woman
having insisted my allowance was myself.

The old man rose and gazed into my face
and said that was official recognition
that I was now a dual citizen.
He therefore desired me when I got home
to consider myself a representative
and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue.
Their embassies, he said, were everywhere
but operated independently
and no ambassador would ever be relieved.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Tá an náisiún fós faoi bhrón de dheasca bás Seamus Heaney. Dé-anaim comhbhrón lena bhean Marie agus a chlann, Michael, Christopher agus Catherine Ann. File den scoth, gan amhras ab ea Seamus Heaney agus bhí clú agus cáil air ar fud an domhain. Fear mór grámhar i ngach aon tslí a bhí ann. Bhí sé cineálta agus lách agus thug sé cabhair agus tacaíocht do a lán daoine, go háirithe filí na tíre seo. Cheap sé go raibh dualgas poiblí air seirbhís a thabhairt don phobal i gcoitinne agus don fhilíocht go háirithe.

There is no doubt that the death of Seamus Heaney has left a large void for all of us, but that void is very painful indeed for his wife, Marie, his children, Michael, Christopher and Catherine Ann, and his close friends, Susan and Ciaran, who are with us today. We have lost our national poet, but they have lost a loving husband and father. I join the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Quinn, by expressing on behalf of my party our deepest sympathy to you. I hope that the very happy memories that you shared together and the wonderful tributes that have been paid to Seamus will sustain you in the weeks, months and years ahead.

His passing was spoken about all over the world. There was genuine sadness felt by all who knew him and by all who loved his beautiful poetry and prose. These were heartfelt and genuine tributes, as people were touched by his contribution to humanity through his poetry and writings. He touched many millions of people with his words over many decades and his passing leaves an enormous gap in our lives, not just on this island, but throughout the world. His fellow poets in particular feel that loss. Theo Dorgan wrote that poetry flowed into Heaney and through him, rather than being created.

In preparation for this address, I was anxious to ascertain the views of the poets of Ireland after the loss of Seamus Heaney. I spoke with a colleague and friend in Cork, a poet called Thomas McCarthy. When he wrote back to me, he stated that the poets of Ireland were bereft. Some of us from outside the poetry world might not have this sense, but they are bereft. He went on to state that, not only had the greatest Irish poet since W.B. Yeats passed away, but a great, towering beech tree, a great nurturing Ulster presence, had been taken from us. He stated that, from the very beginning, Seamus seemed to have been touched by fame. It accompanied him everywhere. Whenever he entered a room or lecture theatre, excited anticipation rose.

It was a genuine belief across all poets that one met and that one has spoken to since his death that poems such as *Mid-Term Break*, *Follower*, *The Tollund Man* and the great 1984 se-

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quence *Station Island* will ensure that he will be remembered as long as poetry is recited. Most poets will agree that, unlike themselves, his poetic immortality is assured.

What has also emerged about him among his fellow poets was his extraordinary kindness to many poets who were on the way up or were in difficulty in life. He was the eldest child in a farming family. That background may be a clue to understanding how such a famous, busy and put-upon writer could help so many other writers. Thomas McCarthy, who has written novels about politicians and is very close to well known politicians in Waterford, Jackie Fahey being one, told me that he was a bit like Jackie Fahey among the poets, in that he minded them. He answered every letter, returned every telephone call and tried to fulfil every request to attend another poet's book launch or reading. He wore himself out helping other poets and artists because he had a profound sense of public duty. He summed this up to Thomas McCarthy by stating that, when one had a great harvest, one had to share it with the neighbours. He leveraged his own fame to enhance the status of other poets internationally, particularly in the US, by supporting them in creating their own marks through their writings when some of them may have felt vulnerable or isolated as they moved into a new world. He was a great ally and a great advocate for Ireland's interests in literature and across the board. He was very much in the mould of W.B. Yeats and Dubhghlas de hÍde in that regard.

It is fair to say that the conflict on the island of Ireland challenged him as a poet and an Ulsterman who was conscious of what was going on around him. Conflict scenarios present unique challenges to poets. It was not easy for him. His poetry highlights and mourns the needless loss of many lives and neighbours. Colm Tóibín poetically wrote: "In a time of burnings and bombings Seamus Heaney used poetry to offer an alternative world." Seamus Heaney wrote in his poem, *Terminus*: "Two buckets were easier carried than one. I grew up in between."

From the phase of his poetry dealing with the North, one gets a sense of wrestling with the issues - divided tribal loyalties to different communities and endeavouring to walk a path through. More than most, he captured the emerging hope that the peace process brought to the island of Ireland and to its people.

He was clear about his own background and where he came from. He was included in a book on contemporary British poetry, and wrote an open letter stating:

My passport's green.
No glass of ours was ever raised
To toast the Queen.

Yet, when Queen Elizabeth II made her historic visit to Ireland, Heaney spoke about how delighted he was to be sitting at the table to welcome her on that historic occasion.

The *Cure at Troy* is the iconic poem on the emergence of the peace process, which Heaney dedicated to the victims of the Omagh bombing:

History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave,
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.

He captured that incredible sense of hope we all experienced as practising politicians, that maybe something was dawning. For the first time in our lives we could comprehend a new era concerning two sets of relationships on the island of Ireland.

I attended Seamus's funeral and we were all struck by the absolute simplicity and creativity that surrounded that ceremony. As the Taoiseach said, there was also a strong familial touch and the constant reminder that he was a father and a husband. Amidst the various celebrities from the artistic and political worlds, that came across particularly strongly. His friend, Paul Muldoon, spoke eloquently and articulated a trait that was ultimately one of the reasons Seamus was so popular and so loved. It was that lack of self importance that was part of his demeanour and the manner of his bearing.

Seamus Heaney's legacy will be enduring. I spoke at the Merriman School, of which he was patron, just a week or two before he passed away. I was using the argument that, through poetry and the arts, we could do an awful lot more in terms of bridging North and South. Heaney's poetry is on the school curriculum, both North and South. One of the great legacies of his life is that his work will be there for generations of students to enjoy and engage with in the years to come.

The poet, Tom McCarthy, summed up the legacy that Heaney bequeaths to us:

The poets of Ireland can only console ourselves now by following the instructions embodied in his life. Even in situations of bitterness and conflict there is always room for the generous act, for the belief in our neighbours, and an untoppled belief in Ireland.

That was Seamus Heaney's life.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Is mór an onóir domsa an deis seo a fháil chun mo fhíor-chomhbhrón agus comhbhrón Sinn Féin a chur in iúl inniu do chlann Séamus Heaney, agus urraim a thabhairt dá gcuimhne.

I am honoured to have the opportunity, on my own behalf and that of Sinn Féin, to join Dáil colleagues and others in the North, including in the Assembly and in south Derry, in expressing to Seamus's widow, Marie, and their children, Christopher, Michael and Catherine Ann, our profound sadness at his passing and our solidarity with them. I cannot recall any death in recent times that was felt by so many people. I know that sense of loss can only be a fraction of what his bereaved family and close personal friends are feeling.

Seoid náisiúnta ab ea Séamus. Táimid fíor-bhuíoch do Marie agus a teaghlach mar thug siad Seamus duinn. He was extremely modest, approachable and humble, and had a great sense of humour. He had a profound and humane understanding of us as a people because he was of us as a people, with all our faultlines, flaws, strengths and weaknesses. Until his death, he was the world's leading living poet in the English language. He was a proud Tamlaghduff man from south County Derry who loved his place and his people. He made them universal because he wrote of them often.

Seamus and Michael McLaverty - another wonderful writer - taught for a time in my home area of Ballymurphy. Michael was headmaster of St. Thomas's secondary school on the Whitrock Road and Seamus was a teacher there. It was from the graffiti there that came, much later, the legend "Is there a life before death" that Seamus used in his poem, Whatever you say, say nothing.

In the early 1970s, when I was on the run, I remember travelling on a bus down the Falls Road reading *Death of a Naturalist* when the British army stopped the bus and boarded it to check the passengers. They were from the parachute regiment and were menacing. They were

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asking everyone their names and addresses, as well as where they were coming from and going to. For a second, one Brit stared at me and then he moved on and questioned the passenger behind me. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when they got off the bus. From that point on, Seamus Heaney became a talisman for me and I told him that much later.

In Long Kesh, where I was a prisoner for a time, I remember one 12 July sitting with a couple of other prisoners in a cage. We could hear the Orange drums outside on Blaris Road. To our surprise, one of our comrades started to recite, from memory, the poem *Orange Drums*, Tyrone, 1966:

The lambeg balloons at his belly, weighs
Him back on his haunches, lodging thunder
Grossly there between his chin and his knees.
He is raised up by what he buckles under.
Each arm extended by a seasoned rod,
He parades behind it. And though the drummers
Are granted passage through the nodding crowd
It is the drums preside, like giant tumours.
To every cocked ear, expert in its greed,
His battered signature subscribes 'No Pope'.
The pigskin's scourged until his knuckles bleed.
The air is pounding like a stethoscope.

Almost 20 years later, I was writing *Hope and History* - whose title I stole - which deals with the 1980s and 1990s and the birth and evolution of the peace process. I contacted Seamus and asked if he would mind if I quoted from his poem *The Cure at Troy*. He generously and speedily agreed.

More recently, in 2010, and I have wonderful memories of that day, he returned to west Belfast for the rededication of a stone at the grave of the playwright, Sam Thompson, and to speak about Michael McLaverty. Sam Thompson was a well-known and influential writer who wrote a wonderful play called *Over the Bridge*. This was in 1959 when I was only a child. It came under huge pressure from the old Unionist regime and the Group Theatre in Belfast refused to stage it. Jimmy Ellis, who became well known later for his part in the television series "Z Cars", left the Group Theatre to set up his own company which staged the play. It was a hugely courageous thing to do at that time.

Seamus was to speak at Féile an Phobail on all these matters. A group of us gathered at Sam Thompson's grave in the city cemetery, including Sam's son and Jimmy Ellis. It was raining but I cannot tell the story because it would be embarrassing to one or two of the people there, but it was hilarious. It was rescued by Seamus at the end who paid tribute both to Sam Thompson and Jimmy Ellis.

Afterwards, he and Marie went off to visit St. Thomas's school with Danny Morrison. I am told that was the first time he was in the school since he left around 1961. It was a very emotional visit. In his talk that day in the big hall in St. Mary's University College on the Falls Road, he told us about the first time he saw his future wife sitting there. He also spoke about being a student and paid tribute to Michael McLaverty. His comments were peppered with humorous insights and telling observations about writing, literature and Belfast at that time. Everyone was enthralled, and then he read us some of his poetry. He thoroughly enjoyed that event and, just as importantly, so did Marie.

She was especially delighted.

His poetry uplifted, surprised and challenged us. It brought him comfort. I attended the mass and was delighted because I had written an article about Seamus's performance during the Fleadh in Derry with Liam Óg O'Flynn of *The Poet and the Piper* and *The Given Note*. Two of my favourite pieces of music and poetry are Seamus Heaney's *Port na bPúcaí* and *The Given Note*. *The Given Note* was given to Seamus. He worked on, developed and honed it. He magically wove words, relived memories, invoked imagination and made us laugh and cry. He also made us think.

I listened to the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Quinn, *ag léamh* *From The Republic of Conscience*. I read it aloud in the car last week. I was not driving at the time. I read it aloud because I think poetry is always better when one hears it. It is a wonderful poem. I was amazed by the magic within it. I do not think any of us could make reference to Seamus Heaney without referencing the *Cure at Troy*. It is so true. It reads:

Human beings suffer,They torture one another,They get hurt and get hard.No poem or play or songCan fully right a wrongInflicted and endured.

The innocent in gaolsBeat on their bars together.A hunger-striker's fatherStands in the graveyard dumb.The police widow in veilsFaints at the funeral home.

History says, don't hopeOn this side of the grave.But then, once in a lifetimeThe longed-for tidal waveOf justice can rise up,And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-changeOn the far side of revenge.Believe that further shoreIs reachable from here.Believe in miracleAnd cures and healing wells.

In these days of turbulence and change in the North, we should be ever mindful that a further shore is reachable from here and we should reach for it. Thank you Marie, Catherine Ann, Christopher and Michael. Go raibh míle maith agat. Thank you, Seamus Heaney.

Deputy John Halligan: I believe one of Seamus Heaney's greatest gifts was to make poetic themes accessible and relatable to people who, by and large, were not interested in poetry. Two thirds of poetry collections sold in the UK in the year prior to our national celebration of his 70th birthday were Seamus Heaney's books. Very few poets, contemporary or otherwise, can lay claim to such popularity. Quite fittingly, numerous events organised to mark culture night last Friday paid homage to Seamus Heaney.

Generations of Irish people will have been familiar with Seamus Heaney's poems. His place in Irish culture and not only Irish poetry was incomparable. Following his death, it was noted that he possessed what he himself once prescribed to Yeats, namely, the gift of establishing au-

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thority within culture. Seamus Heaney once said, “Ireland is not a country but a manuscript.” With this in mind, he always had something to convey about what mattered, be it home, nature, history or moral choice. In a typical articulate speech at the National Museum last March he excellently summed up the frame of mind of the nation during this economic climate when he said, “We are not simply a credit rating or an economy but a history and a culture: a human population rather than a statistical phenomenon.” No doubt the great poet was keenly aware of the manner in which the Irish art sector is being institutionally devalued these days. He spoke often about that.

Some years ago, Pat Moylan, chairman of the Arts Council, while reacting to cuts in the arts funding pondered from where the next Seamus Heaney would come if the Government continued to treat the arts as some kind of luxury that can be easily cut in a recession. She warned that this thoughtless hacking at the Arts Council’s budget would reduce our chances of future champions of the Irish arts, like Heaney. The arts sector has suffered 30% cuts in State funding in the past five years. Anyone who thinks these cuts have no affect is seriously deluded. This sector has no fat and had none to begin with. Hence, the cuts are going straight to the bone.

To save money, one of the oldest theatres in the country, the Theatre Royal, went dark for several months this year. The internationally recognised Spraoi marked its 21st year with severely pared back budgets. I have personally written letters of recommendation for several gifted artists, actors and poets who have emigrated to seek work in the arts in other countries. There is simply nothing left here for them. Names like Seamus Heaney act like a magnet when it comes to attracting tourists to the country. With culture tourism worth €2.1 billion annually to the economy, it cannot be cast to one side. This talent needs to be nurtured.

It is wholly fitting that we celebrate the national institution that was Seamus Heaney here today. However, we need to do more than pay lip-service. We need to provide a solid framework in which young emerging artists, about whom Seamus Heaney often spoke, can thrive. Today, as we mark the immense legacy which Seamus Heaney has made to this country, I implore the Government to ponder the question, “From where will the next Nobel Laureate come?” As the final touches are put to the budget I hope the Taoiseach and Cabinet will be able to look back on the cuts made and ask, “Was it worth it?” In the words of Seamus Heaney, “The next move is always the test.”

One of the greatest love poems ever written was *Valediction*, which is about, Marie, the woman Seamus Heaney loved. It is a simple poem which he wrote when Marie went shopping and he missed her from the house. The last few lines of that poem are absolutely immaculate and will go down in history as some of the greatest words ever written in a love poem. It reads:

Pitched from the quiet sound
Of your flower-tender Voice. Need breaks on my strand;
You’ve gone, I am at sea. Until you resume command.
Self is in mutiny.

Brilliant. Thank you.

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan): Our statements this evening are more than tinged with sadness. When Seamus Heaney died so suddenly last month his loss reverberated around the world. We feel this loss most keenly here in Ireland where he lived, worked and wrote. Like many in this House, I met Seamus Heaney on a number of occasions. In 1991, we were both on a tour of American cities, including San Jose and Pittsburgh, and our itinerary overlapped in a number of locations. I had the opportunity to

speak with him informally over the occasional cup of coffee about his work and about the popularity of Irish writing in the United States. I recognised then, as did many others, that Seamus Heaney was Ireland's supreme cultural ambassador. I saw at first hand the respect that both the academic world, the Irish diaspora, and the reader held for him and his work.

I subsequently met Seamus at the Listowel Writers' Week, which he attended on a number of occasions, reading each time to full houses. His genuine friendship with John B. Keane was coupled with an openness to help and mentor emerging writers and poets, such as John McAuliffe. Many have remarked on his generosity in providing assistance to young writers. Many have also commented on how down to earth and unassuming he was. I was present with the Taoiseach at an event to mark the donation of his archives to the National Library of Ireland almost two years ago. This was a very important occasion. However, I was told afterwards of the background to this donation and how Seamus had arrived at the library, papers in boxes in the back of his car. He had carried the precious boxes of letters and pages from his car into the building, quietly and without any fuss. This was the mark of the man - a great donation but done simply, without pomp and circumstance.

6 o'clock

Most recently, I had the pleasure of Seamus Heaney's company in Paris when he read his work at the Centre Culturel Irlandais as part of Ireland's Presidency of the European Union. Each person in attendance was honoured to hear him. It was an open air event and, introducing Seamus, I could feel the growing sense of anticipation and excitement among the audience. The large group, consisting mainly of Parisians but including many others of different nationalities, had gathered to hear the words of the master. When Seamus uttered his first word a calm descended on the audience. As he spoke, a blackbird nearby began to provide a chorus to his words. It reminded me of Seamus's poem, *St. Kevin and the Blackbird*, which I propose to cite:

And then there was St. Kevin and the blackbird. The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside His cell, but the cell is narrow, so One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands And lays in it and settles down to nest. Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked Into the network of eternal life, Is moved to pity: Now he must hold his hand Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

On that evening in June, it was apt that a blackbird should join the public reading and a beautiful moment.

So much of Heaney's work was immersed in living things - heritage, landscape and our surroundings. The bog, his love of which was sparked by the unearthing from the peat of items such as an elk's skeleton on a neighbour's farm, was a frequent touchstone for his work. Tollund Man and Grauballe Man, naturally mummified bog bodies discovered more than 60 years ago in Denmark, sparked his imagination. The countryside, the crops, fruits, animals and people who inhabited it and all its beauty and harshness, ran like a seam through his work.

When Seamus travelled to Stockholm in 1995 to accept the most prestigious award a writer can receive, we were deeply proud of him. It was a formal recognition of something that was already well known, that he was a writer of international standing and one of the greatest of our time. This extraordinary talent could be also beautifully simple. The language that Seamus used was often the language of the everyday. He embodied the simple principle that the bril-

liant need no artifice. He painted vivid scenes with simple words that he exalted.

There are rarities that come along every now and again - the scientists, explorers, artists who change the way we view the world and our surroundings and whose influence and reach are immense. Seamus was one of them. He was a poet of the world and Greek, Latin, Gaelic and English were the playing fields of his imagination. His mastery of language was equalled only by his generosity of spirit. He had time for everyone and he gave freely of his talent and counsel to many aspiring writers, poets and artists, as well as to those of us who simply loved his writing and delighted in his reading of his work.

Seamus bequeaths a mighty legacy and leaves an immense gap in all our intellectual, artistic and thinking lives. This loss pales beside the great loss felt by his loved ones, especially Marie, his son, Michael, who joins us this evening, Christopher, Catherine Ann, his family, as well as his devoted secretary, Susan, and her husband, Ciaran, who are also with us. Our thoughts remain with them and I hope that, in coming together this evening, we have communicated to them, in some small way, the extent to which we feel and share their loss. Seamus, the husband, father, grandfather, brother and uncle, is always theirs, but we thank them for sharing him with the rest of us.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: In joining in the welcome other speakers have expressed to Michael, Susan and Ciaran, it is appropriate to thank the Taoiseach and the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Jimmy Deenihan, for giving Deputies an opportunity to pay tribute to Seamus Heaney at this early stage after his untimely death. We all value the opportunity to pay tribute to one of the greatest Irishmen.

In history, Ireland has been renowned as an island of great learning and scholarship. We have always deeply valued learning and the pursuit of the ideals of the mind. We often forget or neglect these values in these most difficult of times, understandably so. Higher thought can seem very far away when concerns are focused on incoming bills, worries about employment or caring for a loved one. Increasingly, the national narrative has focused on the cold, calculated statistics of GDP, GNP, bond yields and unemployment which, in recent times, have provided little comfort for our people.

As a nation, we have faced challenging and testing times before. The foundation of the State was a bloody and vicious battle which stemmed from a national awakening and driving sense of unity and purpose, only to end with a searing civil war which vibrated for decades afterwards. The crisis at the outbreak of the Second World War, colloquially known as the Emergency, resulted in rationing and great hardship, although thankfully we were spared the horrors that engulfed the rest of Europe. The nation also faced a crisis of confidence and conscience when the Troubles erupted in Northern Ireland at the end of the 1960s. This conflict would devastate thousands of families, North and South, east and west, and inflict hurt on hurt, build wound on wound and create a sense of despair which hung over these islands until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. It was difficult in those times to reflect, to learn deeply and to find value in pursuing the higher ideals of the mind. So much hurt created little room for such thought, yet there are those who break through the hurt, embrace the best of humanity and inspire. Today, we pay tribute to a man who lived through those times, broke through the hurt and inspired the world. Through his use of words and his writing and wit, Seamus Heaney became a shining light in a world which had little.

A boy from rural south Derry, Seamus Heaney would begin his most rewarding relationship

with writing at St. Columb's College, a Catholic boarding school in the city of Derry, where his journey as an academic, teacher and poet began. His talent shone from a young age and he earned a scholarship to attend St. Columb's College, an opportunity he grabbed with both hands to expand his already burgeoning knowledge and grow his deep love of literature. In 1957, Seamus moved to Belfast where he began his studies of English language and literature at Queen's University. He graduated with first class honours in 1961 and it was during his time in Belfast that he wrote one of his first collections of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*, in 1966. This work, consisting of 34 short poems, won the Cholmondeley Award, Gregory Award, Somerset Maugham Award and Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. The many prizes awarded the work were an indication of the success that was to come.

In the same year as *Death of a Naturalist* was published, Heaney was appointed to a lectureship in Queen's University. It was in this post that he came into contact with Michael Longley and Bernard McLaverty. His works were gaining popularity at home and abroad following publication in the *New Statesman*. His themes of familial love, heartbreaking loss and sense of renewal and reward appealed to a broad audience of all ages. They reflected the most vivid of emotions in everyday human life, which was one of the most endearing aspects of Heaney's poetry. His mix of literature genius with everyday themes was a testament to a man who never forget where he came from.

One of his most popular and striking poems is *Mid-Term Break*, which encapsulates the devastating loss of a younger brother while Seamus was away at boarding school. No one can forget the devastating line which, on reading it, leaves a numbing silence hanging in the air: "A four foot box, a foot for every year."

Heaney was always inspired by his surroundings and his Derry childhood was to influence much of his poetry. He was not immune from feeling the bitterly cold wind of discrimination and despair, which were hallmarks of Northern Ireland society in the late 1960s and 1970s. He was to take part in a number of the first civil rights march protests following the RUC's vicious attack on citizens' previous attempts to express their democratic right to demand reform of a most crooked system. The loss of human life in the Troubles was present in a number of Heaney's poems such as in *North*. The bleakness of this period is clear to all in his many works at this time.

His poetry was also to reflect the dramatically changed relations in Northern Ireland after years of violence and turmoil. *The Cure at Troy* is a verse adaptation by Seamus Heaney which best reflects the more recent history of Northern Ireland when it states:

But then, once in a lifetime
The longed for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

This phrase, much quoted today, is so often used by those who try to capture the scale of an event, including the former President of the United States, Bill Clinton, when addressing the large gathered crowd in Derry some years ago.

Seamus Heaney, like many Irish people, found a home away from home in the United States.

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He had a great following there where his reputation continually grew. He began a rewarding relationship with Harvard University, where he had a visiting professorship, in 1979. He held the Boylston chair of rhetoric and oratory there and he taught one semester a year. He was professor of poetry at Oxford from 1989 to 1994. His students there held him in high esteem and affection. He was known as being approachable and affable, feeling at home with the young and not so young alike. His lectures at Oxford were collected as *The Redress of Poetry* in 1995.

That year, of course, was a seminal year for Seamus Heaney. It was this year that he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for what the Nobel committee described as “works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past”. Seamus Heaney reflected on the troubled history of Northern Ireland at the ceremony. He showed that he would not be labelled by the Northern conflict as he spoke plainly, condemning both “the atrocious nature of the IRA’s campaign of bombings and killings” and “the ruthlessness of the British Army on occasions like Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972”. He refused to be used as a pawn in anyone’s political games.

The following year he received the Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters from the French Ministry of culture. His other accolades over the years included the T.S. Eliot, Forward and David Cohen prizes, and twice the Whitbread prize. In 2004, Queen’s University opened its Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry.

As a nation, we were proud of his achievements and as a poet, I believe it is fair to say he was proud of us, the Irish people. He never allowed any ambiguity develop over his nationality. This fact was encapsulated by his reply to being included in a book of great British poets. Despite sitting down to dinner with Queen Elizabeth when she visited this country some time ago, he wrote:

Don’t be surprised if I demur, for, be advised

My passport’s green.

No glass of ours was ever raised

To toast the Queen.

Heaney was our national poet. He understood our people, our nation and our way of life, and he reflected these to the world. He was also one of the world’s best-known poets, and his passing was felt not just in Ireland but across the globe. This man was a shining light. He was one of our greatest of ambassadors, our keeper of language, our saoi. Despite all this, he remained one of us, one of the people. His inspirational works will continue to inspire for many generations to come.

John Hume, another accomplished Derry man, may have said it best when, in his praise of Heaney, he said:

His poetry expressed a special love of people, place and diversity of life. That profound regard for humanity has made his poetry a special channel for repudiating violence, injustice and prejudice, and urging us all to the better side of our human nature.

To his beloved wife, Marie, to Christopher, Michael and Catherine Ann, and his grandchildren, I say that their loss is our nation’s loss. We pass our deepest sympathies to them on losing a husband, father and friend.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam uasal.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: The Irish people have a great love for language, a great feel for the pithy phrase and a quick wit. Even in the day-to-day speech of the ordinary man or woman in the street there is great poetry and colour. I believe this is due to our bilingual nature as a nation, and due to our rich cultural and literary heritage.

Ireland has always produced great poets and writers who have commanded the attention of the nation, and indeed of the world, and caused us all to marvel at their command of language, their craft and their creativity. We are all familiar with the names: poets such as Yeats, Art Mac Cumhaidh, Boland, and Ó Ríordáin; and writers such as Ó Criomhthain, Joyce, Beckett, and Swift. We have a literary tradition that can compare with any in the world, and we are justifiably proud and honoured to have had among us such masters of the English language and of the Irish language.

Though our great writers are legion, few are held in the same regard and with the same genuine affection as was Seamus Heaney. The phrase is used often in the media, but truly it can be said that following the passing of Seamus Heaney a nation mourned. A full house at Croke Park applauded with respect and admiration. Many thousands watched the funeral live and conversations in the street all ended up on the subject of our great loss.

Everyone had their own Heaney poem, perhaps their own line, which meant something very particular to them and had a personal significance. Many of us can remember being introduced to Heaney, perhaps the first time that we read *Mid-Term Break*. Those last few lines are so sudden and cruel, and visceral at the same time. Rarely has poetry carried such power and force.

It was felt deeply by the Irish people when he passed, because we all felt that we knew Seamus Heaney. He was a part of our lives and meant something to us all. Even those of us, who would not be avid readers of poetry, individually, but more specifically as a community, felt we had lost something special, a wealth of language, talent and joy. Truly he was a treasure.

Seamus Heaney was held in such affectionate regard by the Irish people because he was not exclusive, but inclusive. People felt as though his poetry was written for them because it was written for them. He wrote with that poetry that Irish people speak with. He spoke with an articulacy that was simple and comprehensible. With a great economy of language, he could write about complex emotions with simplicity and even in a colloquial way. While his art was equal in terms of skill and craft to anything being produced anywhere in the world, any person on the street could read his poems and understand and appreciate them.

Since his passing, words such as “earthy” have been used to such a point as to approach cliché. However, it reflects a certain aspect of Heaney’s work. He wrote about ordinary things, often in a rural context, in a humble, simple and yet vivid way. He captured Irish country life, at different times and in different places, in a particularly poignant way. At a time when rural areas of Ireland face great pressures, his poetry reminds us of the great heritage, history and indeed poetry and beauty which exists in our rural communities.

He also cast a light on the realities of growing up in the North of Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s. He cast a light on the deep sectarian divisions which existed in Northern society, and underlined the distrust and suspicion which underwrote those divisions. He put the violence and conflict which erupted in the North in the late 1960s and early 1970s in its historical context and in terms of human experience in a way that was compassionate. He neither glorified nor

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simplified such violence or its causes. He chronicled the key events of his time, not from the perspective of the powerful or the influential, but from the perspective of the ordinary people, detailing their struggles, hardships and feelings.

In spite of his undoubted insight into, and understanding of, the Irish people, it would be a mistake to characterise him only as an Irish poet. He was a poet of the world, and his poetry and writing crossed all borders and spoke to something very deep in the human condition. Upon his passing, tributes flowed not alone from Dublin and Derry, but from the whole world, from the literary world and from wider circles, with former US presidents and the head of the European Commission acknowledging their regard and admiration for him.

His simple but artful use of language and the intense feeling and passion in the poems made him one of the most well-known poets on the planet. Among poets he was one of the most well-regarded and respected, not only as a poet but as a human being. Andrew Motion, the great English poet, believed that we had lost “a great poet, a wonderful writer about poetry and a person of truly exceptional grace and intelligence”. This has come through in every tribute paid to him as well as his humanity, kindness and his absolute decency and patience.

I did not have the fortune to meet Seamus Heaney in person at any stage but I know the regard in which he is held within the artistic community. Recently, I attended an Arts Council bursary showcase in Merrion Square at which Seamus was originally to speak. Although an excellent event, it was naturally tinged with sadness because so many people at the event knew him intimately and had worked with him. The evening began with his poetry, and as much power as it ordinarily has, it had so much more on that occasion. He would have been proud to see such talent and so many new artists coming through, whether in literature, the visual arts, music or otherwise.

He has bequeathed us a rich legacy and I am hopeful that it is in good hands. Our nation was so proud of his winning the Nobel Prize in 1995. The reaction was more like a sporting victory than a Nobel Prize. We felt as though the world had finally discovered what had given such pleasure to us and he truly became one of the great international poets.

He marked an important moment in Irish poetry. Along with others, he recaptured the soul of Irish poetry, dug deep into our tradition and heritage and drew a link from now until then. The poem, *Is Mairg Nár Chrean le Maitheas Saoghailta*, by Daithí Ó Bruadair, the 17th century Cork poet, underscores the death of the old Irish order, mourns how nobility and poets had been reduced to working the land in penury and how the culture and artistry of a generation previous was being lost. There is a certain parallel between this and Heaney’s poem *Digging*. The land and rural life is central. He thinks of his father and generations before him who worked with the land, often in hardship but always with dignity. Heaney writes:

Through living roots awaken in my head.

But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I’ll dig with it.

Many generations after the poets were reduced to peasants and a tradition nearly lost, He-

aney grasps the pen and the tradition and reasserts their dignity and importance. The nobility and power of poetry is brought to the fore not as high art away from the people but as part of a living breathing tradition that is as central to Ireland and her story as is the land. There is a phrase in Irish about the decline of Gaelic Ireland, trí ghlúin ó rí go rámhainn, three generations from kings to the spade. In *Digging* it is perhaps appropriate to consider that it was trí ghlúin ó rámhainn go peann, three generations from spade to pen. This was his strength and his depth. He was in awe of and indebted to our traditions, culture and language and rooted in them. Thus he brought such insight and passion to bear in reflecting the Irish people and life. Moreover, he brought those traditions with him, looked beyond them and built upon them. That is how he became a poet who spoke to the world and to the universal nature of the human condition. Men of such courage, ability, compassion and insight are rare and we may consider ourselves blessed to have lived in his time. To put it simply, tá laoch ar lár.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: Is pribhléid agus onóir é dom caint faoi Seamus Heaney. Mar is eol dúinn, is ócáid bhrónach í seo, go háirithe dá chlann agus dá chairde. Ní cheart dúinn bheith brónach, i slí eile, os rud é go bhfuil a fhios againn go mbeidh Seamus Heaney againn go deo - trína chuid filíochta, trína chuid léachta agus trína chuid scríbhneoireachta.

The playwright, Robert Bolt, wrote a play some years ago about Thomas More called *A Man for All Seasons*. I believe that is an apt title for Seamus Heaney because he was a man for all seasons, not only in the seasonal sense of spring and summer but also a man for all seasons for people in their relationships and moods. Those moods encompass everything in his writing from sadness to happiness and from despair to humour. I always particularly liked his sense of humour which is encapsulated in the poem he wrote about his loving wife Marie, entitled *The Skunk* in which he used imagery of the animal. We see the man for all seasons aspect in the titles of the collections of poetry: *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, *Field Work* and *Seeing Things*. It is also part of all the seasons in our past because in his fourth volume, *North*, he ranges over 3,000 years of European civilisation stretching back to classical Greece and up to 19th century Ireland.

He was a poet of the people, whether he was writing about his aunt Mary in *Sunlight*, his father in *The Harvest Bow* or figures from his childhood. I recall the air of menace and fear created in *A Constable Calls*. He wrote a poem called *Bogland*. I am unsure of his view about the current debate about bogs but he had an interest in bogscapes, the many bogs, and the way bogs preserved traces of our past in such a way that they are like museums. We saw that in his poem *Bogland*.

Poets write poetry because they have something to say and have an urge to communicate. Ezra Pound said that good poetry is “news that stays news” and that is relevant to Heaney’s poetry because there is a relevance and resonance that is with us and will be with everyone who reads poetry from here on in.

There are interesting things in his writings particularly in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*. He said “the poem is asked to set the balance right”. He was talking about the political, social and personal balance. He was writing about a poem by Elizabeth Bishop called *One Art*. He says about Bishop that she manages to advance poetry beyond the point where it has been helping us to enjoy life to that even more profoundly verifying point where it helps us to endure it. That is true of his poetry too. His was a compassionate and wise voice that helped us to endure as well as appreciate life. He spoke about the social character of poetry and how the poet is concerned with his fellow man, among whom he lives, and that the poet is a source

of truth and a voice with people.

Another point he made is interesting because we are in a political establishment. In *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* he wrote about how poetry offers a response to reality which has a liberating and verifying effect upon the individual spirit. He went on to say how that is not sufficient for the political activist because the political activist will always want the redress of poetry to be an exercise of leverage on behalf of his point of view and that he would require the entire weight of the thing. This is reminiscent of Yeats's dilemma. He debated whether there should be art for art's sake or art for politics' sake. For Heaney, the redressing effect of poetry comes from its being a glimpsed alternative. We could all do with lots of alternatives.

As a direct response of his award of the Nobel Prize for literature, the Ireland chair of poetry was established between Queen's University, UCD, Trinity College and the arts councils of Northern Ireland and Ireland. As a Dubliner and a north-sider I am delighted that another Dubliner and north-sider, Paula Meehan, is taking up the chair. They have in common their voices of compassion, tolerance, empathy, sensitivity and humour.

A debate is going on at the moment about the Seanad, but my view is that the Seanad should be a place where people are honoured to be Senators. It is an honorary position. I can only imagine a Seanad of people like Seamus Heaney and his fellow poets, including Montague and Longley, and the type of debate it would ensure. It could help us to get away from looking at society and life from a purely economic point of view.

Two particular lines encapsulate Seamus Heaney for me. In *The Forge* he says "All I know is a door into the dark", but I believe he showed us more than a door into the dark. In *Postscript* he said "And some time take the time to drive out west". He had us driving all over the place to have views of other perspectives.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am privileged to be able to join in this tribute to Seamus Heaney. I pass on my sympathies and commiseration to Marie and all his family. I pay tribute to the Government for facilitating these statements. It is a great thing to spend a little time thinking about poetry and writing in the Parliament. We would do well if, before we came in to start our political day, we read the lines of *From the Republic of Conscience* that the Minister read out earlier. I was planning to read them out myself.

However, they bear repeating when he suggests:

At their inauguration, public leaders
must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep
to atone for their presumption to hold office –
and to affirm their faith that all life sprang
from salt in tears which the sky-god wept
after he dreamt his solitude was endless.

While that is the best put-down of political cynicism I have ever heard, it also is an appeal to be the best and for politics to be what it should be-----

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Yes.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----which is about dealing with human suffering, that is, starting from that point and trying to do something about it.

Seamus Heaney was a giant in both Irish world poetry and to try to do justice in words to someone who was a master of words is quite intimidating. Anything Members say in this Chamber will be poor tribute to the enormous poetic and literary achievement of Seamus Heaney and in some senses, the most important thing one would wish to say about Seamus Heaney is read his poems and reread them again and again and experience the richness, the beauty and the power of words when they are in the hands of a master poet and wordsmith. I believe Seamus Heaney's work is a body of work that when taken as a whole, is an unparalleled word painting of modern Irish history and society from the 1960s right up until his death. It is, however, a word painting of that history from the particular perspective of an individual, of a sensitive human being and of a writer trying to grapple with the conflicts, difficulties and problems of that history and society.

Before I became involved or was dragged into politics, I was a student of English literature in UCD and my ambition was to be a poet. Right from the outset, Seamus Heaney's writing inspired me. At the time, I was a student living in a little flat in Sandymount and I was even more thrilled to find, in Gleeson's pub in Ringsend, Seamus Heaney and his wife sitting in the corner enjoying a pint and listening to the traditional music being played there. I of course was blown away by poems like *Death of a Naturalist*. The great power of his writing was the manner in which he wove together wonderful images of family, of his childhood, of place and of people with the great political concerns, the great conflicts and the great problems, of history as he experienced them and as he felt the need to try to dig beneath and get beyond such conflicts to some sort of better place. In that sense, a poet to whom I was speaking on the telephone beforehand said that in a way, Seamus Heaney was a utopian. He was a passionate utopian who yearned-----

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Unlike you, comrade, he lived in the real world.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes, but he yearned for the republic of conscience, as the Minister stated.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Yes, he did.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Moreover, I actually do live in the real world. I think we all live in our different real worlds.

I also recall the debate in college about the relationship between politics and literature and there always were people who thought writers should be more engaged with the Northern conflict in particular. While this of course is not a place to rehearse that interesting debate, Seamus Heaney always featured very strongly in it. While from what I can see or have read, he resisted formal affiliation to any partisan cause or party political agenda, it is important to state he was always engaged with politics in the bigger sense of the origin of the word, which is people.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: He was political but not partisan.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Absolutely. He also took positions on things that mattered to him and got involved in them. He was a supporter of the anti-apartheid movement. He took a stand on the issue of protecting the Hill of Tara when the motorway was being built through it and he of course wrote the poem, *From the Republic of Conscience*, as his contribution to

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International Human Rights Day and was a supporter of Amnesty International. Consequently, his politics was a commitment, as was his poetry, to our shared humanity and to trying to look to a place where we could get beyond some of the conflicts and disputes, that is, to a better place in which our shared humanity would be at the centre of what we did and how our society was.

It also is important to mention he was extremely popular among many diverse writers, including those who perhaps had a different perspective on many things. I spoke to one such writer earlier, who is a much more politically engaged poet, but who recalled that he received his first bursary award from a board on which Seamus Heaney sat. He made the point that Seamus Heaney never was open to the idea of there being competition between poets but that he wished to nurture, encourage and support poetry of all kinds, as well as to assist younger poets and to uphold the importance and relevance of poetry to the world in which he lived. He certainly achieved that in spades, to coin a phrase.

If I may, I will conclude with the poem by him that inspired me. It probably is his most famous but it truly inspired me and sums up everything he set out to do and did during his life, namely, *Digging*.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.
Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down
Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.
The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.
By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.
My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle

Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.
The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.
He dug a rich vein.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): I wish to express my thanks to the Heaney family, Marie, Michael, Christopher and Catherine Ann, for their attendance and presence in the Chamber today. The appreciations have been moving and full and have shown that Seamus Heaney had a wonderful life for which he was very grateful. He understood his own soul, mind and heart, and he fulfilled his human potential with great generosity in his life. Personally, I felt moved in sharing his funeral farewell in Donnybrook church. Everybody who contributed to that made it a very lovely occasion. Seamus will live on. His appreciation is only in the early stages because his work lives on and is timeless. His life will remain in the mind's eye of everybody who knew him. He was kind, courteous and very human. He has given all of us, as a man, great example in how to live a family life and the life of an individual and to share with others the things he was good at and able to understand and appreciate. What more can I say?

On a practical note, we have moved from appreciation to the hard-nosed stuff. I noticed the interchange between the Minister and the Deputy. It is said that one campaigns in poetry and governs in prose.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Much of the time not in very good prose.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): We will conclude on that note.

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Topical Issue Debate

Teacher Training Provision

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The Minister knows the importance of this issue for so many young people who have decided to make their career in the noble profession of teaching. When I became a primary school teacher 13 years ago, there were not so many people who were willing to take on that career. It was difficult to find people who wanted that career and to give of their time and expertise and involve themselves in that vocation. However, times have changed.

Unfortunately, in my constituency office I am encountering a number of not just students but also their parents who are extremely anxious about the future young teachers have in our system. It is not that they are asking me where are the jobs. Obviously, there have been changes in the training schedule for teachers. There are new online courses to which the previous Government gave recognition. That is fair enough and we are where we are in that regard. We have a number of newly qualified teachers but we do not have jobs for them. That is a fact. It might change over time because of the number of students coming into the system, which is expected to be nearly 70,000 over the next few years. That gives some hope.

However, the problem is not just the inability to obtain employment, but also the inability to even get probated. After a three year degree it is necessary to spend almost a year in the classroom to be inspected and given one's diploma, or what is known within the profession as the "dip", to be properly probated, after which one can become a fully permanent teacher. The students I have encountered are dying to get into the classroom and have their own class, but they must be probated before they can seek employment within the system. It is devastating for them that they cannot even get their foot in the door. We have discussed previously what is happening in the system. It is an issue across Ireland. When a teacher takes maternity leave or where a long-term substitution is required, it is not the newly qualified teacher who tends to be called immediately, but a retired teacher or somebody well known to the school. The problem is that the new teachers who need to get into the system to be probated and have the chance to be more employable are not given that opportunity.

I wish to put this on the record of the House and to discuss with the Minister ways of overcoming it. It is not necessarily simply the responsibility of the Department of Education and Skills. Obviously, teacher unions, management bodies and the patrons who oversee those management bodies have a role. Nobody wants a situation where newly qualified teachers who simply want to get started on their teaching career cannot even get the most basic validation of their teaching qualification, being probated in a classroom, from which they could move on and, hopefully, get their teaching career started. Ireland is going through a difficult time and we have a difficulty in financing the type of teacher body we require. Everybody accepts and understands that the bulk of what we spend on education goes on pay. However, for the dreams and aspirations of these teachers, not even being able to get started at the first point on the scale is something that must be addressed. I look forward to the Minister's comments in that regard.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The Deputy has raised the important issue of the probation of newly qualified teachers, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss it.

The period between qualification and fully independent practice as a teacher is a vital stage of the newly qualified teacher's career. It is important that coherent and supportive induction and probation structures are in place to facilitate the newly qualified teacher's development as a practising professional during this phase. In Ireland, the Teaching Council is the body with statutory authority, under the Teaching Council Act 2001, for the professional regulation of teachers. All teachers must successfully complete induction and probation requirements specified by the Teaching Council to achieve full registration. The work of the Teaching Council, on behalf of the profession of teaching and in the interests of the public, is grounded in the values of professionally-led regulation, shared professional responsibility and collective professional confidence.

The council is introducing a new model of induction and probation for primary and post-primary teachers on a pilot basis. Central to this new model is a period of post-qualification professional practice called *Droichead*, the Irish for bridge. I look forward to the outcomes of the pilot. The Teaching Council works closely with my Department to ensure appropriate supports for newly qualified teachers are in place. The Department funds the national induction programme for teachers, NIPT, which provides a comprehensive and systematic support to all newly qualified teachers through workshops, mentoring support at school level, online resources and professional support groups.

I am aware that some newly qualified teachers experience difficulty in accessing teaching hours to complete their probation for registration purposes because they do not yet hold a teaching position in a school. However, measures have been taken by the Department and the Teaching Council to alleviate difficulties faced by new teachers. There are standard arrangements in place for filling teaching vacancies. In this regard, the Department has directed managerial authorities of schools to recruit unemployed teachers ahead of retired ones, in an effort to ease the difficulties for those who cannot find work in the profession. In addition, the JobBridge national internship scheme can provide newly qualified teachers with opportunities to gain experience and to undertake the necessary teaching duties to complete the process of probation.

The minimum service requirement for probation purposes to secure registration with the Teaching Council was decreased from 170 days to 100 days in the 2011-12 school year. If a registered teacher is unable to complete the requirements of a registration condition within the specified period, the teacher may apply to the council for an extension to that period. Each application is considered on its merits taking account of the stage reached by the applicant in meeting the requirements.

In conclusion, I assure the House that every effort has been made to address the difficulties faced by newly qualified teachers while also maintaining the professional standards of the teaching profession.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I thank the Minister for his reply. Perhaps he would expand on it. He said the Department has directed the managerial authorities of schools to recruit unemployed teachers ahead of retired ones. Will the Minister indicate how successful this initiative has been? As stated, this matter could be tackled by means of a cohesive approach across the entire education system. I am sure those who work within that system would agree that we must give the best and fairest start to those commencing their careers. The Department, teachers' unions and managerial and patron bodies have a part to play.

The teachers to whom I refer are seeking fairness in the context of starting out on their ca-

reers in education. We must ask whether it is fair to take into the system each year the numbers that are currently being taken in for jobs that just do not exist. Effectively, are we just training these young teachers for export? I intend no criticism of what is happening in the context of the online course. The latter has been given recognition and such recognition cannot be withdrawn. However, there must be some mechanism whereby we can control the number of teachers entering the system because otherwise these individuals will be given completely false hope. The latter has been the position with regard to those graduating from the more traditional teacher training colleges in recent years.

I am interested in the Minister's response to these matters. We are trying, on a non-partisan basis across the House, to assist those who obtain excellent leaving certificate results - they are the best academic results achieved by people in that age group anywhere in Europe - who have decided to enter a profession in which there are difficulties and challenges and which does not necessarily offer levels of remuneration as high as those available elsewhere in the economy and who are trying to get into classrooms but who cannot even get probated. The Minister accepts the difficulties to which this matter gives rise for people. I would appreciate it if he could indicate how the managerial bodies have dealt with the request from his Department and comment on the oversupply of teachers in the system.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: The managerial bodies are the employers. As I have stated on many occasions, there is a public private partnership arrangement in the education system between the State, on one hand, and the patron bodies or employers on the other. We can urge, make requests and engage in dialogue, but we cannot give direction to employers in the context of whom they can or cannot employ. Since I became Minister for Education and Skills, we have strongly emphasised that in short-term situations where a crisis exists, and in isolated parts of the country, the only person available to perform classroom functions may be a qualified teacher who is retired. That is a short-term emergency function and it should be for no longer than a week at the outset. In the context of predictable structured absences of extended duration, such as those relating to maternity or compassionate leave, management bodies should respond to the calls from unions and others to give preference to young teachers.

I am referring here to teachers who are qualified and probated. The point the Deputy has highlighted relates to an even more acute situation whereby young teachers cannot avail of enough days - now 100 as distinct from 170 - to allow them to be considered qualified and probated. The co-operation of the unions is required in this regard. The latter must accept into their ranks newly qualified teachers who are attempting to obtain probationary positions without being used in any way as substitutes for full-time teachers. There is a question of trust in this regard. I have a track record on this matter. When I introduced community employment programmes, there was no dislodgement of legitimate employees when newly qualified teachers were brought into the system on a short-term basis.

The Deputy's second point relates to supply. I accept that perhaps there is an oversupply of teachers, but those teachers are not just being trained for the national market. Teachers are in short supply internationally. Britain is our nearest neighbour. There is a crisis in southern England - from The Wash down to the south coast - as a result of the shortage of highly qualified teachers. As the Deputy pointed out, teachers trained in this country are very well regarded internationally. Likewise, there is a demand in the United Arab Emirates for professional teachers with Irish backgrounds. That is an option of which young Irish citizens may very well want to avail. The problem does not necessarily lie with the online college because some people in their mid-20s, having gone through the initial undergraduate phase, may decide that they want

to transfer and they take the conversion course as a result. There is a balance to be struck between the three. There is a problem in this regard and I am glad the Deputy has brought it to my attention.

Haddington Road Agreement Issues

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Minister for coming before the House to deal with this matter. As he is aware, the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland, ASTI, voted to reject the Haddington Road agreement. The ASTI is the only trade union to reject the agreement. The Government has unanimously stated that the Haddington Road agreement will not be changed to accommodate the ASTI. This may be so, but the Government cannot ignore the sentiment behind the ballot and the concern to which it is giving rise. Pupils, particularly those who are due to sit State exams this year, and parents do not need the stress of facing up to the threat of industrial action. Their concerns cannot be ignored.

The ASTI represents 17,000 secondary school teachers who voted - by 63% to 37% - to reject the agreement. In a simultaneous ballot, members of the ASTI voted by 65% to 35% in favour of industrial action - up to and including strike action - in response to what they term the Government's decision to breach the Croke Park agreement and impose the draconian financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, legislation. Yesterday, the ASTI announced that a programme of industrial action in second level schools will begin on Wednesday, 2 October. Some 17,000 ASTI members will withdraw from duties outside of normal school hours, including school planning and policy meetings, staff and parent teacher meetings and in-service training. They are also being directed to withdraw their co-operation from work on the new junior cycle framework and not to undertake any duties arising from vacated middle management duties unless they are pensionably remunerated.

We believe that the Government's original Croke Park II agreement lacked fairness and the proposals it contained would have had a particularly heavy impact on front-line workers, women and family life. The revised proposals in the Haddington Road agreement offer some improvement, but we continue to have concerns. We object to plans to guillotine debate on the relevant legislation next week before all unions have had an opportunity to ballot their members on the proposals being put to them. The intention is to push the legislation to which I refer through the Oireachtas over three days next week despite the serious nature of what is under consideration. The Government has effectively brought an end to the prospect of an overall public sector pay deal by conducting a series of bilateral negotiations, some of which favoured certain unions over others. No agreement was reached with ICTU in respect of the Haddington Road deal, and that could have implications for industrial relations in the future.

In the context of its approach to this matter, the Government seems, understandably, to have been very concerned about reducing the public sector but to have been much less concerned with regard to improving the delivery of public services. There is scant mention in the new agreement of the users of public services. Speaking after a recent meeting, the general secretary of the ASTI, Pat King, said that while teachers were anxious not to disrupt their students' education, ASTI members had voted by a two to one majority in favour of industrial action. He also stated "The loss of classroom teachers from schools, the withdrawal of guidance services, the axing of middle management posts, the tying up of teachers' time and energy with extra administrative work – these are the actions that have disrupted and damaged the education of

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our young people in recent years”. Mr. King further stated “Despite the fact that vital resources have been stripped from schools, ASTI members signed up to and delivered more for less under the Croke Park Agreement only to find the Government reneging on its promises under the same Agreement”.

The Minister should intervene and seek to have the industrial action deferred. At the very least, he should encourage the Labour Relations Commission to intervene and explore whether there are any matters which could be clarified in the context of the Haddington Road agreement.

7 o'clock

It is not enough to say the Government is going ahead with the financial measures in the public interest legislation when the pupils of our secondary schools and their parents are facing a winter of industrial discontent.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: It is important in any discussion of the Haddington Road agreement to remember the context within which this agreement came into being. This Government on coming to office inherited a financial situation of the most extreme gravity. Essentially, the country had lost its economic sovereignty, and as a Government we were obliged to look at all possible options for retrieving the situation, while at the same time maintaining, to the greatest extent possible, solidarity across all sectors of our community.

The State is still in a very serious financial and budgetary situation. We have to meet the very stringent public deficit targets placed on the Exchequer by the troika. Savings must be made in every area of public spending and a proportionate element of those savings must come from the public service pay and pensions bill.

I have said on many occasions that I have the greatest respect for the role and contribution of public servants in this country. I greatly value the role of teachers and appreciate the importance of their day-to-day work for the well-being of young people and, by extension, for the well-being of this country. ASTI members have voted in a ballot to reject the Haddington Road agreement and voted for industrial action up to and including strike action. ASTI has decided to begin that action next Wednesday, as the Deputy said. This action will see ASTI members withdraw from all meetings outside school hours, refuse to participate in training for the new junior cycle and not take on any management responsibilities without additional pay.

The Haddington Road agreement has been pursued as one final contribution from public servants towards securing our economic recovery. It has always been the preference of this Government to have a negotiated agreement on how to achieve the savings we require from the public pay bill. I am, therefore, extremely disappointed that the ASTI has not accepted the agreement. Need I remind the House that it is the only public service union to have taken that position?

The Government has sought to reach an agreement that allows substantial costs to be extracted and enhances public service productivity to the benefit of all those who rely on public services while also ensuring that savings are achieved in a way that is broadly equitable and that has the greatest impact on those who are best able to afford it. The principle of making sure the burden was shared by all sectors and that those on more pay would pay more was paramount in the discussions which led to the formulation of the agreement.

The Haddington Road agreement is public-service-wide in its application and follows from

a protracted period of very intensive negotiations involving the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and teacher and various other unions, which took place against a backdrop of continuing significant difficulties in the finances of the State. My colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, has made it clear in his comments on this matter that given this overall context, there can be no renegotiation of this agreement.

Teaching is a valued and important profession in Ireland and I am glad that agreement has been reached with three of the four trade unions representing teachers and lecturers in Ireland, namely, INTO, TUI and IFUT. I ask ASTI to examine the costs to its members of remaining outside the Haddington Road agreement and to reflect upon this matter again. The Haddington Road agreement is a negotiated way of reducing the impact of the financial emergency measures in the public interest legislation as far as possible across the public service. The impact to individual ASTI members of remaining outside the Haddington Road agreement will be the full impact of the financial emergency measures in the public interest legislation.

In addition to the monetary impact on individual teachers, the Haddington Road agreement also provides additional benefits for young teachers, particularly with regard to securing permanent status as teachers, a matter to which we referred earlier. All of this represents a major impact on ASTI members relative to other teachers. The decision by ASTI to remain outside the Haddington Road agreement and to withdraw from existing commitments means that the protections and benefits of the agreement, including those in regard to security of tenure, are not available to its members. This will be a matter of concern to many teachers and underlines the strong case for reconsideration by ASTI of the situation.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Minister for his response. He indicated that ASTI members should reconsider and should take note of some of the benefits of the Haddington Road agreement, of which some will not now be able to avail. The reality is that ASTI has spoken and has made a decision in regard to the agreement and the Minister is faced with the reality that it has initiated industrial action. That will cause serious disruption in our schools from next week and will represent serious difficulties in regard to the Minister's plans for junior certification reform, due to the amount of in-service and preparation work that is needed.

Aerial communication between the Government and ASTI outlining their positions very loudly will not be good enough; they need to engage. Will the Minister consider engaging the Labour Relations Commission to consider whether there is scope within the Haddington Road agreement for further clarification which may allay some of the teachers' concerns in this regard? It is important that there be engagement. We cannot allow a situation to develop in which there is escalating industrial action in our schools as the school term progresses. Will the Minister consider ways in which he can engage that might allow for a resolution? We need to ensure we will not see the type of disruption that now looks likely to happen in our schools from next week.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: I would like to see a resolution to this disagreement. ASTI is on its own in this regard but its importance to the system is not without significance. The summer has passed. Three of the four teacher unions reflected and waited until their members were back at work, so to speak, to ballot them. We got the results of those ballots in the past couple of days, including that from IFUT. I am sure the consequences of their decision were uppermost in the minds of all of the people who voted. They must reflect on their position before any kind of communication can commence that will have the prospect of a successful outcome. I would

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like to be able to say something different to the Deputy as I know he is well-intentioned in what he suggests. The ballot came in last Friday evening and the standing committee of ASTI met yesterday. It took a decision that will take effect next Wednesday. We listened very carefully to what Mr. Pat King said. He felt it would not disrupt the delivery of front-line education services but we will have to see how that unfolds and how ASTI responds to the situation. I am open to any suggestions in regard to this matter, but this is a public-sector-wide agreement. It is not a dispute between the Minister for Education and Skills and one teacher union. It fits into a wider context and I must have respect for that context. However, I would like to see a satisfactory resolution to this issue as soon as possible.

Postal Services

Deputy Joe McHugh: I will give a bit of background to this issue. There was a public meeting in Greencastle about the fears of the community in regard to the closure of Greencastle post office. This has generated considerable debate locally and the local community will challenge any decision to permanently close the post office, which has been providing an invaluable service to the greater Greencastle area. An Post has not yet made a decision, so it is important to give it a bit of space. However, this House can feed in the views and concerns of the local community in regard to this service. Obviously, the core-periphery argument can be made quite logically and comprehensively when one is trying to co-ordinate services in a more efficient way. Merville, which is over the road from Greencastle, became the focal point for areas like Lecamey, Carrowmenagh and Meenletterbale, where there had been existing postal services down the years. The argument was a logical one. The people in those communities would say that Merville is quite close. The next stop to the north is the island of Inishtrahull or the Hebrides in northern Scotland. The core-periphery argument is quite a succinct, good and logical one. If one looks at where Greencastle is on a map, as An Post will be doing, and if one draws a line to find the nearest place, one will see that it is in Northern Ireland, where a different postal service is in operation. It does not come into the equation.

It is easy to make the argument that Greencastle is a peripheral outreach of Merville. It is on the periphery near the Border. The reality is different, however. The ferry route between Magilligan and Greencastle is becoming the main transport corridor for a whole new tourism route between Donegal and the Titanic Centre in Belfast. This summer, large numbers of people used the new tourism corridor to visit parts of Donegal like Inishowen and Glenveagh National Park. Many people visit the Titanic Centre, which is the focal point of this new corridor, before going to see the Giant's Causeway and using the ferry to skip across into Donegal. A substantial number of people from Northern Ireland travel through the village of Greencastle. It is not necessarily a peripheral point. It is a main thoroughfare for many people who have holiday homes in Northern Ireland. It is a commercial centre. I do not need to remind Members that it is one of our main fishing ports. It is important to point out that many students attend the National Fisheries College in Greencastle. I say this in support of the postal service in the Greencastle area. It is not just an outpost that is on the periphery. It serves an important function. The community has reacted in a positive way. Local people are willing to work with An Post to see whether additional measures can be implemented to provide for a more progressive service.

I would like to conclude by informing the Minister that as a result of the closures in places like Lecamey, Meenletterbale and Carrowmenagh, the people are queued out the door in Merville already, to put it in ordinary north Inishowen language. If there are capacity issues in Mo-

ville already, what will happen if the Greencastle facility closes down? I suggest that Merville will not have the capacity to cope. Such intricate aspects of the matter need to be looked at. I encourage the Minister, regardless of what is stated in the script he has in front of him, to do what he can to give An Post the latitude, the time and the space needed to make a comprehensive decision and not just a reactionary one.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: As the Deputy and the House will know, I am responding to this matter on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Rabbitte. The Minister would like to assure the Deputy that the Government is committed to a strong and viable An Post and supports the maintenance of the maximum number of economically viable post offices. The commercial operation of An Post's post office network is a matter for the board and management of the company. It is not one in which the Minister has a direct statutory function. The Minister understands from An Post that due to the death of the postmaster in Greencastle last month, the son of the former postmaster has been put on a temporary postmaster contract to operate the service pending a review of services in the area. When postmaster vacancies arise, An Post reviews the need for a post office as a standard procedure. In this case, An Post decided to proceed with local consultation. A notice that was put up in the post office on 9 September 2013 invited the views of interested parties no later than this Friday, 27 September. It is the intention of the company after 27 September to consider the position taking account of any relevant factors, including views received, and to take a decision on the future of the office at that stage. At this point in time, no decision has been taken in the matter.

In reaching its decision, An Post will take account of network coverage needs, the level of business at the post office, customer access to service elsewhere, travel distances and the capacity of neighbouring offices to handle business if the post office closes. Deputy McHugh has referred to this aspect of the matter. As we have heard, the nearest post office to Greencastle is located in Merville, which is approximately three miles away. It has been mentioned that the AIB branch in Merville closed recently. The Minister is satisfied that the criteria used by An Post to decide on the future of individual post offices are robust enough to take account of changes in local circumstances. He fully understands the concerns of Deputy McHugh, Senator Jimmy Harte and Councillor Martin Farren about the future of the post office and the importance of the office to the local community. As a shareholder, the Minister has a strong concern for the ongoing commercial position of the company. It should be noted that An Post is facing many challenges, not only financially but also as a result of the development of communications technologies. Any decision it may take must be considered in the context of maintaining a sustainable post office network. An Post has many strengths. It has the largest retail presence in the country. The Minister has impressed on the company the need to further exploit its unique position in this regard. He has supported its attempts to diversify its income streams and to win a wider range of commercial contracts offering higher margins. The Government recognises the strategic importance of the postal sector. It has been a long-standing policy that An Post must remain in a position to compete in a liberalised market and to continue to provide wide-ranging services to urban and rural communities.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I thank the Minister for his response. I appreciate that no decision has been made to date. I hope the various contributions to this debate, such as the community interjection, the public meeting and all the different observations and opinions, are taken on board. I welcome the fact that An Post officials have agreed to meet public and community representatives. I am conscious that an array of political personnel is involved in this. I am

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working quite closely with Councillor Mickey Doherty in the area. I appreciate the complete and comprehensive update he has given me.

We need to look at where we are at as a country. The argument we hear from the Executive is that we need to do more with less. That is the mantra. It can be political dynamite to buy into that agenda and vote on that basis, because it can involve rationalisation of hospitals and primary schools. While I can accept aspects of that difficult argument, the philosophy I espouse is that I am looking to the future; in this case, the future of Greencastle as a port and the future of Donegal as a county. Historically and traditionally, County Donegal has been neglected. I accept that partition has played a part in that. There can be a perception that it is in Northern Ireland. During the era of the Troubles, people were reluctant to travel to Donegal. International tourists were more inclined to fly into Shannon Airport or Dublin Airport. Americans were not inclined to travel any further north than County Clare or County Galway.

The future of our region is changing. As a businessman in my local parish said to me, our county has had one of the best summers ever. That was a big thing for him to say because he has been around for a while. He said it might have been the best summer ever. That trend is going to continue. People from places like Wexford, Germany and America will be willing to travel northwards. Greencastle will be the entry point from Northern Ireland. As more people come to stay in County Donegal, the number of people travelling through Greencastle will increase. I strongly urge the Minister to make the point to An Post - I will do so at a meeting tomorrow morning - that Greencastle is not a peripheral area, even if it might look isolated on a map. It is part of a wider community that incorporates many people from Northern Ireland who come to the area on a temporary basis, perhaps while staying in holiday homes or visiting as day tourists. The number of people who contribute to the local community in this way will increase as time goes on.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: I understand the point the Deputy is making. I know the Minister, Senator Harte and others are equally concerned. Everybody in Donegal has been affected by the historical legacy of partition, etc. Let me put some statistics on the table. An Post has 1,144 retail outlets, of which 57 are company-owned and operated and 1,087 outlets are contract offices. A total of 146 outlets are postal agents. In 2009, there were just under 1,500 such outlets - 1,413 to be precise. According to this note, approximately 35% of all post offices could be classified as urban and 65% as rural. It seems to me that we must get a balance between access to services, to which all citizens in Ireland are entitled, and the commercial viability of a semi-State commercial company which must make commercial decisions. Having spoken to the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources about this, I know the Government is committed to a sustainable post office network across the country. The An Post review takes account of local circumstances, including that people have reasonable access to post office facilities. Regrettable as the closure of the local bank branch in Moville is, the facility of the post office network to provide an alternative outlet for financial transactions is one that is of benefit to communities. I know it will take into account all of the factors involved and I know the Minister is acutely conscious of the Deputy's concern and that of other Deputies and Senators in the area.

Alternative Energy Projects

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Are Deputies Stanley and Colreavy sharing their time?

Deputy Brian Stanley: Yes.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): The Deputies have two minutes each.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I am raising this issue because of the situation developing in the midland counties, in particular, Laois, Offaly and Westmeath, where large-scale wind farm projects are up and running and companies are actively developing them and signing farmers into land deals. We do not have regulations at the moment to govern the construction of wind farms and large turbines and we urgently need them.

We on this side of the House support alternative energy, including wind, but it can only be part of it. It cannot be all of it and that is the problem. It is being driven forward as the solution to everything in the same way as the house building boom was promoted as solving all our problems 12 or 15 years ago. We just had to keep building houses and piles of hotels and everything would be okay. Local communities, elected representatives and county development plans are being brushed to one side. Companies developing wind farms are ploughing ahead. They are able to ride roughshod over communities because all we have are outdated and inadequate guidelines that are not fit for purpose. The maximum setback is 500 metres and the guidelines do not cater for these. Companies are moving ahead at speed and we need regulations in place as soon as possible in Laois, Offaly and Westmeath to protect communities, the landscape and the environment. There needs to be robust regulations.

Companies have projects well advanced in areas not zoned for wind farms under county development plans. Therefore, is local government being swept to one side as well? Will this be allowed? I made the comparison with the building boom. We had light-touch regulation during the noughties and saw what happened with house building. We had light-headed financiers. Are we witnessing the same thing again - light-headed financiers with light-headed developers driving this approach? It is irrational and insane and we need a rational debate about this. Will all of these turbines be economically viable and sustainable?

Deputy Michael Colreavy: Undoubtedly, Ireland is uniquely situated in terms of wind speeds and a map will demonstrate this. There are glorious and significant opportunities in wind energy. However, we must have full community participation in the process of maximising the benefits from this. Planning guidelines relating to the erection of wind turbines have been flouted. In Donegal, for example, we have witnessed turbines which were located far closer to homes than the existing guidelines stipulate. The Minister is talking about introducing new guidelines on this issue.

We are arguing that there needs to be a moratorium on planning permission until the new regulations are agreed and in place. There is little point in bolting the stable door after that horse has gone. We also want wind turbines to benefit the State. We do not want to see a situation similar to our oil and gas industry where we are giving away our energy for little or nothing with no benefit to the Irish people. Wind is a natural resource and is for the benefit of Irish citizens yet even now when we talk about the midlands, the Minister cannot or will not tell me and the Dáil what financial benefit to the State will arise from our export of energy from the midlands.

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We need a national wind energy strategy that lays out in full the Government's plan for the development of wind energy over the short, medium and long term. The strategy must require full community participation and project evaluation and approval that are patently open and transparent. We can no longer accept discredited practices such as people who are key advisers in respect of Government policy also being beneficiaries of private companies with a stake in wind energy production. We have had enough scandals in respect of energy projects under previous Governments and do not want any more.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): I thank Deputies Stanley and Colreavy for raising this issue. I am very much aware of the concern about this issue, particularly in the midlands. We must ensure that we take those concerns into account but at the same time, we must recognise the importance of renewable, clean energy for the future of our environment and economy.

I stress that the construction of wind farms is subject to the planning code in the same manner as other developments. Since 2003, approximately 1,250 turbines in 160 wind farms across 22 counties have been commissioned with a total capacity of approximately 1,800 MW. The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government's current wind energy development guidelines were published in June 2006. They provide advice to planning authorities on catering for onshore wind energy through the development plan and development management processes. The guidelines are also intended to ensure a consistency of approach throughout the country in the identification of suitable locations for wind energy development and the treatment of planning applications for such developments.

Our Department, in conjunction with the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and other stakeholders, is now undertaking a targeted review of the onshore wind energy guidelines 2006 focusing on noise, proximity and shadow flicker. Earlier this year, the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources commissioned the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, to invite proposals from suitably qualified organisations for the completion of a study to examine the significance of noise related to onshore wind farms. The objective of the study is to obtain evidence upon which to evaluate the appropriateness of the existing guidelines in respect of noise impacts and if considered necessary, suggest changes. It will take account of the following key contextual issues: the evolution of wind turbine technologies since the current guidelines were published in 2006; experience to date in the application of the current guidelines; research relating to wind turbine noise issues, including an examination of international practice, since the current guidelines were adopted; and Ireland's binding targets in respect of renewable energy update and penetration.

SEAI awarded the contract for carrying out the study to Marshall Day Acoustics in July 2013. Marshall Day has significant international experience in this field and has previously participated in reviews of the wind farm noise guidelines for the Australian and New Zealand governments. This study will form a key input into the review of the statutory guidelines. The indicative timetable for the publication of the draft statutory guidelines is quarter four 2013. The draft guidelines will, like all other new or revised guidelines, go out for extensive public consultation for a period of six weeks to two months to allow for publication of the final guidelines in 2014. Once the consultation period is closed, the submissions received on the draft guidelines will be considered and taken into account in the final form of the guidelines. Again, I stress that public consultation is central in respect of this - first, in the publication of draft guidelines and second, when that period is closed for comment, they will be fully taken account of.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister of State for her reply. The problem in regard to the publication of the draft statutory guidelines in the fourth quarter is that many of the companies in question are already far advanced with their plans. They are well on their way and are beating the Government to the clock on this, deliberately rushing ahead to try and do this under the current flimsy guidelines, which are as weak as dishwater.

In regard to trying to identify suitable locations, which the Minister of State mentioned in her reply, they are sweeping the county development plans to one side and are developing projects in areas that are not zoned by local county councils, taking into consideration the Minister of State's existing guidelines. We need a moratorium, a cooling off period. We must press the pause button. There is no reason not to do so. I have written to all parties in the Dáil, including that of the Minister of State, asking that we have a joined up approach to this. There is nothing to stop us halting this for four, five or six months in order to put proper regulations in place, ensure we do this right and that we do not make the mistake we made with the housing boom. Like the Minister of State, I am a supporter of alternative energy but we want to do this right. That is what our party is seeking.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: There is a credibility issue here. When I asked the Minister of State what were the financial arrangements for the development in the midlands she assured me that a memorandum of understanding only has been signed, and no financial arrangements have been agreed. Yet there are at least three companies that are buying and leasing land in the certain knowledge that turbines are going to be put on it. I did not come down in the last shower-----

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Nor did I.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: -----nor did the people of Ireland who know what is happening here. These companies have been given the nod and the wink which tells them that turbines will be going up on the lands in question and that they should proceed with their investment because their money is safe. We are being fobbed off with the answer that nothing has been decided or agreed yet. This kind of smoke which hides what is really happening is precisely what we tried to get away from under the last Government.

There is another point that needs to be checked. In her statement the Minister of State said the SEAI was awarded the contract in July 2013 for carrying out the Marshall Day acoustic study. Have we checked there is nobody in a key and influential role in SEAI who is also a financial beneficiary in any of the companies negotiating for or purchasing land in the midlands?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: That is a question of ethics.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Companies cannot sweep aside county development plans. Any planning application is subject to planning rules and must take account of such plans, whether the issue is being decided locally or is going to An Bord Pleanála. There is no nod and wink. I want to make that clear to Deputy Colreavy.

It is well to be clear there are two types of wind projects currently being processed - those that contribute to our domestic targets and those for export to the United Kingdom. They have very separate hoops to negotiate. Before they can progress, the proposed export projects - those I believe the Deputy is concerned about in the main - must await the completion of an inter-

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governmental agreement with the UK, as the Deputy noted; the putting in place of an overall policy and planning framework, underpinned by a strategic environment assessment, to ensure that only appropriate development takes place; and the obtaining of planning information informed by this policy framework. The framework will be prepared over the coming year and will provide an opportunity for all stakeholders, including local authorities, potential project developers and local communities to be consulted and have an input into the national policy for wind export. There is a difference, therefore, between the export projects and those that are for our own need and use and it is important people understand that. Obviously this crosses over and the Marshal Day research is being done under the Department of the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, while the planning guidelines are being done under my Department.

In regard to planning guidelines, there were already 550 submissions in the pre-consultation process which we initiated earlier this year. I reiterate there will be another round of public consultation after the revised draft guidelines are made available. When published, the final wind energy development guidelines will take cognisance of all views. The two processes are side by side, with the guidelines under my remit. We will publish the draft guidelines later this year which will then go for public consultation that could last up to two months. They will be adopted some time next year. The others that concern export have a considerable number of hoops to go through, which I have just put on the public record.

Cuts in Education: Motion [Private Members]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will move to Private Members' business, motion re education. I call on Deputy Jonathan O'Brien to move the motion. There are 40 minutes in this speaking slot.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: Is the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, remaining for this, or will the Minister-----

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Ruairí Quinn, will be returning to the House.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: May we wait until the Minister returns?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The norm is that we proceed with the debate because there is limited time. That is the only issue.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I understand there is limited time but surely if we are to debate an issue as important as education, somebody from the Department must be in attendance to listen to the debate.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The Minister stated he would be present but he took three of the debates in the Topical Issues slot so he has gone out for a short period. I understand he is coming back for the debate.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tá an t-Aire anseo. I call Deputy O'Brien.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I did not want to start without the Minister, Deputy Quinn, being present.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: It has been a long day.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I thank the Minister for being present to take this important issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I understand the Deputy is sharing time with Deputies Gerry Adams, Michael Colreavy, Sandra McLellan, Seán Crowe, Pearse Doherty, Martin Ferris and Michael Healy Rae.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

affirms that the right to education is an internationally recognised human right, enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 13 and 14 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, reaffirmed by the 1960 UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education, Article 2 of the first Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child;

notes that the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916 pledges to “cherish all the children of the nation equally” and recognises their right to a decent education;

notes that access to education provisions in internationally recognised human rights law include the obligation to eliminate discrimination at all levels of the education system;

recognises that Article 42 of the Constitution of Ireland commits the State to ensuring children receive a certain minimum education;

notes that the commitment to ensuring a citizen's right to education has been undermined by the failure of successive governments to adequately invest in education and that even during the height of the Celtic tiger the 2007 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's annual Education at a Glance survey reported that the State was spending 4.7% of its income on education compared to an OECD average for that year of 5.7%, while current spending on third level education in Ireland amounts to 1.2% of GDP compared to the OECD average of 1.5%;

notes that, since coming to power in 2011, the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government has continued the slash and burn policies of its Fianna Fáil-Green Party predecessors through the implementation of successive cuts to the State's education system that resulted in an adjustment of €132.3 million in 2012 and €77 million in 2013, with further cuts to come in October 2014, which are expected to be as high as €100 million; and the punitive cuts to education are being made when the school population is projected to rise significantly over the next decade and at a time when the Government has imposed an employment control framework that limits the numbers who can be employed in the education sector;

deplores the current class sizes of primary schools in Ireland which average 26 pupils

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per teacher, the second largest in the EU, and that a further increase in the pupil-teacher ratio, PTR, would mean 30 plus class sizes in many primary schools;

acknowledges that the State's failure to invest properly in education has resulted in a significant decline in literacy and numeracy rates in Irish schools, as reflected in tests carried out by the OECD between 2000 and 2009 which saw a fall from 15th to 25th in maths and from 5th to 17th in reading;

believes that, during a recession, it is important to prioritise and ring-fence funding for education in order to produce a highly skilled and flexible workforce that is necessary for our future economic growth and prosperity;

challenges Government's policies that target higher and further education and greatly undermine the objective of incentivising people from upskilling and re-training in order to enhance their employment prospects;

recognises that the millions cut from the education budget will greatly impact on the implementation of progressive measures such as the reform of the junior certificate cycle and improving literacy and numeracy standards that are essential for improving standards in Irish schools;

recognises that instead of guaranteeing equal access to the highest standard of education, current Government policy has entrenched educational inequalities and a two-tier system;

acknowledges that more than one in four primary school pupils are being taught in overcrowded classrooms and many are taught in run-down facilities;

further acknowledges that almost one quarter of children of working-class parents do not sit the leaving certificate and the numbers leaving school without qualifications have remained unchanged since the 1990s, and an estimated 1,000 students per year cannot even make the transition from primary to secondary education;

notes that approximately one quarter of the adult population has literacy and numeracy problems while taxpayers pay €80 million per annum to subsidise the private education system, even though the children of the majority will never have a chance to attend these exclusive fee-paying schools;

acknowledges that teachers who are proficient in the Irish language play an essential role in helping to ensure the future viability of our native tongue as a vibrant, working, living language;

further acknowledges that Gaelscoileanna are struggling because of changes to staffing schedules as well as the ending of the preferential PTR and that this is likely to lead to the forced closure of many Irish language schools; and agrees that back to school costs for parents are unacceptably high;

calls on the Government to set out a timetable to:

— adopt a similar strategic approach to that taken by Northern Ireland's Education Minister, John O'Dowd, who has redirected almost £400 million back into schools that has led to a rise in standards which have been recognised by the findings of the TIMSS and PIRLS, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and Progress in International Read-

ing Literacy, that showed primary schools in Northern Ireland are world leaders in terms of literacy and numeracy - a trend that has also been matched by encouraging improvements in the post-primary sector;

— reverse the loss of an estimated 700 plus career guidance counsellors in second level schools resulting from the decision in budget 2013 not to provide these posts on an ex-quota basis that will seriously reduce the level of support for children experiencing a range of emotional and learning difficulties;

— ring-fence funding for Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools bands 1 and 2 schools; increase the number of teaching resource hours and bring to an end the cap on special needs assistants in order to match the needs of a rising school population and break the cycle of deprivation, marginalisation and educational disadvantage through the promotion of fairness and equality;

— reverse the decision to increase the PTR from 17:1 to 19:1 for post leaving certificate programmes which unfairly impacts on marginalised learners and the loss of an estimated 400 teachers with expertise in specialised subjects who will be impossible to replace in the further education and training sector;

— reinstate resource teachers and supports for Traveller children to pre-2011 levels;

— reverse the cut to the back to education allowance which will further compound and restrict student opportunities to access further education and will act as a barrier to creating job opportunities for the unemployed;

— introduce mandatory regulations that will ensure parents have greater choice when buying school uniforms and paying for school text books; and

— place on a statutory footing the voluntary code of practice to regulate the printers responsible for producing school text books; and

further calls on the Government to:

— make a commitment not to increase the PTR in the State's primary and secondary school sector;

— ensure that, before its proposed budget cuts to the education sector are implemented, a comprehensive equality and social impact study is undertaken to first determine the implications for teachers and students;

— increase supports for Irish language learning and ensure Gaeltacht schools retain a preferential PTR in recognition of the challenges of teaching in Irish medium schools;

— publish a timetable for the delivery and construction of school buildings and other educational facilities and bring an end to the use of prefab buildings with at least a minimum of 150 school building projects to enter the architectural and planning stage each year in order that schools are ready to proceed as quickly as possible to the construction phases;

— protect the maintenance grant and end the annual increase to student contribution fees;

— increase resources for adult literacy, and deliver a progressive national strategy on

lifelong and work-based learning focused at those most in need of training, re-training and upskilling;

- spend at least 6% of GDP on education, in keeping with best international practice;
- set a target to eliminate the need for the subsidy of educational provisions by charitable organisations, in the form of school books and school breakfasts and lunches, and ensure that every child can avail of a book rental scheme and free school meals;
- immediately extend the early start preschool project to all schools with pupils from disadvantaged areas, with a maximum child to adult ratio of 12:1;
- introduce a universal pre-school session of 3.5 hours per day, five days a week for all children aged three to five years;
- invest towards implementation of a PTR of 15:1 in all post-primary schools and immediately reduce all class sizes for children under nine years of age to a maximum of 20 pupils;
- invest to progressively reduce class sizes at post-primary level;
- keep funding for schools fully public and under democratic control;
- ensure adequate provision of special needs assistants where required;
- set targets to increase the number of students in further and higher education, especially part-time and adult students and other groups, including people with disabilities and Travellers, and provide third level access programmes for schools with a low take-up of places;
- provide adequate financial assistance and support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to complete their courses;
- establish a book lending scheme across all primary and secondary schools; and
- end the system where schools are reliant on voluntary contributions from parents by raising the capitation grants to cover the real cost of running a school.”

Last night, I attended a meeting in Cork on the subject of cuts in education, organised by the INTO and the National Parents Council. Understandably, there has been much media attention lately concerning potential or proposed increases in the pupil teacher ratio, PTR, at primary level, which was of great concern to everybody who attended. At the meeting there were Deputies from all sides of the Chamber who heard at first hand from teachers, principals and parents about the difficulties and challenges being faced by everybody involved in the education sector. I am sure the Minister will understand the level of anger and frustration which was palpable in that room last night in regard to some of the media coverage about the proposed PTR increases that has been aired both in print media and on the airwaves. Much of that anger was directed, not only at the present Minister, but at the successive governments that, in the opinion of those teachers and principals who are working within the education system, failed to invest in education. One of the most common questions that kept coming up in all contributions, whether from the top floor, from members of the INTO, parents or from concerned members of the public, was why this is happening. Why are children being targeted for cuts? Why are they being asked to

pay for the economic failings of this State and of previous governments, bankers, bondholders and such like? That was the recurring theme in all the contributions made last night.

The answer many are coming to form on their own is that this Government has decided that children must pay towards the economic recovery of the State, and because of policy decisions being taken by this Minister in respect of education, children must take some of the burden of responsibility in the regaining of economic sovereignty. Of course that does not go down well with people because children did not create the economic crisis and should therefore not be held responsible. They should not have to pay for the failings of others.

Government Deputies will say that answer is simplistic in nature and shows a lack of understanding of the economic challenges facing us. On the contrary, the Minister can understand why people come to that conclusion when we look at some of the decisions taken by the Department in recent years. There were budget cuts of €132 million in 2012, followed by €77 million last year, and if we are to believe media reports, up to €100 million this year. We do not have the exact figure this year because of the changes in the timing of the budget, and I understand that, but we are certainly looking at in excess of €70 million again this year and possibly up to €100 million. If we take the upper level of that estimate, in the region of €300 million will have been taken out of education over the last three years. The Government's amendment to the motion states that it has protected front-line services. I do not think that if €300 million is taken out of education it can be stated categorically that front-line services have been protected. It is just not possible and I think the Minister knows that.

Many of the cuts which have been announced since the Minister came into office were in DEIS, and the Government's amended motion refers to the advantages of having DEIS posts, which makes the Minister's decision in the first budget all the more bewildering, when he targeted DEIS. Of course, he reversed that decision but we had cuts in further education last year and we are seeing cuts to capitation, increases in PTR and the minor works grant has been scrapped. All of these are having a significant impact on the provision of education at a local, regional and State level. They cannot continue to be implemented at that rate. All of this comes at a time when our class sizes are already the second highest in the EU. One school in my county of Cork has 41 pupils in one class. There is no way that a class of 41 pupils will get the type of education that is needed. It is just too many pupils for one teacher. Within that class of 41 pupils, there will be a wide spectrum of ability among the student population, so it is unfair on the teacher to try to teach 41 students.

The cuts in education are not just the preserve of this Government. We have seen what the previous Administration thought of education and we can see in its amendment the priority it affords education. It tabled a two-line amendment. During the boom time of the Celtic tiger era, we were spending less of our GDP on education than the OECD average. That is the type of low base from which we are trying to come. I am the first to admit that there are huge challenges facing the Minister, the Government and society in general when it comes to education. The way to answer that challenge is not to cut the education budget, but to protect it. I know people will say that this cannot be done, but it can be done, it must be done and we have shown in our alternative budget last year and this year how it can be done. We may differ on how to achieve that, but it can be done. If we look at international best practice we see that when countries like Finland were in recession, not only did they protect their education budget, they increased investment in education and they are now reaping the benefits of that. This can and must be done.

There are major challenges and we have outlined some of them tonight. One in four people in this State have numeracy and literacy problems. Students are being taught in classes in excess of 30 pupils, and I already cited a case in Cork of a class in excess of 40 pupils. I will be the first to recognise that there have been some progressive measures coming from the Department in education, such as junior cycle reform and the creation of SOLAS, but all of these progressive measure are under threat of not being implemented due to the continuation of cuts in education. The Minister cannot bring in reforming measures and then cut budgets which are needed to implement those reforms.

There will be much focus over the next two nights on the fact that Sinn Féin is in government in the North and we have a Minister for Education. Before Members in other parties criticise our record in the Six Counties, I would like mention some of the initiatives which the Minister, John O'Dowd MLA, has put in place for education. In this State the Minister is cutting investment in education, but under a Sinn Féin Minister in the North, we have actually redirected almost €400 million back into education. We have increased the number of teachers working with students with learning difficulties. All of this is bringing success and a recent report showed that students in the Six Counties finish top of the class. I know there was some improvement in the levels of literacy and numeracy in this State, but it shows that with a bit of political will, financial input, foresight and long-term planning, much can be achieved. One of my biggest criticisms of this Government is its lack of long-term planning. There is some planning on junior cycle reform, but all of that has been undermined by the lack of investment. If we are serious about creating an education system that is fit for purpose, we have to make a decision to protect our education budgets.

Over the next couple of nights, Members will come in here and say that we are in tough economic times and there are hard decisions to be made that they do not like to make, but they will make them in the best interests of the State. Cutting education is not a hard decision. There is no such thing as a hard or easy decision. There is only a right and wrong decision. Cutting education budgets and denying children the best possible opportunity to attain their own personal academic potential is not a hard decision. It is simply the wrong decision and I ask the Minister to reconsider any proposed cuts in education in the upcoming budget.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I commend an Teachta Jonathan O'Brien for bringing forward this very comprehensive PMB motion on education, and for his thoughtful and considered contribution to this debate. Hopefully the Minister will take some of his points on board. Mar a deireann Sinn Féin, tá an Rialtas seo ag leanúint na droch pholasaí oideachais céanna a bhí i bhfeidhim ag Rialtas Fianna Fáil. Níl aon Teachta ó Fhianna Fáil anseo, ach tá a fhios ag an Aire cad atá ar siúl acu.

With the budget only weeks away, there is serious concern among many teachers and parents that the Government plans to impose more cuts on education, and that this will lead to a further increase in the pupil-teacher ratio. The primary school class sizes in this State are already the second highest in the EU, with primary schools allocated one teacher for every 28 pupils. I am sure all Members have received hundreds of postcards over the last few weeks urging them to ensure that primary education is protected in the October budget, so this motion and this debate is timely.

There is no way that school children of today and tomorrow should be paying for the mistakes of greedy bankers and incompetent politicians. Education is a very basic right for every child, regardless of his or her background, and an across the board cut to education would be

a direct attack on that right. An increase of 2.5 in the pupil-teacher ratio could also mean the loss of as many as 500 mainstream teaching posts, which would mean more overcrowded classrooms and understaffed schools, and basically failing the next generation. The Minister knows better than me that class sizes have a huge impact on children's learning. All the evidence shows that learning outcomes improve in smaller classes. Smaller classes also provide greater opportunity to identify learning difficulties and allow for early intervention. Primary education needs to be a cornerstone of the recovery, not a target for more cuts.

As Deputy O'Brien mentioned, Labour Deputies have spoken about places in the North that many of them have never visited. The current pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools in the North is 24.7:1. By contrast, in this State, austerity rules, not the child's right to an education or the parents' right to see their children reach their full potential. Some €200 million has been cut from education since the Government entered power. The cost in educational terms is significant for children. The financial cost has been severe for parents. School uniforms, books, stationery, activities like sport and drama and the demands for voluntary contributions can cost a family with three children more than €1,000 per year.

More than 120,000 children - nearly a quarter of all primary school children in mainstream schools - are in classes of 30 pupils. As the Minister knows, the school population is set to increase significantly during the next decade. In Termonfeckin in my constituency of Louth, there are 36 in one classroom and 37 in another.

I wish to address briefly the issue of guidance counsellors. They are spending more time in the classroom and are not available to deal with students who approach them seeking help, sometimes with serious mental health issues. There has also been a loss of 500 teaching posts in 700 schools as a result of the changes made to secondary school staffing allocations. This has led to the loss of guidance counsellors. This is unacceptable at a time when young people are particularly vulnerable and the suicide rate is increasing.

I commend this motion to the Dáil and ask Deputies to vote to protect primary education and the pupil-teacher ratio. The Minister should accept the points made in the spirit in which they have been offered.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: Education is key to the development of a nation and its youth. There can be little argument that, without a proper, functioning education system, a country is unable to prosper, innovate and grow. Most Irish people would understand and appreciate the exhortation in our nation's Proclamation that we cherish the children of the nation. In a decent, democratic republic, the state would surely ensure children had access to the care and education required to reach their full potential as citizens. In this State, however, particularly since the enforcement of austerity measures, State effort seems to be focused more on identifying reasons children should not access quality care and education services rather than on facilitating such access. The financial bottom line carries more weight than the potential of our children. This is wrong and short-sighted.

I will spend my limited time speaking of preschool child care and education. These services should not be regarded by any society as an optional extra that can be granted or withdrawn at the whim of any Government or Administration. Extensive studies carried out nationally and internationally demonstrate clearly the social and economic benefits to the individual and to societies with enlightened preschool policies and facilities.

There are some praiseworthy initiatives in respect of preschool care and education. The early childhood care and education scheme, ECCE, is excellent. I understand it was originally intended to be extended to two years, finances allowing, but consideration of the extension was dropped when the Government moved to improve the inspections regime urgently. The ECCE scheme should be continued and consideration should be given again to extending it to two years.

Will the Minister right a grievous wrong? Children who have been identified as having special needs are allowed only one year in the ECCE scheme - one year on three days, one year on two days. Generally, such children start mainstream schooling one year later. If the Minister does nothing else, will he consider extending the scheme to two full years for children with special needs as opposed to one?

Standardised inspections should be mandatory in all areas. This is the Minister's intention. I understand that, in some areas, the joint environmental child care inspections are not being carried out because environmental health officers or public health nurses are not available to conduct them. Even the facilities' owners have pointed out that only half inspections are being conducted. They want full inspections.

Regarding training, many child care workers who have achieved FETAC level 5 or 6 would like to progress to BA level. While they are quite prepared to spend their own time doing the four year BA child care programme, child care workers are not well paid and cannot afford the €12,000 in fees or the cost of transport, if they must travel, to education centres. Despite this, they cannot qualify for grant assistance because they are working. In child care, an income ceiling prevents both women and men workers from attaining their maximum potential, which has obvious implications for the quality of care and education they can deliver to the children in their charge.

Will the Minister and his Department re-examine the preschool resource allocations model? Since it is heavily influenced by population statistics, communities in rural areas with a lower population, such as the west, north west and the Border, are disadvantaged. There is some adjustment in the model to take account of lower populations, but it is inadequate. The model should be rebalanced or at least re-examined to reflect the particular challenges in low population areas.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: The Constitution does not contain much by way of explicit positive rights or social and economic rights of which the people can avail. However, the right to a certain minimum education is guaranteed under Article 42. We and all the children of the nation are entitled to it. Often, however, the real meaning of education is lost upon the Government and its officials.

One of the most ignoble episodes in recent Irish educational history was the dreadful spectacle of successive Fianna Fáil education Ministers dragging children with special needs, such as Jamie Sinnott and Paul O'Donoghue, and their parents through the courts system, arguing against these children receiving a full education and trying to limit their right to an education. In the O'Donoghue case, the High Court played down what was meant by education in this State. The court found that the right to free primary education in Article 42.4 of the Constitution was not confined to simply scholastic education provided in primary schools between ages four and 12, but was about fuller development on a human and social level, not merely an academic level, and extended to include the needs of all children, however limited their capacities.

Education is about the full development of our young people and should involve so much more than books and study. The arts, sport, and cultural pursuits have a significant role to play in the type of young people that we raise and bring through the educational system. Art has long been considered something of a luxury subject, something akin to an add-on. None of this is the responsibility of the teachers, but the reality is that the history of arts and education in this State is decidedly weak.

The Government recently introduced the arts in education charter. While it contains much that is positive, there is a great deal of concern that it could end up the same as the countless reports and documents that have been introduced in the past decade or two on the role of art in education - gathering dust and not implemented. There is no set budget for the arts in education charter. Without one, we are simply expecting goodwill from teaching staff.

If the Government is seeking goodwill to implement projects like these, it should drastically change its approach to how it engages with teachers and their unions. Given the significant role teachers play in society, it is shameful that the Government continues to seek to brow beat and bully them into accepting poorer conditions. The ability of teachers to bring in such projects as the arts in education charter rests not only on support and on resources, important though they are, but also on the atmosphere in the classroom or school. As it is, morale in schools is low as conditions deteriorate.

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This is likely to be exacerbated by any increase in the pupil-teacher ratio.

Teaching and exploring art with pupils requires attention to be given to individual students in small groups. How we can expect a teacher to be able to do that in a class of 30 - as may be the case in many places - is beyond me. Without a change in approach the Minister for the Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht will find his project sunk by his colleagues due to oversized classes.

Likewise, we are far behind the rest of the world in terms of sport and physical education. Pupils in Irish primary schools spend less time in physical education classes than those of any other EU member state. The EU's education information network, EURYDICE, states that both in absolute and proportionate terms Ireland has fewer hours of compulsory PE classes than any other EU member state.

We then wonder where our obesity crisis is coming from. Our lack of PE is truly scandalous but sadly not surprising. The reality is that the Minister lacks a vision for education in this State. He has ambitions and, perhaps, aspirations, but certainly no over-arching vision. He would do well to look at his counterpart in the North, John O'Dowd MLA who, in spite of extremely difficult circumstances, has succeeded in substantially improving educational outcomes. He is transforming the whole philosophy of education by ending academic selection and increasing the amount of school meals for disadvantaged children.

There is a need for an overall vision and a total change of approach. The Minister should consider that in terms of his Department, more so than any others, the decisions he makes in the forthcoming budget will still be affecting people and their prospects decades from now due to lost opportunities. It will follow them for the rest of their lives.

Deputy Seán Crowe: It is timely to focus on education as children return to school after the summer break. In addition, students are returning to universities this month and the budget

is coming up in October.

Last Saturday, I was speaking to a special needs teacher on the Luas and heard at first hand, a blow-by-blow account of how low morale is among teachers. That teacher opened up and it happens to us all the time. She said how she used to look forward to teaching in school but now she dreads it. That woman has spent half her life in the classroom. In the majority of classrooms around the country, teachers are fighting against pressures resulting from years of incremental cutbacks. They are tired and overworked. The teacher I met on the Luas said she and her colleagues are completely worn out from the past few years of treatment that undermines their work and ability to teach.

She said that what is happening in the community and in the home is being reflected in the classroom which is not isolated. She said that all the pressures in society, that we constantly discuss here, have to be dealt with daily in schools. Teachers are at breaking point, as can be seen by the decision of ASTI members to reject the Haddington Road agreement and vote for some form of industrial action. It arises from frustration and the teachers' powerlessness in the system.

The teacher I spoke to said they are not doing this for selfish or self-centred reasons, they are doing it because they see the hard won education system crumbling in front of them. They are at the coalface and can see the degree of cutbacks in special needs education and the heartbreaking effect this is having on the lives of children and their families.

The Minister may say there are no cutbacks in that area, but we know there are because we deal with families every day who have difficulties in trying to get their children through the system. We have debated on many occasions in this Chamber the desire for a seamless transfer of children from primary to secondary school, yet that has not happened. That must be a priority because there are too many trap-doors in the system, particularly for children with special needs.

The teacher on the Luas spoke of her rights being trampled on, as well as the lack of fairness and equality in the Government's cuts and the austerity measures that are impacting on the most vulnerable.

When will the Government wake up and acknowledge that teachers and schools can take no more cuts? Our educational system is in need of drastic reform, but austerity measures are not the response that is needed.

This year, Barnardos' school costs survey highlighted again that, on average, parents are paying €350 in back to school costs for a child in senior infants, €400 for children in fourth class in primary school, and €785 for children going into first year in secondary school.

Families are being crippled by the Government's austerity measures and budget cutbacks. The last thing they should have to worry about is how to afford to send their children to school. Parents are being forced to cut back on other essential services. We know from Barnardos and others the difficulties that parents face each September in getting a basic education for their children.

One of the biggest school expenses for parents - and it is an issue I have consistently raised in the Dáil - arises from schools forcing students to wear expensive uniforms. In England it can cost just £2 to stamp a school crest on a uniform. Here, however, 74% of parents of primary

school children and 97% of parents of secondary school children told Barnardos that they had to buy uniforms with the school crest on them, which greatly added to the costs involved.

When I was Sinn Féin's education spokesperson, I publicly called on the Minister to proactively introduce measures to eliminate this school uniform racket. Parents do not want excuses, they want to hear what the Minister can do about this matter. It is true that each school board of management is responsible for matters of school policy and governance, but they are also responsible to the school patron and ultimately to the Minister for Education and Skills.

As my colleagues said earlier, we want to see a halt to cuts. We support the Minister when he is arguing at the Cabinet table for education funding. We believe it can be done through alternative measures, and it must be done.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Ba mhaith liomsa fosta mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Teachta O'Brien, a chur an rún seo os comhair na Dála anocht. Ba mhaith liom díriú isteach ar chúpla ceist fhíorthábhachtach. Níl dabht ar bith go bhfuil na ciorruithe atá an Rialtas ag cur i bhfeidhm ag déanamh damáiste mór don chóras oideachais agus do pháistí, daltaí agus tuismitheoirí. Tá sé ag déanamh damáiste freisin don Ghaeilge agus go háirithe don Gaeltacht. Cuireann cúpla ceann de na ciorruithe atá beartaithe ag an Aire isteach go mór orm. Ba mhaith liom sa chomhthéacs sin díriú isteach ar an liúntas oileáin agus an liúntas Gaeltachta. Labhair mé sa Dáil roimhe seo fi dtaobh an tábhacht a bhaineann leis an dá liúntas seo. Thug mé mar shampla-----

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Gabh mo leithscéal, ach níl Gaeilge mhaith agam. Ní féidir liom an méid atá le rá ag an Teachta a thuiscint.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Ceart go leor. Tá córas aistriúcháin anseo. There is a translation service to translate.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: It is not available.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I know the headsets are not here sometimes.

The Minister's education policies have not only damaged the sector but also the Irish language. The importance of the cuts to the island allowance and the language allowance cannot be overstated. I have spoken about this matter here before. For example, Arranmore secondary school applied for a teacher but could not get somebody who would be able to teach the subject in Irish, and that was with the allowance in place. Taking those allowances away from small island communities will have a devastating effect on the ability of those schools to attract teachers from the mainland. I ask the Minister to consider that point.

The Gaeltacht allowance is there because teachers who teach in Gaeltacht schools do not have the resources. I know this myself because my wife is a teacher and my three sisters are primary school teachers. There are simply not enough resources to be able to teach children in the current environment. This is about having additional assistance to recognise the extra work and effort that those teachers put in in Gaeltacht schools. For many years, the Department did not have its act together in providing those type of resources. That is having a direct effect on the Irish language itself.

I will cite another example about which I have been in communication with the Minister. The catchment area of Pobalscoil Chloich Cheannfhaola has the strongest Gaeltacht in the entire

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State. It includes areas such as Magheraarty and Fana Bhuí where the poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh comes from. It is absolutely rooted in the Irish language. Some 84% or 85% of people there speak Irish daily, yet at the secondary school students cannot do their leaving certificate in Irish. They can only do it through Gaeilge up to the third year.

The pupils who want to do their leaving certificate through Irish are crying out for the Minister to give additional resources to their school to allow them do so.

We have heard a great deal about Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge. It states:

Cuirfear oideachas lán-Ghaeilge ar ardchaighdeán ar fáil do dhaltai scoile arb é mian a dtuismitheoirí/gcaomhnóirí é. Leanfar leis an tacaíocht do ghaelscoileanna ag leibhéal na bunscoile agus déanfar forbairt ar sholáthar lán-Ghaeilge ag leibhéal na hiarbhunscoile chun freastal ar éileamh de réir mar is gá.

This means that the Government has signed up to the 20-year strategy to provide resources for Irish language education and to increase resources for post-primary education where the demand exists. The Minister knows that the demand is there from the pupils in Pobailscoil Chloich Cheannfhaola who want to receive their education through Irish. They speak Irish every day and their mothers and fathers speak Irish to them every day. They want to be able to do their leaving certificate through Irish and the State is denying them that opportunity. I appeal to the Minister to re-examine that issue. Let us help regenerate the Irish language. The island allowance, which does not amount to much, and the Gaeltacht allowance are important to that community not only for education but in the context of the Irish language.

Deputy Martin Ferris: Éamon de Valera, the founder of the Fianna Fáil Party, whose members are absent, made a speech in the 1930s in which he stated that Fianna Fáil would no longer run a State in which children are reared for export. We all know what happened after that. Like the current Government, the former Fianna Fáil-led Government, decided to put the interests of anonymous bondholders ahead of those of the citizens of this State. It is now the case that the best option for children of school-leaving age is the boat or the aeroplane. It is little wonder then that little attention is being paid to our schools. More young people than are sitting the leaving certificate are emigrating. From a cynical point of view one might ask what is the point of teaching them anything other than how to complete a passport or visa application.

The Labour Party and the Minister for Education and Skills make much of their fighting the Aunt Sally of the Catholic church - battles over school management which were fought and won a long time ago. Parents and children are not deluded by all of this. This is no more than a cover to conceal the fact that a Labour Minister is presiding over the running down of the education system at every level from primary to university. A report published some weeks ago stated that September is one of the most stressful times of the year for families because of the expense of sending their children to school. We claim that education is free. However, the reality is that schooling takes up a considerable part of the family income. It can be a challenge even for those people who are working and on a reasonably good income. For those unfortunate enough not to be working, it is far more challenging.

People do not mind paying for education. The perception is that education is being targeted for cuts by a Government that does not have the courage to take on others and that, like its predecessor, does not have the courage to put the interests of the Irish people ahead of those of a bunch of failed gamblers. A man who gambles his money away at Paddy Power before looking

after his family is rightly considered to be turning his back on his responsibilities. A Government that favours gamblers over schools and children is worse.

Last night, Deputy Healy-Rae, myself and three other Deputies representing Kerry attended a meeting of more than 500 people, including teachers, parents and members of the public, at the Brandon Hotel in Tralee. The contributions from the floor were worth listening to. Everybody is hurting. The teachers have made the point that they are prepared to take wage cuts, and have done so, but they are not prepared to take cuts in class sizes if children are to have every chance of getting the education they deserve and are entitled to. It was damning for the Government and for people who have turned their backs on their responsibility to look after our children.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank Deputy Martin Ferris and Sinn Féin for allowing me some of their speaking time. I also compliment Deputy Jonathan O'Brien on this Private Members' motion, which is most timely. Like Deputy Ferris and others, I have visited schools during the past couple of weeks and months that are extremely concerned about what is coming down the tracks. As the Minister will be aware, one of the biggest issues is teacher-pupil ratios. Small schools in particular are worried about their future viability.

It is not good enough for people to stand back and say this is all the Minister's fault because it is he who is proposing it. The Minister is proposing this because he has the backing of the people supporting him. Like me, Deputy Ferris and the others, who are honest, will not stand up at a public meeting and say one thing and then vote differently in this House. If we are supporting something that the Government is proposing we will say so and if we are against it we will say that also. However, there are people who are agreeing at public meetings in our constituency with the parents, pupils, principals and teachers and are then agreeing with the Minister, who is completely at odds with the people who are standing up for small schools. It is hypocritical of people to say one thing to their constituents and then support the Minister. In previous bad times our teachers and small schools kept going and stayed the course. I hope the Minister will not be the one to knock them off course now.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I now call the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Quinn, who I understand is sharing time with Deputies Kevin Humphreys and John Paul Phelan.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): I move amendment No. 2:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"recognises that:

- the latest Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, Education at a Glance survey from 2013, relating to the 2010 year, reports that the State was investing 6.4% of GDP in education, compared to an OECD average of 6.3%, while current spending on third level education in Ireland amounts to 1.6% of GDP, equal to the OECD average of 1.6%; and

- education services have been protected despite the immense challenges posed to the financial sustainability of our nation;

welcomes:

- the fact that the 2012 report on retention rates of pupils in second level schools,

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published by the Department of Education and Skills, found that over 90% of all students in Ireland now stay in school to sit the leaving certificate;

- that this shows that the proportion of early school leavers in Ireland is considerably below the EU average of 14%;

- the fact that retention rates in delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS, schools have particularly improved, rising from 68% to over 80% over a five-year period, and that studies from the Department's inspectorate and from the Educational Research Centre have shown improvements in pupils' literacy in DEIS primary schools; and

- the fact that Irish fourth class pupils were placed among the countries performing significantly above the international average in the 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study tests conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, and that the Irish fourth class pupils were among the top performers in Progress in International Reading Literacy 2011 tests;

notes that under the current Government a range of new initiatives have been introduced to protect the quality of our education system and the well-being of our young people, which include:

- reform of the junior cycle;

- an action plan to combat bullying in schools;

- the implementation of a major restructuring of initial teacher education provision;

- the creation and report of a forum on patronage and pluralism in the primary sector;

- a review of the system of apprenticeships in Ireland;

- significant reform of school inspection and the introduction of school self-evaluation;

- the roll-out of new guidelines for schools on mental health promotion and suicide prevention;

- a new landscape for the higher education sector, and implementation of the national higher education strategy to 2030; and

- the publication of the draft general scheme of an education (admission to schools) Bill 2013 which will ensure fairness and transparency in school admissions;

further welcomes:

- the fact that €12 million has been set aside by this Government since 2011 for the roll-out of a new national literacy and numeracy strategy, which is designed to help ensure that every child who leaves school has the literacy and numeracy skills they will need for the rest of their lives, and that a further €9 million has been in-

vested in the same period for other related activities including standardised testing and the junior certificate schools programme;

- the provision of free high-speed broadband to every post-primary school in Ireland by September 2014, at a cost of up to €40 million by 2015, paid for by the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources;

- the protection by this Government of the standard pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools and free post-primary schools since taking office;

- the ring-fencing of an investment of €1.3 billion to support children with special educational needs in the education sector;

- the consolidation of the vocational education committees sector as local education and training boards, and the replacement of FÁS with SOLAS, an agency that will be empowered to lead a coherent, high-quality further education and training sector in Ireland;

- the inclusion in the Further Education and Training Act 2013 of a requirement for SOLAS to develop a strategy for the promotion and development of adult literacy and numeracy;

- the investment of over €2 billion during the lifetime of this Government in school building projects, creating an estimated 15,000 direct and 3,000 indirect jobs over the period of the programme;

- in particular, the investment by this Government of €57 million to date to replace prefabricated structures with permanent school classrooms, which will reduce the prefab rental bill by 25% each year; and

- the creation of new training, further and higher education programmes, such as Springboard and Momentum, which have so far provided over 23,000 unemployed people with educational opportunities closely linked to areas where employment opportunities exist.”

I thank Sinn Féin and, in particular, Deputy Jonathan O’Brien, for tabling this topic for discussion. The motion is very comprehensive. I am not sure we will be able to give it the attention it deserves this evening but we will have other times to do so.

I would like to remind the House that when this Government came into office two and half years ago, Ireland was in a precarious position as a result of economic mismanagement on a vast scale. Since then, it has been the difficult - and sometimes unpopular - task of Government to get this country moving towards economic recovery and into a position whereby we can once again control our own economic destiny. The latest financial figures show that we are on track to meet our targets under the EU-IMF programme of financial support and to achieve a successful exit from that programme. When we do so, we will be the first European country to do so.

The task of regaining our economic independence has not been easy, given the massive differential between what was being spent by Government and what was being collected by way of taxes prior to this Government’s taking up office. Narrowing this gap is essential in order for equilibrium to be restored. While the gap has been reduced significantly, we are still, in 2013,

obliged to borrow €1 billion per month to fund public services. This is not a sustainable situation. However, while there is work still to be done, the Government is confident that our policies can help in turning the economy around to a strengthened position of stability and growth.

I make these opening comments to inject an element of realism into this debate. Significant investment in education expenditure in Ireland is reflected in the most recent OECD statistics from its education at a glance series of reports. The latest set of results, published in June of this year, shows that expenditure on education in Ireland in 2010 was 6.4% of GDP. This compared favourably to an OECD average of 6.3%. The report also showed that expenditure on higher education, at 1.6% of GDP, was the same as the OECD average. Between 2005 and 2010, total public and private spending on education in Ireland below higher level increased by 44% in real terms. This compared to an average increase of 13% across OECD countries. In higher education, expenditure grew in real terms by 40% compared to a 20% average increase across the OECD. The latest OECD results, therefore, paint a different picture of Irish education expenditure than earlier OECD results indicated. It is unfortunate that Sinn Féin chose to ignore the latest available figures in compiling its Private Members' motion and relied instead on data published more than three years ago. While a debate on the appropriate level of State expenditure on education is welcome, we must ensure such debate is properly informed and up to date.

Great importance has been attached to improving retention rates of pupils at second level as a key factor in improving overall levels of educational attainment and I share the concerns expressed by Sinn Féin Deputies in this regard. More than 90% of all students in Irish schools now sit the leaving certificate, the highest rate ever and proof of the success of policies which strive to keep young people in school. The percentage of early school leavers in Ireland - less than 10% of students - is considerably lower than the European Union average of 14%. There is never room to be complacent in this area, however, and a 10% rate of early school leavers indicates that far too many young people are still leaving school prematurely and heading into a very uncertain future. Nevertheless, our performance relative to other EU countries shows we are having some success in this area.

Retention rates in disadvantaged schools have improved even more markedly due in large part to the supports offered through the DEIS action plan for educational inclusion. I will be pleased to discuss the reasons the action plan is working on another occasion. Retention rates for DEIS second level schools increased by almost 12% over a five year period, between pupils who entered second level in 2001 and those who entered in 2006. There is clear evidence that the DEIS programme is having a positive effect in tackling educational disadvantage and is an example of funding well spent. The 850 DEIS schools across the primary and post-primary sectors receive additional funding of the order of €70 million to provide a range of supports for pupils, including lower pupil-teacher ratios in the most disadvantaged schools.

In addition to measures to promote educational inclusion in schools, the Government is committed to facilitating access to higher education. A key objective of the current national strategy for higher education is to promote access to higher education for disadvantaged groups. The higher education system performance framework published by my Department earlier this year sets out how progress towards national objectives, such as increasing access of certain disadvantaged groups, including students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, can be made. An overall evaluation of progress on the plan will be completed later this year.

A new national access plan is being developed for the period from 2014 to 2016. The Department supports a range of measures which facilitate greater levels of participation by

disadvantaged students, mature students and students with disabilities. The principal support in financial terms is provided under the student grant scheme. Approximately 42% of students in full-time higher education in the 2011-12 academic year were in receipt of a student grant.

I will now address the literacy and numeracy strategy, an issue that has animated me since long before I became Minister for Education and Skills. This Government is strongly committed to improving literacy and numeracy levels in schools. I described the Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, results on mathematics and reading, which were published in late 2010, as a “wake-up call” for the Irish education system. The programme for Government made literacy and numeracy a national priority. The 2011 to 2020 national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people was published in July 2011. Since then, the Government has ring-fenced some €12 million for the roll-out of the strategy, while a further €9 million has been invested across other related activities. The strategy contains 41 actions and 180 sub-actions across six key areas.

Primary schools were asked to increase the time each week spent on mathematics and literacy in class and introduce a third point in standardised testing in English reading and mathematics. This will mean pupils are tested at the end of second, fourth and sixth class. On the basis that if one does not measure, one will now know, specific targets have been set to measure progress against the strategy. In addition, ongoing implementation of significant junior cycle reform aims to develop an integrated approach to promote the development of literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum. The results of the PISA 2012 study are due to be published in December of this year and I hope they will show some improvement as a consequence of the change in approach.

The programme for Government also seeks to promote adult literacy through integration of literacy in vocational training and community education. As Deputy Jonathan O’Brien will be aware, I made it a point of the legislation establishing SOLAS that, unlike FÁS, the new organisation will have a specific statutory responsibility to be aware of literacy problems among people entering long-term training programmes. The last time literacy was measured among the adult population, it emerged that 500,000 of our citizens had literacy problems. As Deputies are aware, if a person has literacy problems, he or she will also have employment problems.

On teachers, class size and staffing schedules, salary costs of teaching staff in schools constitute the most significant element of the education budget, amounting to approximately €3.8 billion in 2013 or 47% of overall voted current expenditure. While difficult choices had to be made to identify savings across the Department, the Government has sought to protect front-line services as best as possible. The focus is on ensuring there are sufficient school places and teachers for the thousands of additional pupils entering our schools each year. There is no realistic scope at present to give any consideration to the provision of additional teachers to reduce class sizes. However, increases in the school population as a result of demographics will give rise under existing policy to a demand for an additional 800 to 1,000 teachers on average each year over the medium term, in other words, the next six to ten years. Classroom teachers in primary schools are currently allocated under the published staffing schedule on the basis of a general average of one teacher for every 28 pupils, with lower thresholds for DEIS band 1 primary schools. The 28:1 ratio has been protected by the Government in the past two and a half years.

The staffing schedule sets out in a fair and transparent manner the pupil thresholds for the allocation of mainstream classroom posts for all schools and treats all similar types of schools

equally, irrespective of location, a point I hope Deputy Pearse Doherty will note. At post-primary level the standard staffing allocation for schools is based on a ratio of 19:1. DEIS post-primary schools operate on a standard staffing allocation of 18.25:1. The main budget measure to affect the staffing of post-primary schools in the current school year was confined to fee charging schools, of which there are 55 from a total of 729 secondary schools. The standard staffing allocation for fee charging schools was increased to 23:1 with effect from September 2013. This reflects the fact that fee charging schools have the resources, through fees charged, to employ teachers privately, an option which is not available to schools in the free education scheme.

The budget for education, including the number of teaching posts we can afford to fund in schools, is a matter I will have to consider with my colleagues in Cabinet in the context of the forthcoming budget. The Government will endeavour to continue to protect front-line education services as best as possible.

This Government has passionately defended the provision for special educational spending since coming into office. Some €1.3 billion will be spent in support of children with special educational needs this year. This is exactly the same amount allocated to the entire operation of the Garda Síochána. This provision is in line with expenditure in recent years and shows that despite the current economic difficulties, the total funding for special education has not been cut. It is the same amount this year as last year and the previous year. The level of expenditure which is being provided means that the majority of pupils with special educational needs can continue to be educated in an inclusive environment in mainstream schools along with their peers. It also means that for pupils who have additional special educational needs which require intensive interventions in a specialised environment, special class and special school placements can continue to be provided. More than 1,100 teaching posts in special schools will continue to be provided for this school year.

The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, has also opened 118 new special classes for the 2013-14 school year, which brings the total number of special classes to 740. This year we will again provide funding for 10,575 whole-time equivalent SNAs. There has been no reduction to the overall number of SNA posts which are available for allocation to schools. The number remains at 10,575 posts available for allocation. It should also be noted that unlike many other areas of the public sector, SNA vacancies are being filled up to this number.

On the allocation of resource teaching support for schools, in June I authorised the NCSE to maintain the level of resource teaching allocations to be provided to individual students at existing levels. There has been growing demand for resources in this area and I have agreed to provide the necessary extra posts to reflect this increase in demand. There will therefore not be a reduction in resource-teaching time for these pupils compared with the amount of support provided last year. That is a change in policy in response to a genuine sense of concern. Deputies will be also aware that the NCSE recently published comprehensive policy advice on supporting students with special educational needs in schools. On foot of that change in policy, I have requested the NCSE to establish a working group to develop a proposal for consideration for a new allocation model for teaching supports for children with special educational needs. I am not satisfied that the current model is working satisfactorily and I would be happy to discuss it wherever Deputies wish. We all know much more and regardless of who is in government, resources will be finite. Let us work on getting a better system. I expect to receive shortly an update on the work of this group, which is led by Mr. Eamon Stack, the former chief inspector of the Department and currently chair of the NCSE. When we get that report, we can discuss it.

Deputies, in particular the former education spokesperson for Sinn Féin, Deputy Crowe, spoke about back-to-school costs. Tackling the costs associated with school has been a major priority of mine for some time and is obviously a very topical issue at this time. Since becoming Minister for Education and Skills, I have taken a number of steps aimed at helping to reduce the burden on families. On the cost of school textbooks, I met members of the Irish Educational Publishers' Association and received a commitment from them to limit the publication of new editions of textbooks and to maintain editions of books in print, unchanged for at least six years. Some books were changing arbitrarily every two or three years while the substance had not changed - for example, the map of Ireland has not changed.

The publishers have also assured me that they would sell books for rental schemes to schools at a substantial discount, similar to the wholesale rate they were giving to booksellers, but not entirely the same. Deputies will be also aware that I greatly favour schools establishing textbook rental schemes. I launched new guidelines for developing textbook rental schemes in schools in January. These guidelines provide practical advice to primary and post-primary schools on how rental schemes can be established and operated. The aim of the guidelines is to help as many schools as possible to start such book rental programmes as soon as they can. I hope schools that are not yet operating book rental schemes will be encouraged to use the guidelines to introduce them in order to provide substantial savings for parents. Schools which already have rental schemes can save parents up to 80% of the cost of buying new books. I will continue to monitor the number of schools operating book-rental schemes and if it proves necessary, I will consider further steps to encourage schools to do so.

I have also been clear in my support for measures to reduce uniform costs for parents including measures such as the use of generic-type uniforms and the use of sew-on crests. There are about four or five colours of school uniforms with which we are all familiar. The ones available in the various big retail outlets cost a fraction of bespoke individual school uniforms. The technology and practices are available for the sew-on crests to deal with the particularisation of the branding of an individual school. I have raised this matter with the National Parents Council at primary level and recommended that the National Parents Councils - primary and post primary- mobilise parents' associations to raise this issue with school authorities. The only group recognised in the Constitution in terms of education is the family as "the primary and natural educator of the child". The school authorities and the Department are not recognised in the same way and yet the families represent the weakest component at the moment.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister has one minute remaining.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Schools should consult parents on matters relating to their children's education, including those matters which have cost implications. In that regard, I propose to draft a parent and student charter in consultation with interested parties and to give it some statutory basis so that parents will be empowered to do some of the things I believe Deputies across the political spectrum wish to see.

Do I have ten minutes remaining?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, ten seconds.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: I could refer to what we are doing in other areas, but I do not want to deprive my colleagues of speaking time. I thank Sinn Féin for introducing the motion.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: I thank the Minister for sharing his time because it is always

difficult for a Government backbencher to get time to contribute to debates in the House. I commend him on his response to the motion and the amendment he moved. It is important that the contributions we make tonight be fact based. Figures from the latest OECD Education at a Glance survey confirm that in 2010 Ireland invested 6.4% of GDP on education compared with OECD average of 6.3%. While we can all bandy around these figures, the Government amendment is fact-based and I ask Sinn Féin to accept it as that.

The past five years have been tough and anybody who has been involved in politics or has children in either the education or health system, knows exactly how tough it has been in those years. I commend the Minister, Deputy Quinn, on the work he has done on protecting the education area from cuts.

There has been considerable reporting of potential cuts to education budgets. While I believe much of it has been unfounded, we will know on the day of the budget. It is to the eternal shame of the Catholic Church that the State has been left to pick up the majority of the cost of the redress scheme for the victims of clerical abuse. It has been reported that owing to the high demand for the scheme, €40 million more than budgeted has been spent and will need to be provided for in the budget of the Department of Education and Skills. I believe I would have cross-party support in saying that the children of today should not be made to pay for the liabilities for the redress provided to the children of yesterday for the crimes committed against them. The money that is needed to pay that redress should come from a central fund and should not need to be carried by an education Vote. The Minister would have my support and that of many Deputies if we could achieve that outcome in the budget. A sum of €40 million to come from the education fund for redress for those terrible crimes that were committed against the children of the past is far too heavy a burden for the children of today to carry. We cannot ask the current children to carry that. I call on the Minister of State, Deputy Ciarán Cannon, who has just come into the Chamber and the Minister to argue strongly about this at the Cabinet table.

Simplistic solutions have been thrown around, but we must be careful because we had simplistic solutions all the way through the boom years and the outcomes were very poor. Prefabs were provided throughout the country and children were left in them for ten to 15 years. That was at a time when there was a great deal of money around. It is to the credit of the Government that there is a classroom building programme throughout the State, for which I commend it.

Earlier I heard Deputy Jonathan O'Brien discussing pupil-teacher ratios, but there can be too much of a focus on pupil-teacher ratios. We need to focus on and measure the outcomes for children coming from these classrooms. As chairman of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee and many VEC colleges throughout the country, I have seen children come through the primary education system with poor literacy and numeracy skills under programmes with low pupil-teacher ratios. Therefore, I question the claims made. We should concentrate on measured outcomes, one example of which is to be found in my constituency and the constituency of Deputy Mary Lou McDonald and the Minister of State, Deputy Joe Costello. It is an early learning initiative based in the National College of Ireland in the docklands. It runs a programme entitled the parent-child home programme. During the summer I was giving awards to primary school pupils in their first year and it was the first time I had seen at first hand the outcome of the initiative under which people from the community are trained to teach numeracy and literacy skills and parents how to play with their children in an educational manner. This has been rigidly looked at by people from Trinity College Dublin who have said it is cost-effective. When we see the literacy skills of young children, we realise that at last it is giving them an equal playing field in primary school. Certainly, many children from inner city

areas start at a great disadvantage.

I will skip over much of my script. The Government must continue with reform. My primary focus is on primary education. All through my time in politics I have seen my community being denied equal opportunity. We must ensure many disadvantaged areas have an equal opportunity. I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for his patience.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I know that sometimes I may sound more like a school principal than a chairman.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I wish to speak about a couple of issues. In fairness, the Sinn Féin motion is rather detailed and I agree with a couple of points made in it. At the end of his comments the Minister touched on the efforts he had made in respect of book rental schemes. Certainly, I agree that the cost of texts at all levels of education is very significant and the introduction of such schemes is more than desirable.

I concur with the sentiments expressed about school uniforms. Recently, I was in a house where the subject raised was education. The occupants were not especially well-off. It was pointed out to me that crested uniforms tended to be produced in Ireland, whereas universally generic ones were not. This means that the additional cost is at least being spent within the economy. However, I believe people should have the option. For families on lower incomes, a relatively small reduction in the cost of a uniform could have a very significant impact.

I wish to speak about the series of public meetings that have taken place throughout the country on the pupil-teacher ratio. I was at one such meeting in Kilkenny yesterday evening and it was well attended. As someone who was a teacher in a previous life, albeit a secondary school teacher, I am only too familiar with the importance of trying to keep classes as small as possible. There are significant benefits for children, particularly younger children who are new to the system and may have educational difficulties which have not been identified. It is also best in giving them the best start. I urge the Minister to ensure, if he can, that the ratios will not be affected in the upcoming budget. I was amused when Deputy Michael Healy-Rae spoke about the importance of Deputies doing what they said they would at these meetings. He spoke about schools in Ireland 40 years ago, but 40 years ago there were 50 or 60 children in classrooms in which there might only have been one teacher. Thankfully, the Government will ensure we will not go anywhere near what was happening in the glorious years of education 40 or 50 year ago to which the Deputy referred.

I wish to comment on the general point made by Deputy Pearse Doherty on Irish language education. It is not something on which I am particularly expert, but I consider myself to have been a relatively good student in school. It is a system of education in which we invest millions of euro every year. However, children can attend primary and secondary school for 13 or 14 years and remain unable to speak the language when they leave. That is simply unsustainable. The notion that extra funding should be provided for a system that simply does not work in a great many cases makes no sense. The proof lies in the fact that the uptake in terms of speaking the language is poor in most parts of the country. We must change the way we teach Irish.

The aim of my final point is to reaffirm and request once more that the Minister of State, Deputy Ciarán Cannon, do all he can in his discussions with the Minister to ensure class sizes are retained at existing levels. I realise it will be difficult to do, but it is significant and important, especially for children in their early years in education.

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Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I join the various Deputies on both sides of the House and commend Sinn Féin, in particular its spokesperson on education, Deputy Jonathan O'Brien, for bringing forward and putting this comprehensive motion before the House. The motion covers the entirety of the education spectrum from preschool to third level.

Let us consider the experience of the various sectors of education since the Government came to office. A serious strain has been put on educational services as a result of decisions taken by the Government in its various budgets. Let us consider the primary education sector. Schools are struggling on a daily basis to make ends meet. I refer, in particular, to the minor works grant which was worth a minimum of approximately €5,000 to each school, regardless of size. This was a significant blow and has put schools in a difficult position, especially smaller schools because the payment made up a significant part of their income.

Other Deputies on the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection will have heard from the CPMSA, the management body for 90% of primary schools nationally. The body presented recently, before the Dáil went into recess for the summer, and its representatives indicated that the evidence was that half of primary schools nationally were operating with a deficit. Let us consider where the burden is falling. Once again, it is falling on that section of society which is most stretched, which is feeling the most pain and which is finding it most difficult to make ends meet.

Let us consider the minor works grant. If it was worth approximately €5,000 to a school with 50 students, that works out at approximately €100 per student which must be found by that school to replace the funding lost. This then falls back on the family, who already are in a difficult position. At secondary level, the decision to remove the *ex quota* career guidance provision in last year's budget has had a significant impact in secondary schools. It constituted a *de facto* worsening of the pupil-teacher ratio because in an effort to retain some careers guidance hours, many schools were obliged to squeeze their subject areas as a result. The end product has been pressure on subjects, larger class sizes and significant pressure on the provision of careers guidance hours with a significant reduction in one-to-one meetings in particular. One survey showed how the number of one-to-one hours between students and careers guidance counsellors has been reduced by 50%. Moreover, this measure is having a greater impact this year and if one talks to school management bodies, they will outline how difficult this has been. At third level, the Government has piled the pressure on students to meet the increased costs of going to college by increasing the registration fee year on year by €250 euro per year. At the same time, it actually is reducing the level of funding to colleges, thereby putting significant pressure on them. Overall, a recent survey from the Central Statistics Office revealed that education inflation increased by 5% last year and was one of the leading factors in the national inflation rate. Again, this increase must be borne by parents, who find it extremely difficult to equip the students in their families to go to school.

Another pressure point to emerge from Government action has been the impact of its policy on small schools. Nationally, 47% of primary schools have five teachers or fewer and this is the same school size that has been targeted by the Government with regard to the increases in the pupil-teacher ratio. In this context, there have been yearly increases for one, two, three and four-teacher schools. This also has a particular impact on the plurality of patronage within the education system. Last night, I attended a meeting organised by the INTO in Letterkenny that was similar to those attended by many other Members in various venues nationwide. A particular theme to emerge from that meeting was a concern expressed by the Protestant community regarding the pressure that increases in the pupil-teacher ratio is exerting on their schools, as

well as the impact of changes to the minor works grant. The Protestant community is particularly concerned by what may be contained in the Government's value for money report on schools, which recent media reports indicate will set a threshold for sustainable schools of 85 pupils. A Protestant minister who attended the aforementioned meeting indicated that of the 33 Protestant schools in County Donegal, just three would remain following the implementation of such a threshold. Moreover, of 200 Protestant schools nationwide, one quarter have 30 pupils or fewer. This demonstrates the impact such pressure on small schools is having on their ability to continue as viable entities. This also flies in the face of the rhetoric one hears from the Minister for Education and Skills about increasing the plurality of patronage within the education system. On the one hand, the Minister advocates the need to bring greater diversity to patronage bodies. On the other hand, however, his policies regarding small schools, a category into which most existing Protestant schools fall, is putting them under massive pressure and this is threatening diversity and plurality of patronage within the education system in an unprecedented fashion.

Another area in which budget 2013 has had a significant impact both last year and this year has been the pressure on special needs and resource teaching hours. While the Government rowed back on its plans not to meet the increased demand for resource teaching hours, it did not do so with regard to the increased demand for special needs assistants, SNAs. While Members continually hear the Government state the number of special needs assistants and resource teachers remains constant, they do not hear it acknowledge the demand for the time of such teachers and SNAs has increased significantly. The Government was forced to admit this point following much public pressure and a Private Members' motion tabled in this Chamber after which the Government decided to increase the number of resource teachers being hired to meet the existing demand and to avoid cuts to the resource teaching hours being provided to individual children. However, as far as the special needs assistant posts were concerned, the Government continued with the fallacy that there has been no cut to the students on the ground by virtue of the its keeping constant of the overall number of SNAs. This ignores the increase in demand that is feeding through in schools nationwide at present and every Member of this House will have heard of the pressure under which classrooms are operating and of the additional pressure being exerted for SNAs to be shared among a large number of pupils where a greater number of hours are now required. This also is in direct contrast to the approach the Minister has taken regarding the hiring of additional teachers to ensure the general pupil-teacher ratio has remained constant. The principle that as demand for a service increases, so too must the numbers of those who provide it in order for it not to be diluted, must be remembered. However, the Minister has not been consistent in his application of that principle.

Overall, Members need to discern from the Government a recognition of the need to prioritise education and to ring-fence the funding for it. They are aware of the existing budgetary position and of the requirement to make income meet expenditure. However, one must consider the impact this is having and the impact the cuts already have had on education. Fianna Fáil, will be advocating, as it has done in its last two pre-budget submissions, that the Government should ring-fence education spending. It has identified it as one of three areas for which spending should be ring-fenced, together with expenditure on mental health services and disability services. While this obviously will require additional funds and finances to be found elsewhere to ensure that education funding is not cut, Members require and should expect from the Minister that in government, he also should follow this policy.

Another point I wish to bring to the Minister's attention concerns the impact of the increases

of the pupil-teacher ratio in the further education sector that took effect after the last budget. Last year, the Minister increased the pupil-teacher ratio from 17:1 to 19:1 in the post-leaving certificate, PLC, and further education sectors. This is an area which could ill afford such cuts and while I acknowledge the Minister reversed them to an extent by providing some remediation following an appeal process, the cut has had a significant impact on the ability of VECs and PLCs to provide the diversity of courses that is their hallmark. I ask the Minister for Education and Skills to re-examine this issue and to reverse that particular measure in the forthcoming budget. Another issue on which I wish to focus is the impact on schools of the career guidance cuts. An unprecedented situation has arisen among young people with regard to mental health.

9 o'clock

In the last couple of weeks there have been further soundings from the Labour Party backbenchers regarding the chaplaincy services in secondary schools, identifying them as a potential source of further cuts in the forthcoming budget. The Minister must look at the impact this has had and listen to the career guidance counsellors who have made it clear that they are unable to cope with the stresses that have been imposed on them. Many students who need to avail of one-to-one contact simply cannot get it. This is a crisis in many parts of the country. Unless an *ex quota* allocation is reinstated to ensure there is a minimum service and threshold for careers guidance service, these staff will continue to be unable to meet the demand.

Since this Government took office there have been repeated cuts in the education budget. It has been indicated that the cut will be up to €100 million this year, although there has been talk recently that there might be an amelioration in that regard. I urge the Minister to ring-fence the budget to ensure we protect what is there and, in time, try to develop it further. I urge the Minister and his Cabinet colleagues to find a way to ensure that the policy the Minister has followed in his first two budgets is not replicated in the path he chooses for this budget.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies Thomas Pringle and Richard Boyd Barrett have two and a half minutes each.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the education sector. I congratulate Sinn Féin on tabling the motion. It was interesting to hear the Minister's contribution earlier in which he quoted statistics from the OECD as a justification for the spending on education and said we are meeting the OECD average. He criticised the Sinn Féin figures, saying they are from 2007 and not up to date. However, the OECD figures quoted by the Minister are from 2011 and are a couple of years out of date. They do not take into account the €200 million in cuts that have taken place under this Minister in the lifetime of this Government and the impact that is having on the education of young people throughout the country.

It is vital that we recognise education as a right. The Minister should fight the battle on behalf of education as an investment rather than a spend for the Government. That would change the way education is perceived and treated. It is an investment. It is an investment in the future of this country and in children for the future. If this country is to recover, it must have a highly educated workforce that is capable of availing of a recovery when it comes. That is vital.

The reality on the ground gives a lie to the Minister's arguments about the spending taking place in education. He should attend the public meetings on this issue that are taking place throughout the country. There was one in Donegal last night. The reality is that class sizes are

out of control. Many students are suffering due to these class sizes and it impacts on the quality of the education they can receive. In Donegal, almost 4,000 children in primary school are in classes of more than 30 and 86% of all children in the county are in class sizes of more than 20. That has a huge impact and is putting huge strain on the schools. It is vital to keep class sizes down and reduce their size. The Government is talking about possibly increasing class sizes in the next budget.

We should look at what is happening in other European countries. Indeed, the country the Government constantly says Ireland does not wish to resemble, Greece, has an average class size of 16.8. It is 24.7 in Ireland. These countries in programmes of support have protected their education sectors and their children by keeping class sizes small, yet this country has increased them. We must defend the sector against that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Any further education cuts are completely inexcusable. It is not just that we cannot and should not cut any further, we should urgently reverse the cuts that have been made to the education budget which amount to €170 million over the last two years. The Minister should reverse them and increase the amount of money we spend on education. Anything less than an increase in education funding is a cut anyway, because there are 10,000 extra new pupils joining the education system every year. Even standing still represents a very significant cut, but to cut against a background in which there is a greater demand on the education system amounts to slaughtering the quality of our education.

It makes a joke of the curriculum, which is supposed to be child centred. The phrase we use is “child centred education”. How can one have child centred education in classes of more than 30 pupils? Over one quarter of schools in the country have classes of more than 30 pupils. One cannot have child centred education in that situation; it is simply not possible. Add to that the mainstreaming of special needs children who do not have as much support as previously. That is very bad for them and also makes the class much more difficult to manage. There are also the cuts in capitation grants to schools, while parents who are hit with either unemployment and virtually no income or significant cuts in their income must pay for school books, uniforms and so forth. Parents have less money to pay for that and schools have fewer resources to support families who might have financial difficulty. It is bad all around.

There is a way to increase education funding, by taxing wealth and corporate profits. Even the multinationals who are investing in this country and understand the importance of an educated workforce could see the logic of them paying a little extra tax so we can educate our young people to be in a position to work in the high tech industries which the Minister talks so much about promoting.

Debate adjourned.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.10 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 25 September 2013.