



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 06 Márta 2014

Thursday, 06 March 2014

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 09.30 a.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

St. Patrick's Day Celebrations

1. **Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht his views on whether the St. Patrick's Day festival is soulless; his plans to promote Irish culture and heritage during the St Patrick's Day festivities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10700/14]

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: This question is appropriate as we move towards the celebration of the national feast. In tabling it, I am conscious that the national St. Patrick's Day festival is probably one of the most international of national festivals. In the brief time available to us, I want the opportunity to explore with the Minister how we can best celebrate it at home, whether what we are currently doing is good enough and whether we can do better.

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan): Since 2012, the week around the St. Patrick's Day festival has been designated as the international week of Irish culture. That year was essentially the first of a five-year development plan in this regard, with the emphasis on the launch of an international celebration of the Irish culture brand and a series of programme activities based in existing cultural venues around the Merrion Square-Kildare Street areas of Dublin, marketing the message of "I Love My City".

Last year, the international element had Culture Connects, the international culture programme of Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, as its key focus. The

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domestic element of the celebration took place over an extended four-day period and featured 16 free headline events staged in the surroundings of some of our most prestigious cultural institutions and venues.

This year is year three of the initiative, and the I Love My City programme will again feature an array of diverse and eclectic cultural events, showcasing established and emerging artists from a variety of disciplines, including literature, music, film, visual arts and the spoken word. The domestic cultural programme will take place throughout the four days of the festival and some of our most well known cultural institutions and venues will play host to events, including the National Gallery of Ireland, the National Concert Hall, the National Library of Ireland, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, the Royal Hibernian Academy, RHA, and Archbishop Marsh's Library.

Internationally, my Department, through its Culture Ireland programme, has allocated funding of approximately €250,000 to more than 40 events in 18 different countries taking place over the St. Patrick's Day period. The aim is to enhance the overall impact of the period by promoting Irish arts and culture on the international stage at a time when the spotlight of the world is on Ireland.

I am satisfied that, far from being soulless, the St. Patrick's Day festival provides a wonderful opportunity, which is being well utilised, to showcase Irish culture and heritage at home and abroad.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I thank the Minister for his response and join in paying tribute to everyone involved in developing this as an important cultural festival, including Ms Susan Kirby and others who have given selflessly of their time. However, it is also appropriate to ask whether it can be improved upon. Recently, there was stringent criticism of the festival from none other than the Dublin lord mayor, who accused the organisers of lacking ambition, referred to it as a soulless festival and called the closing off of Merrion Square - he is particularly interested in that area, I suspect - as something that was about raising money rather than celebrating our Irishness and the best of what it is to be Irish.

Can we do better? Can we infuse something of the spirit, success, enthusiasm and vigour of the great fleadh cheoil, which is probably our principal cultural event, into the St. Patrick's Day celebrations?

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I thank Deputy Ó Fearghail for raising this matter. He has accepted that we are doing well and are using St. Patrick's Day not only as a celebration of our Irishness but also as a platform to undertake other cultural events at home and internationally. Of course we can do better. For that reason, I will have a meeting in early April with Culture Ireland, which is a representative group, Tourism Ireland, which deals with the international marketing of Ireland, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, given its connection with the embassies and consulates general around the world, towards establishing an international programme. During the Irish Presidency, the Culture Connects programme proved how effectively a cross-Europe cultural programme could work. We can also probably improve the quality of our parades across the country while recognising the major effort that, for example, schools and arts organisations put into making floats and attractive parades, which are attracting about----

An Ceann Comhairle: I will let the Minister speak again.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I thank the Minister for that. The week after next, we will see a major exodus of members of the Government from Ireland. I salute the Cabinet and Ministers of State for their efforts and wish them well as they reach out to the Irish community across the world. I understand that the Minister is off to San Francisco.

This initiative is an important mission in terms of connecting with the Irish abroad and promoting Irish tourism and continued foreign direct investment, FDI. Is there an extra dimension to the initiative this year, given the fact that 28 members of the Cabinet and the junior team are heading abroad? We realise the importance of the initiative. Before the naysayers criticise the Government for doing this, they should consider the benefits that flow from it for the Irish at home and abroad.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I agree with the Deputy. I remember paying my own way to Silicon Valley and coming here when I was in opposition, at a time when Ministers were not going there, and saying I agreed totally that they should go there. When they did go somewhere, they were criticised from the Opposition benches. It is very important that they do go there. We are attracting a large number of the Irish Diaspora through the business diaspora and the Global Irish Economic Forum. If they come to Ireland, they do not charge us and they ask why we cannot go to them when we have this great opportunity. There is no other country that gets as much attention as Ireland on St. Patrick's Day because other countries do not have comparable festivals. That makes it very important for us. For that reason, despite the fact that funding for Culture Ireland was reduced somewhat this year because we wanted to spend the money on local organisations and events, we still have provided a sum of €250,000. There will be people going to 18 countries, some of whom will be performing in different places. Therefore, there is an appreciation and realisation that this is a great opportunity. Nonetheless, I take the Deputy's point that we could do better.

Scéimeanna Teanga

2. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** den an Aire Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta an dtabharfaidh sé sonraí ar chruinnithe a bhí ag Aire na Gaeltachta le gach Ard-Rúnaí chun mainneachtana maidir le scéimeanna teanga comhlachtaí poiblí (faoi Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla) atá luaite sa tuarascáil bhliantúil a phlé. [11100/14]

4. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Michael P. Kitt** den an Aire Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta an bhfuil athbhreithniú ar siúl ar úsáid na Gaeilge sna Ranna éagsúla agus sna comhlachtaí Stáit; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [11099/14]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Tá an Ghaeilge i ngéarchéim sa tír seo ag an bomaite. Tá na mílte daoine tar éis teacht amach ar na sráideanna de bharr polasaithe an Rialtais, agus an easpa acmhainní agus an easpa oibre ar an ábhar seo. Nuair a bhí an tAire Stáit ag an gcomhchoiste inné, dúirt sé gur daingníodh 16 scéim anuraidh. Ciallaíonn sé sin go dtógfaidh sé 25 bliain chun na scéimeanna ar fad a dhaingniú. Cad atá déanta ag an Aire Stáit chun an fhadhb seo a réiteach?

Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dinny McGinley) (Deputy Dinny McGinley): Tógfaidh mé ceisteanna Uimh. 2 agus 4 le chéile.

Tá próiseas leanúnach ar siúl faoi Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 chun líon agus caigh-

deán na seirbhísí i nGaeilge a chuireann comhlachtaí poiblí ar fáil a fheabhsú. Aithníodh ón tús gur próiseas forchéimnitheach a bheadh i gceist le feidhmiú an Achta, ag tógáil céimeanna de réir a chéile le comhoibriú agus le dea-thoil na bpáirtithe leasmhara éagsúla. Sa chomhthéacs seo, aithnítear an tábhacht a bhaineann le dóthain daoine le hinniúlacht i nGaeilge a bheith ar fáil sa Státchóras chun freastal ar éileamh ón phobal ar sheirbhísí i nGaeilge. Mar thoradh ar chinneadh a thóg an Rialtas i mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2013 chun cumas na Gaeilge sa Státseirbhís a threisiú, tá an Roinn Caiteachais Phoiblí agus Athchóirithe ag iarraidh ar Ranna agus oifigí Rialtais sainaitheant a dhéanamh ar phoist agus réimsí oibre ina dteastaíonn oifigigh le Gaeilge mar chuid den phróiseas pleanála don fhórsa oibre. Táthar ag iarraidh ar Ranna aird ar leith a thabhairt ar phoist atá lonnaithe i gceantair Ghaeltachta nó a dhéanann freastal ar cheantair Ghaeltachta. Beidh an próiseas seo lárnach chun a chinntiú go ndéanfar foráil dhóthanach i gcomórtais earcaíochta amach anseo do cheapacháin i bpoist ina dteastaíonn oifigigh le Gaeilge. Ina theannta sin, sonrúfar na poist ina dteastaíonn oifigigh le Gaeilge i scéimeanna teanga faoi Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 amach anseo. Tá na bearta seo ag teacht le spriocanna sonracha atá luaite sa straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge chun cur leis an líon oifigeach atá in ann feidhmiú go dátheangach sa Státchóras. Maidir leis an dara ceist, a bhaineann leis na scéimeanna teanga atá daingnithe faoin Acht, ní miste a nótáil gur faoin Aire Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta atá sé scéimeanna teanga a dhaingniú le comhlachtaí poiblí agus gur faoin gCoimisinéir Teanga atá sé faireachán a dhéanamh ar chur i bhfeidhm na scéimeanna teanga sin. Dá bhrí sin, níl aon ról agam faoin Acht a bheith ag plé le comhlachtaí poiblí maidir le cur i bhfeidhm a gcuid scéimeanna teanga.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Dúirt an tAire Stáit go bhfuil sé “ag tógáil céimeanna de réir a chéile”. I ndáiríre, táimid ag cúlú de bharr na gcéimeanna sin. Dá ndéarfadh duine a bheadh ag dul le haghaidh NCT “tá na rotha maol, níl dabht faoi sin, ach níl an t-airgead agam anois chun mo dualgaisí dleathacha a chomhlíonadh” agus “diaidh ar ndiaidh, céim ar chéim, b’fhéidir go gcuirfidh mé cúpla euro isteach sa ghluaisteán, agus ar aghaidh liom”, déarfadh an oifigeach NCT “ní féidir leat é sin a dhéanamh, caithfidh tú do chuid dualgaisí agus an dlí a chomhlíonadh”. Níl sé sin á dhéanamh ag an Aire Stáit ná ag an Roinn ar chor ar bith. Tá sé suimiúil go ndúirt an tAire Stáit linn inné gur fhreastal 300 seirbhíseach poiblí ar ranganna Gaeilge le trí bliana anuas. Tá 300,000 duine sa Státchóras ag an bomaite. Ciallaíonn sé sin go dtógfaidh sé 100 bliain go dtí go mbeidh 1% den Státchóras tar éis freastal ar ranganna Gaeilge chun a gcuid cumas teanga a fheabhsú. Ní céim ar aghaidh é sin - is cúlú é sin.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Ní shílím go bhfuil aon mhoilliú i gceist i dtaobh na scéimeanna teanga. Is dóigh liom gur a mhalairt atá fíor. Tá 185 comhlacht clúdaithe ag 113 scéim teanga i láthair na huairé. Aontaíodh 16 scéim úr anuraidh. Tá sé scéim eile daingnithe go dtí seo i mbliana. Tá foireann iomlán curtha le chéile anois agus beidh siad ag feidhmiú ar scéimeanna teanga as seo amach. Tá teagmháil déanta le 121 comhlacht poiblí eile. Tá comhráite agus plé ar siúl leo i láthair na huairé maidir le scéimeanna teanga. Caithfidh an Teachta a aontú gur dul chun cinn é sin. Is cuma cén dóigh a n-amharcann an Teachta ar an ábhar seo - is léir go bhfuilimid ag cur níos mó saothair, níos mó oibre agus níos mó béime ar scéimeanna teanga a aontú ná mar a tharla le fada.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Bhain an cheist a chuir mé ar an Aire Stáit leis an athbhreithniú atá á dhéanamh ar úsáid na Gaeilge. Dúirt mé inné ag an gcruinniú go bhfuil méadú ag teacht ar líon na ngearán ón phobal. De réir tuairisc an Choimisinéara Teanga, tá an uimhir méadaithe ó 734 sa bhliain 2011 go dtí 757 sa bhliain 2012. Tháinig formhór na gearáin ó Chontae Bhaile Átha Cliath, Contae na Gaillimhe, Contae Chiarraí, Contae Chill Chainnigh, Contae na Mí,

Contae Dhún na nGall agus Contae Chorcaí. Tháinig 26% de na gearáin ón nGaeltacht. Tá cothrom na féinne agus dualgas reachtúil i gceist anseo. An féidir leis an Aire Stáit a rá liom go mbeidh an t-athbhreithniú sin á dhéanamh agus go dtiocfaidh toradh níos fearr ón obair seo?

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Sílim gur rud maith é go bhfuil gearáin ag teacht isteach ón bpobal. Léiríonn sé go bhfuil éileamh i measc an phobail ar sheirbhísí trí Ghaeilge. Ba cheart dúinn éisteacht leis an éileamh sin agus freagra a thabhairt air. Tá iarrachtaí á ndéanamh, ar ndóigh. Táimid chun cur chuige úr a chur i bhfeidhm i bhfeachtais earcaíochta an Státseirbhís as seo amach, ionas go mbeidh céatadán áirithe d'áiteanna curtha ar fáil d'iarrthóirí le hardchumas Gaeilge. Níor tharla sé sin le 40 bliain. B'fhéidir nach bhfuil ann ach an beagán, ach is tús maith é mar aitheantas go bhfuil an t-easnamh sin ann. Chomh maith leis sin, tá an Roinn Caiteachais Phoiblí agus Athchóirithe ag iarraidh ar gach rannóg Rialtais agus ar gach comhlacht Stáit a aimsiú cá bhfuil gá le hoifigigh le Gaeilge ar a gcumas acu chun seirbhís a sholáthar do shaoránaigh na tíre seo. Tá dhá chéim chun tosaigh tógtha. B'fhéidir nach bhfuil ann ach tosnú, ach is tosnú iontach deimhneach atá ann.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Ní cheapaim go dtuigeann an tAire Stáit cé chomh feargach is atá daoine i dtaobh na ceiste seo. Go simplí, tá siad ag iarraidh dul i dteagmháil leis an Stát agus a gcuid gnó a dhéanamh trí mheán na Gaeilge. Nuair a théann siad i dteagmháil leis an Stát, de ghnáth diúltaíonn dóibh an Ghaeilge a úsáid. Is é sin an gnáthchleachtadh atá ag daoine faoi láthair. Dúirt an tAire Stáit go bhfuil 415 comhlacht fós le scéimeanna a dhaingniú. Ós rud é go bhfuil 16 scéim á dhaingniú gach bliain i láthair na huaire, tógfaidh sé 25 bliain chun na scéimeanna go léir a dhaingniú. Dúirt an tAire Stáit go bhfuil sé i gceist níos mó daoine le Gaeilge a earcú sa Státchóras. Dúirt an Coimisinéir Teanga go dtógfaidh sé 28 bliain chun an sprioc a bhaint amach. Níl aon chostas ag baint leis na rudaí seo, ach tá deifir ag baint leo. Is rud uafásach práinneach é seo. De réir an taighde atá déanta, níl ach 16 bliain fágtha ag an nGaeilge mar theanga phobail sa Ghaeltacht. Cén fáth a bhfuil an Rialtas ag cur moill ar an bpróiseas seo?

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Sílim go gcaithfidh an Teachta aontú liom go bhfuil sé seo an chéad rud cinnte atá déanta le blianta fada chun freagra a thabhairt ar an éileamh ar sheirbhísí Gaeilge atá i measc an phobail. Tá sé ráite agam go bhfuil dhá chéim móra tógtha againn - go gcuirfear le chéile painéal speisialta de dhaoine le hardchumas Gaeilge san earcaíocht atá amach romhainn agus go mbeidh-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Beidh mé 70 bliain d'aois faoin am a bheidh an sprioc sin bainte amach.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Tá sainscrúdú nó sainathint á dhéanamh i ngach Roinn maidir leis na háiteanna ina bhfuil gá le seirbhísí trí Ghaeilge. Tá daoine i ngach Roinn Stáit a bhfuil ardchumas Gaeilge acu, ach nach bhfuil deis acu bheith ag plé leis an bpobal. Tá an dá rud cinnte sin ar siúl. Tá cúrsaí speisialta á gcur ar fáil do dhaoine a bhfuil suim acu feabhas a chur ar a gcuid Gaeilge. Beidh siad in ann cáilíochtaí a bhaint amach dá bharr. Mar sin, aithníonn an Stát cad atá le déanamh. Don chéad uair ó tháinig mé isteach anseo - tá mé anseo níos faide ná an Teachta - tá céimeanna deimhneacha á dtógaint maidir leis na fadhbanna seo.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Aontaím leis an Aire Stáit gur mhaith an rud é go bhfuil daoine ag gearán faoin tseirbhís atá á sholáthar. Tá súil agam go n-aontóidh sé liom gur mhaith an rud é go bhfuil daoine ag máirseáil. Bhí athrú meon aige mar gheall ar sin. Ag an mórshúil i mBaile Átha Cliath cúpla seachtain ó shin, dúirt bean gur sheol sí e-mail chuig an HSE i nGaeilge,

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ach fuair sí freagra as Béarla. Ní dóigh liom gur cheart go dtarlódh a leithéid. Tá súil agam go mbeidh an tAire Stáit in ann leigheas a chur ar an scéal sin. An aontaíonn an tAire Stáit le Conradh na Gaeilge gur cheart go mbeadh sé mar chuspóir go mbeidh - faoi dheireadh na bliana 2016 - gach seirbhís Stáit ar fáil trí Ghaeilge do phobal na Gaeltachta, agus go mbeadh na seirbhísí sin ar chomhchaighdeán leis na seirbhísí a chuirtear ar fáil trí Bhéarla in áiteanna eile?

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Ba bhreá liom a rá go bhfuil seirbhísí trí Ghaeilge ar fáil anois do gach duine a éilíonn na seirbhísí sin, ach tá oidhreacht nó legacy i gceist anseo. Tháinig an fhadhb seo chun cinn le roinnt blianta anuas - le 40 bliain anuas, b'fhéidir. Mar a dúirt mé, tá cur chuige úr ann anois. Tá a lán talamh le déanamh suas. Ba mhaith liom go bhfaigheadh éinne a scríobhann chuig Roinn Rialtais - i nGaeilge nó i mBéarla - freagra sa teanga inar dheim siad teagmháil leis an Roinn. Caithfidh gach iarracht a dhéanamh a chinntiú gur mar sin atá. Má scríobhann duine litir trí Ghaeilge, ba cheart dó freagra a fháil i nGaeilge. Má scríobhann sé litir trí Bhéarla, ba cheart dó freagra a fháil i mBéarla. Tá sé sin ceart agus aontaím leis. Is é an sprioc agus an cuspóir atá againn ná gur mar sin ba chóir go mbeadh sé. Caithfidh sé bheith mar sin.

Natural Heritage Areas Designation

3. **Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht with regard to the permit system that he has put in place for owners of Natural Heritage Area bogs, the way the owners are to access this system; the way persons are supposed to know if they have a bog with such a designation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10844/14]

Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan: My question is about how this proposed permit system will work on NHA bogs and how people were notified about this. The Minister was asked on Shannonside Radio if people were contacted and he answered that "they probably were".

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: The recently published Review of Ireland's Raised Bog Natural Heritage Areas, which is available to download from my Department's website, provides detail on future arrangements regarding turf cutting on each of the 75 raised bog NHAs. Based on a comprehensive scientific assessment, the review has proposed a reconfiguration of the network of raised bog NHAs, which will improve conservation outcomes by increasing the area of endangered habitats within the network of sites. At the same time, it will exclude the most heavily cut sites, thereby avoiding any impact on over 80% of active turfcutters currently in the NHA network; from over 3,000 to around 500 cutters.

The review envisages the complete or partial de-designation of 46 existing NHAs where turf-cutting may continue into the future. In these de-designation cases, it will not be necessary for individuals to seek consent to cut turf. The review also envisages effective cessation of turf cutting on 36 NHAs by 1 January 2017, in order to preserve their conservation value. Management plans, which will be subject to environmental assessment, will be prepared for each site. Turf-cutters on these sites will require consent from my Department before cutting this year. The review further envisages the proposed designation of 25 new sites as raised bogs NHAs later this year to replace the habitat lost through de-designation of the more heavily cut sites. Many of these proposed sites are in public ownership, or have relatively few or no turf cutters.

It has been possible to subdivide seven current NHAs in such a way as to allow for a continuation of turf-cutting in one part and conservation elsewhere on the site. This has resulted in

a total of 82 separate units within the original 75 NHAs.

My Department has written directly to more than 3,600 landowners who may have an interest in the NHAs where consent will be required from this year. Site maps were enclosed with those letters, as well as advice on how to obtain an application form for the compensation scheme or consent to continue cutting. Last week, notices explaining future turf cutting arrangements on these sites were placed in local newspapers, which circulate in the areas where the relevant NHA bogs are located. Any turf-cutter required to cease turf-cutting on an NHA is being offered compensatory measures similar to those available to turf-cutters from raised bog special areas of conservation. Such compensation will be available to qualifying persons with effect from 2014. Application forms for the compensation scheme or for permits to continue cutting over the next three years are available on request from my Department. Relevant contact details are published on my Department's websites.

Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan: When the advertisements were placed in the newspaper, turf cutters contacted the number provided and were told that resources are stretched at the NPWS. They were told that they have not got the permit system ready. I contacted the NPWS 20 minutes ago and again they told me that resources are stretched and they do not have anything ready. They could not tell me the details of how the permit worked. Initially, they wanted to know in what bog was I cutting my turf. People will be going out in three or four weeks to cut their turf, depending on the weather, but no permit system has been organised or put in place yet. It is important to protest at the idea that people would have to ask permission anyway to do something they have done for centuries. It is like a child in school having to ask permission to go to the toilet. They are not children.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I am glad that the Deputy raised this matter here and I will make immediate inquiries as to the availability of permits. This service should be available to those people who are affected. I will certainly ensure that it will be made available. If there is a problem with the existing system, we certainly need to improve it because I agree that these people deserve the right to know how to apply for the permit and whether they have to get one or not. We have written to them - 3,600 letters have gone out - and advertisements have been placed in local newspapers where there would be affected bog owners, but if there is still confusion, I will ensure that will be improved by a communication.

10 o'clock

I thank the Deputy for raising the matter.

Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan: Sadly, there is no system in place as yet. The Minister has advertised that there is a system in place, but that is not the case. Apparently, he has written to thousands of people, but a system has still not been established. That is a failure on his part. The same mistakes are being made in the bogs the Minister is considering excluding and those he intends to include. In Carricknaughton near Athlone, pasture land is going to be included in one of these areas and the person who owns it will be obliged to obtain permission to use it.

I take the opportunity to make a point on a particular matter which may not be raised in the House today. I condemn whoever was responsible for shooting a white-tailed eagle in County Tipperary. Many turf cutters and I are of the view that those involved are gurrriers. What they did was shameful.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I am not aware of any pasture land being included in turf-

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cutting areas. The Deputy referred to permits and advice being made available. I take what he said very seriously and will address the matter immediately. This is a very important and sensitive matter. As Minister, I am responsible for ensuring both European and national laws are enforced and the Deputy is representing his constituency. We are, therefore, approaching the matter from different angles. However, there is a system in place and its existence must be made known. In addition, the service must also be available. I will ensure this is the case and will follow up on the matter immediately.

I join the Deputy in condemning the people who ruthlessly shot the white-tailed eagle in County Tipperary. We are trying to repopulate the country with eagles.

Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan: We are united on this one.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I welcome what the Deputy said about this matter.

National Library

5. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the amount of funding allocated to the National Library of Ireland, NLI, in each of the past ten years, including 2014; if he will provide details of any representations made to him by the management of the NLI outlining the severity of the situation which obtains there at present; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10698/14]

Deputy Catherine Murphy: A number of staff from the National Library of Ireland came before the Joint Committee on the Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht recently and I tabled this question as a consequence of what they had to say. Only 1% of the holdings of the National Library of Ireland are conserved to international standards. When members of the committee teased out the matter further with their guests, it emerged that the situation in preserving the National Library of Ireland's stock was precarious.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: On a general note, the Deputy will be aware that all of the national cultural institutions, including the National Library of Ireland, have unavoidably suffered significant cuts in their allocations in recent years. This is an unpleasant reality with which every publicly funded body has had to deal with during the economic crisis of the past few years. The Government has done its utmost to minimise budget cuts for the cultural institutions, in so far as was possible, while being cognisant of competing demands on the public finances. The stark reality is that in the current funding environment institutions have had to make difficult choices when prioritising the spending of their allocations.

The National Library of Ireland and its board are statutorily independent under the National Cultural Institutions Act 1997. It is the statutory responsibility of the board to determine the priorities for the institution based on the resources available to it and the need to ensure the conservation and protection of its collections. I assure the Deputy of the Government's interest in and continuing support for our national cultural institutions. I remain hopeful that, notwithstanding the continuing pressure on the State's finances, it will prove possible in the coming years to ease the resource constraints. The funding to the National Library of Ireland since it became statutorily independent in 2005 is set out in the table that will be included in the Official Report. In the past two years the National Library of Ireland has managed its employment control framework in such a way as to yield some leeway in addressing resource issues. I have

also made additional moneys available for its temporary exhibition programme and the development of the Heaney exhibition.

My Department maintains ongoing contacts with the management of the National Library of Ireland on a wide range of issues. I stress, however, that day-to-day operations are a matter entirely for the board and the director of the library.

NATIONAL LIBRARY

Year	Current	Capital	Total
2005	€8,054,000	€1,350,000	€9,404,000
2006	€9,067,000	€2,350,000	€11,417,000
2007	€9,201,000	€4,000,000	€13,201,000
2008	€9,752,000	€2,250,000	€12,002,000
2009	€9,242,000	€1,500,000	€10,742,000
2010	€7,848,000	€1,500,000	€9,348,000
2011	€7,084,000	€1,000,000	€8,084,000
2012	€6,620,000	€500,000	€7,120,000
2013	€6,153,000	€452,000	€6,605,000
2014	€5,912,000	€428,000	€6,340,000

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The National Library of Ireland appears to be in an impossible position and its resources seem to be stretched to the point where it has found it necessary to bring in outside experts on occasion. The overall figure for the cuts it has been obliged to absorb is somewhere in the region of 40%. It appears that a very low priority is being afforded to certain aspects of our cultural heritage. The National Library of Ireland and the National Archives of Ireland appear to be in the most serious of difficulties. Less than 100 years ago the Public Record Office of Ireland was set on fire and 700 years worth of records were lost. Will people 100 years from now ask questions about the point when the holdings of the National Library of Ireland came under threat? There is a serious possibility that irreparable damage is being done. More needs to be done as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Between 2007 and 2011 when I took office the allocation for the National Library of Ireland was reduced from €13.2 million to €8 million, a decrease of €5.117 million. Since I became Minister, the reduction has been €780,000. Last year we minimised the cut to the National Library of Ireland's funding. The figure in that regard was just €265,000. In the five years since 2010 the aggregate allocation to the library has been €38 million. In the same period a potential acquisitions fund of €30 million has been available to it and the other national cultural institutions under section 1003 of the Taxes Consolidation Act. The National Library of Ireland continues to receive substantial funding, particularly when one considers the challenges we face from an economic point of view. In 2012 it was hard-pressed to expend its entire allocation. I hope we will be able to restore its funding in the future. As I understand it, it is not in the position described by the Deputy.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The National Library of Ireland also has a tourism function and has been stretching in order to provide a very good genealogy service, which is very much in demand. That is taking from the library's other work. That only 1% of its collections can

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be preserved to international standards, particularly as the country has such a rich heritage, is really shameful. I acknowledge that most of the reductions in the National Library of Ireland's funding happened prior to the Minister taking office. What is required is an assessment of what the library needs, at a very minimum, to conserve its collections in order that they will not become damaged beyond repair.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I share the Deputy's concern. Unfortunately, when the country had the necessary resources available to it, no one had either the vision or the commitment required to ensure the work to which the Deputy refers was done. That work should have been carried out, but this did not happen. I inherited a very challenging situation and was obliged to introduce cuts for all of the cultural institutions. Last year we gave preferential treatment to the library and, as a result, the cutback in its funding was less than 4%. We also provided additional funding for the Heaney archive. I am looking forward to engaging with the new director of the National Library of Ireland who is due to be appointed shortly and with its board to ensure some of the problems and challenges highlighted by the Deputy can be addressed.

I have been a supporter of the National Library of Ireland since I became a Member of the Oireachtas 30 years ago. I visit it regularly and support it in every way possible. As a result, I am very conscious of its value. I will be launching the "Inspiring Ireland" website during my visit to San Francisco for St. Patrick's Day. That website which will include material from the library will provide an opportunity for greater digitisation which is the best way to preserve material.

Other Questions

National Archives

6. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in view of the recent change in legislation in the United Kingdom relating to the transfer of Government records to the National Archives and specifically a change to the twenty year rule; the plans he has to amend Irish legislation regarding same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7488/14]

Deputy Michael Creed: We have a long and sometimes troubled shared history with our nearest neighbour, the United Kingdom, and it is important that we get our view across in respect of that shared history. As a consequence of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 which commenced in January 2013, the British authorities are accelerating the release of public documents, with the 30 year rule being reduced to 20 years. If we do not move simultaneously, there is a danger that our perspective on shared events will not be in the public domain and, therefore, opinions will be formed on events in our recent history while we wait ten years to catch up. A legislative change is required to rectify this.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Recent legislative changes in the United Kingdom provided new arrangements for public access to the archival records of government after 20 years, not

30 years, as had previously been the case. In Ireland the National Archives Act, 1986 provides for the preservation of official Government records, their transfer to the National Archives and release to the public. When enacted, provision for public access was similar to the arrangement in the United Kingdom, that is, records became eligible for release when 30 years old, subject to certain exemptions.

The new 20 year access rule in the United Kingdom is to be implemented over a ten year period, which commenced in 2013. When the 1983 official records of the Irish Government were released in January 2014, the UK National Archives and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland had released the 1983 and 1984 official records together. Both bodies will release further records in this manner over a ten year period until such time as all records that are 20 years old or more will be accessible to the public.

I recently established an interdepartmental group to consider the current status of the National Archives Act and the implications of moving to a 20 year access rule. The group comprises officials from my Department, the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Justice and Equality, the National Archives, the Office of the Attorney General and the Office of the President. The group has met on a number of occasions and is expected to submit its recommendations in the coming weeks, following which I anticipate bringing a memorandum to the Government for consideration.

Deputy Michael Creed: I thank the Minister for his outline of the position and the dangers that are imminent if we do not implement change. While I welcome the establishment of the working group, it seems a little unwieldy. This is a no brainer, requiring only a simple amendment to the National Archives Act, 1986. The longer we prevaricate and as Britain accelerates its programme of release of public documents under the new 20 year rule - there will initially be a transition period - the more historical interpretation of events will be skewed by the fact that its voice is heard but ours is not. We need to catch up. As I said, all that is required is a simple amendment. I will draft it if that would be helpful to the Minister. It is vital that we have a timescale for implementation of the necessary change. My preference is that it would be published and passed before the end of this Dáil term. It would not tax the Attorney General greatly to devise a minor amendment to the 1986 Act. I implore the Minister to act in view of the shared and troubled history between our two countries. As Britain begins releasing papers on the early formative years of the peace process, we need to ensure our perspective on these events is known.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I agree that we are talking about very important information and a very sensitive period in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict. The longer time lag in this country is rather unfair on historians and researchers. Moreover, as the Deputy says, it means that only one view of what was happening back then will be in the public domain. It may well be the case that the Governments of both countries often had the same point of view, but, equally, there may well have been differences in other instances. It is very important that these differences are made known.

I have asked the working group to produce its report in a timely fashion, which will include an examination of a possible amendment to the legislation. The group is taking its task very seriously and I hope to have its recommendations before too long. If it is the case that a simple amendment is all that is required, I am sure it will be possible to assign a draftsman to devise it.

Deputy Michael Creed: Can I take it that the Minister agrees that there is a need to move in

line with what is happening in the United Kingdom? If so, can I take his response as a promise that legislation will be forthcoming?

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Of course. This is an issue we are already pursuing with the intention of changing the legislation. I give the Deputy an assurance that it will be pursued very seriously.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Some 70,000 boxes of records in the National Archives have not been catalogued. If the Minister proceeds to implement the change Deputy Michael Creed has proposed which would be very welcome, will he also ensure the resources are provided to make all of the records physically available?

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I am aware that the Deputy has a personal interest in this matter and a deep knowledge of the archival challenge. We will take her point on board in so far as it is possible.

Special Protection Areas Designation

7. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the number of landowners nationally whose land is designated for hen harrier protection; his plans to extend the compensation schemes currently administered by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10557/14]

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: My question relates to the designation of lands in different parts of the country, particularly in my own area in west Limerick, for the protection of hen harrier habitats. I am concerned about the compensation arrangements available to some but not all landowners. Where lands are designated for habit protection, thereby limiting their use from an agricultural point of view, but no compensation is forthcoming, the landowners in question are in limbo.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: My Department uses a variety of data sources to identify landowners and land users within areas proposed for designation, including the Property Registration Authority, the land parcel identification system used by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and information on forestry lands. When advertising six hen harrier special protection areas in November 2007, my Department identified approximately 4,000 individual land users within these SPAs. In order to include others who may also have had an interest in sites, a total of 4,439 notifications of designation were issued. It should be noted that not all these land users are landowners.

At the time of designation, my Department opened a voluntary incentivisation scheme to support farmers to improve habitat for the hen harrier and various other species that shared the same landscape. Applications were sought and a total of 376 hen harrier farm plans were approved until 2010, when the scheme had to be closed to new applicants owing to budgetary constraints. My Department continues to honour existing contracts, which were of five year duration.

My Department is in discussions with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine concerning a range of measures for the protection or restoration of biodiversity under Ireland's next rural development plan. These include measures focused on Natura areas, that is, areas

designated as special protection areas under the birds directive or special conservation areas under the habitats directive. It is envisaged that this approach will be implemented primarily through the proposed green low carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, under the new rural development programme. The draft programme is subject to a public consultation process, as announced by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Of the 4,439 landowners whose lands have been designated for this purpose, fewer than 10% are in receipt of compensation, which is remarkable. In my own area land that is suitable for agricultural use - forestry, in particular - is, essentially, rendered valueless. When Deputy Michael Creed and I met officials from the Minister's Department and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine some time ago to discuss this issue, we were told that a threat response plan was being initiated by both Departments to ascertain whether the designations would continue in their current form or be reduced in line, for example, with what had been done with the bogs. Has the Minister's Department sought legal advice on the scheme as it currently operates? The people I represent who are outside the scheme are asking me on a weekly basis what is happening with their land and whether they will ever be in a position to farm it. If not, will they at least be compensated for the use to which it is being put?

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Deputy Patrick O'Donovan's intervention is timely as my Department is in discussions with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine under the rural development programme to see how best to compensate farmers who are in Natura areas. The points the Deputy has raised are very important. Some 300 farmers were on farm plans to provide proper feeding grounds for the hen harrier but not all farmers in the special protection areas that were designated for hen harriers were involved. The scheme closed due to the financial constraints in 2010 and was not reopened but we are honouring the commitments in respect of those who were in the scheme at the end of that five year programme. We are now discussing how to approach the compensation issue in the next scheme whether it should be funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine or my Department. I feel it should be funded directly from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. I will allow him back in.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank the Minister. As the Minister is probably aware, some were not involved because there was an appeals period when many landowners were in the process of trying to get out of the designation and then the door to compensation closed so they were left in the worst of both worlds. I welcome the discussions taking place with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, but can the Minister give the House a time-frame by which a plan will be put in place? Will he examine the scientific evidence on which the designations are based at present? It is questionable that, say, Patrick O'Donovan's farm is in, Michael Creed's farm is out, Bernard Durkan's farm is in. I know the flight paths of birds but I never thought they avoided ditches and particular gates as they flew over. That is a reason for much of the frustration.

Deputy Michael Creed: Lest there be any confusion, I have no vested interest or land in the Mullaghareirk or Boggeragh district electoral divisions.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Neither have I.

Deputy Michael Creed: This issue is a stain on the Minister's Department and on the

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Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. They are a relatively small number of farmers but they have rights. They are landowners and their rights are being infringed. Deputy O'Donovan asked a pertinent question in respect of legal opinion. They are locked out of a compensation system that others are getting. That is the important issue.

In the context of a threat response plan, to which Deputy O'Donovan referred, we met officials from the Minister's Department and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine almost 12 months ago. How many meetings of the various parties have taken place in drafting that threat response plan because it is multifaceted? It is a complex issue but the simple net point is that there are farmers who are being discriminated against.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Simon Coveney, and I have been engaged at a personal and ministerial level on this issue for the past two years. I am concerned that people who live in designated areas should be properly compensated. Compensation should accompany designation and I have emphasised that aspect at national and European level. There is an opportunity to deal with the issue through the rural development programme and we must not miss out on it to ensure that those people who are restricted in farming practices, who cannot plant trees and who may have to destock in some cases, are adequately compensated. The discussions are taking place. As Deputies are aware the RDP proposal is out for consultation at this time. It is important those people who are interested in this area would forward their own submissions. As the Deputy is aware SACs and SPAs are designated by European law. Therefore a change in designation is quite complex.

Deputy Michael Creed: It is not without precedent.

An Ceann Comhairle: Question No. 8 is next but the Deputy is not present.

Questions Nos. 8, 17, 20 and 139 replied to with Written Answers.

An Ceann Comhairle: Question No. 9 is next but the Deputy is not present.

Questions Nos. 9 and 165 replied to with Written Answers.

Waterways Ireland Remit

10. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if he will provide an update on the review to the draft canal by-laws to incorporate the recently completed public consultation process; the number of submissions received; the way the concerns raised will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10727/14]

11. **Deputy Anthony Lawlor** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if he will provide an update on the review to the draft canal by-laws taking into account that the public submission process was recently closed; the number of submissions that were received; when he expects the review to be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10741/14]

28. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if he has studied the submission received from traditional canal dwellers and recreational users of the canals encompassing their strong objection to proposals to increase dramatically and prohibitively the charges for use of the canals to such an extent as to make it virtually impos-

sible for them to afford to use the canal system for residential or navigational purposes; if his attention has been drawn to their general acceptance of the concept of regulation but in a structure within which they can continue as per their tradition; if he will arrange to meet with a representative delegation from the group at an early date to discuss the issue having particular regard to the fact that in large measure restoration of the canal system was undertaken by local community and voluntary effort; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10696/14]

163. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if he has studied the submission from the traditional canal users and canal dwellers in County Kildare with particular reference to the likely punitive impact of the proposed new by-laws on them; if he expects to be in position to meet with representatives of the group at an early date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11479/14]

164. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if his attention has been drawn to the likely dramatic increase in the fees chargeable by Waterways Ireland to canal users and canal dwellers under the proposed new by-laws with particular reference to the fact that moorings of a shorter long-term nature may no longer be feasible for those using the canals; if he will intervene in order to ensure that the by-laws as now proposed are not implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11480/14]

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I welcome the Minister. Deputy Martin Heydon and Deputy Bernard J. Durkan have met boat dwellers on the canals. We are anxious to get a resolution to the issue. The proposals as put forward by Waterways Ireland were not acceptable from a financial point of view and from the perspective of the boat dwellers staying *in situ*. They were not suitable at all. I hope the Minister will come forward with proposals that will be acceptable to all sides.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10, 11, 28, 163 and 164 together.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Minister, we have a problem here that has to go before the Committee on Procedure and Privileges. Many of the Deputies whose questions are tabled are not present, therefore, they cannot be taken. Only Deputies who are present in the Chamber can take the question because it affects the time allocated for the questions and it is unfair to other Deputies. Deputy Martin Heydon has just arrived and Deputy Kevin Humphreys.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: There are three questions in my name.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Did Deputy Kevin Humphreys have a previous question?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: My Question No. 17 was grouped with Question No. 8.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: May we go back to Question No. 8?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, sorry. Only one person has the 30 seconds to introduce the question. I invite the Minister to proceed.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: The public consultation undertaken by Waterways Ireland on the proposed by-laws governing the Grand Canal, the Royal Canal and the Barrow system concluded on 3 February, in line with the relevant legislation which provides for a 21-day consultation period. I am informed by Waterways Ireland that the main stakeholders were contacted individually and invited to meet with the Chief Executive and the senior management team of

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Waterways Ireland prior to submitting their views. I am also advised that all current permit holders on the three waterways, including traditional canal users and canal dwellers in County Kildare, received individual written notice and were given the opportunity to respond within the statutory consultation timeframe on an individual basis.

I understand that more than 2,000 submissions were made in the course of the public consultation process, all of which were submitted directly to Waterways Ireland as the body responsible for conducting the consultation process. Waterways Ireland is now giving full and careful consideration to all of these submissions, following which it will prepare a report setting out its proposed approach, including any revisions it may wish to make to its original proposals. The report will be submitted to my Department and will then be referred to me, with recommendations for consideration and final decision. I have not set a deadline for the completion of this process in order to ensure that the issues raised in submissions are fully considered.

I welcome the assertion of Deputy Durkan that there is general acceptance of the concept of regulation of the use of canals. The proposed new by-laws provide for the management of house boats, extended moorings and residential moorings. An annual houseboat mooring permit will be required for a houseboat not navigating or continuously cruising the canals. The permit will allow the use of a mooring identified by Waterways Ireland on the canals where the houseboat may moor for more than five days and up to one year. The proposed by-laws will also modernise the charging regime which has remained unchanged for almost a quarter of a century.

The proposed by-laws are intended to support the investment already made by Waterways Ireland in new infrastructure and facilities along the Grand and Royal Canals and the Barrow system. They will enable Waterways Ireland to develop the canals as a vibrant recreational and tourist amenity for all waterway users, including those who use the canals for residential purposes, and will help create and develop the canals into a waterways system that is modern and fit for purpose.

The final consultation report will be made available on the Waterways Ireland website. Also, as I indicated during a debate in Seanad Éireann on Wednesday, 26 February 2014, I will afford interested Deputies and Senators an opportunity to discuss the proposals with me prior to making a final decision on the new by-laws.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I welcome the Minister's response. It is noteworthy that there were more than 2,000 submissions. I gather that most of those people have attended a number of meetings in my constituency where there are two canals and the Barrow system. Whether the bulk of the submissions are in favour of an increase in the rate or in favour of some of the proposed regulations, the scale of what is being proposed is making the boat dwellers and users of the canals very nervous. I welcome the fact that the Minister will have further discussions when the recommendations have been forwarded to him by Waterways Ireland. I look forward to discussing the issue further with the Minister at that time.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I am aware Deputy Anthony Lawlor has a personal interest in this matter and has raised it with me on a number of occasions. As promised, I will come back to the Deputies and Senators who have expressed an interest before I make a final decision. Eventually, I will get the proposals from Waterways Ireland and my Department. I will discuss the sensitivities involved and the effect this will have on canal users.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Based on the Minister's comprehensive reply, the proposed charges will result in a €1,000 or €1,500 increase. The canal restoration that has taken place over the past 50 years was largely done through voluntary effort. While Waterways Ireland has an involvement in upgrading the canals, and it has a responsibility that we all respect, cognisance should be taken of the huge voluntary effort in the restoration of the canals. It would be grossly unfair to penalise people who, having made a voluntary effort, are now using the canals for leisure and residential purposes. Perhaps the Minister can take particular interest in ensuring charges are reduced to something manageable.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: The concerns expressed by Deputy Durkan are expressed in the submissions made to Waterways Ireland. Hopefully, what will be proposed will take into account concerns expressed by Deputies on all sides. Before I reach a final decision, I will consult with Deputies on all sides to ensure that what is proposed is reasonable and workable. It must also capitalise on the major investment made by Waterways Ireland in our canal system of 1,000 km. Waterways Ireland is a vibrant cross-Border body. It is one of the benefits of the Good Friday Agreement and it really works. It has proven itself from a tourist point of view. Many of the canals go through isolated rural areas and it brings life into those areas. We should try to facilitate that investment through proper but reasonable regulation.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I am happy with the Minister's response.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I relayed a copy of the submissions to the Minister and my colleagues have done likewise. Has the Minister studied the submissions with a view to meeting a delegation of representative groups before any decision is made?

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Waterways Ireland is receiving submissions and I have received copies of some of them. There is a common trend going through the submissions. Waterways Ireland deals with people out there and the commitment I am giving is that I will talk to Deputies and Senators from all parties who are interested in the topic. I cannot reopen the consultative process by meeting different groups. That is the business and responsibility of Waterways Ireland. As promised, I will meet Deputies and Senators.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I thank the Minister for the commitment to come back and talk to us about this. I also welcome the fact that Waterways Ireland is committed to further developing our inland waterways. Those in County Kildare know the importance of the River Barrow, the River Liffey, the Grand Canal and the Royal Canal. I welcome the fact that the current proposals include proper concessions for tourists who use waterways. It is intolerable that indigenous users of the waterways will be penalised in the way Waterways Ireland proposes. The structure and the scale of the fee increases envisaged will render the whole project untenable. Indigenous users will be taken off the waterways. It is not the objective of the Minister, nor is it the objective of Members. We must do something about it quickly.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I am aware that a number of people reside on canals and use them as a home. It is a very important consideration and we do not want to push the fee to a level at which it is no longer economical to reside on the canals. That must be taken into consideration. I take the points raised on board.

12. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Michael P. Kitt** den an Aire Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gael-tachta cén dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir leis na scéimeanna Teanga faoi Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [10694/14]

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Baineann an cheist seo leis na scéimeanna teanga agus cén dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir leo. Tá inní ar a lán daoine go dtógfaidh sé tamall fada chun na scéimeanna teanga a shocrú. Bhí sé seo soiléir ag cruinniú a bhí againn leis an iar-Choimisinéir Teanga. An cheist atá agam mar sin ná, cén dul chun cinn atá déanta leis na scéimeanna teanga.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Tá próiseas leanúnach ar bun ag oifigigh mo Roinne chun scéimeanna teanga a dhaingniú leis an iliomad comhlacht poiblí a thagann faoi scáth Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003. Ón eolas is déanaí atá ar fáil do mo Roinnse, tá 155 scéim teanga san iomlán daingnithe le comhlachtaí poiblí éagsúla, ón uair gur tháinig an tAcht i bhfeidhm, ar a n-áirítear céad, dara agus tríú scéimeanna. Ag tógáil san áireamh athruithe atá tagtha chun cinn mar thoradh ar scor nó ar athstruchtúrú comhlachtaí poiblí éagsúla le tamall anuas, ar a n-áirítear na boird oideachais agus oiliúna nuabhunaithe, tá 185 comhlacht poiblí san iomlán clúdaithe faoi na scéimeanna teanga i láthair na huair. Ina theannta sin, tá plé gníomhach ar siúl le tuairim is 120 comhlacht poiblí faoi láthair chun scéimeanna teanga a aontú leo.

Ní miste a nótáil go bhfanann scéim teanga i bhfeidhm, faoi réir alt 14(3) den Acht Teanga, ar feadh trí bliana ón dáta a dhaingnítear í, nó go dtí go ndaingnítear scéim nua, cibé acu is moille. Tá sé aitheanta go bhfuil an próiseas chun scéimeanna teanga a aontú dúshlánach, go háirithe sa chomhthéacs reatha ina bhfuil brú mór ar acmhainní. Tá céimeanna éagsúla á mbeartú chun an próiseas aontaithe scéimeanna a éascú, go háirithe i gcomhthéacs na leasuithe reachtúla atá beartaithe ar an Acht Teanga.

Ón uair gur tháinig córas na scéimeanna i bhfeidhm faoin Acht Teanga, tá sé tábhachtach a aithint go bhfuil feabhas tagtha ar líon agus ar chaighdeán na seirbhísí Stáit a chuireann comhlachtaí poiblí ar fáil i nGaeilge. Aithníodh ón tús gur próiseas forchéimnitheach a bheadh i gceist le feidhmiú an Achta, ag tógáil céimeanna de réir a chéile le comhoibriú agus le dea-thoil na bpáirtithe leasmhara éagsúla. Sa chomhthéacs seo, tá bearta dearfacha á dtógáil ag an Rialtas chun feabhas a chur ar na seirbhísí i nGaeilge atá ar fáil ón Státchóras. I measc na mbeart sin, áirím na céimeanna atá idir lámha chun cur le líon na n-oifigeach sa Státseirbhís atá inniúil ar an nGaeilge.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Mar is eol don Aire Stáit, creideann Conradh na Gaeilge go mbeadh sé scannalach dá síneofaí an tréimhse trí bliana do scéimeanna teanga go seacht mbliana. Deir an Conradh go bhfuil na scéimeanna lag ón tús, ach deir an Rialtas go n-éireoidh siad níos láidre gach trí bliana. Deirtear freisin go bhfuil moltaí sa dréacht straitéis don Bhille go síneofaí an tréimhse go seacht mbliana, rud a ligfeadh do na Ranna éagsúla a ndualgais a sheachaint. B'fhearr i bhfad fáil réidh leis na scéimeanna agus córas nua a fhorbairt - córas le caighdeán bunaithe ar rialacháin reachtúla, cosúil leis na rialacháin a d'éirigh as Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 nó an córas caighdeán atá bunaithe acu sa Bhreatain Bheag. Céard é tuairim an Aire Stáit faoin méid atá ráite ag Conradh na Gaeilge?

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Mar atá léirithe ag an Teachta, tá inní ar Chonradh na Gaeilge nach bhfuil níos mó scéimeanna teanga aontaithe ag an bpointe seo. Tá 185 comhlacht poiblí clúdaithe anois ag scéimeanna teanga agus tá comhráite ar siúl idir mo Roinn agus oifigigh na Roinne atá ag déileáil le scéimeanna teanga le 120 comhlacht eile, agus tá dul chun cinn dhá dhéanamh. Má éiríonn leis na scéimeanna sin, beidh breis agus 300 comhlacht clúdaithe. Tá

sin idir lámha i láthair na huair. Deir Conradh na Gaeilge gurbh fhearr dúinn, b'fhéidir, in ionad scéimeanna teanga cur chuige eile a bheith againn. Ar ndóigh, táimid ag breathnú ar na féidearthachtaí sin san athbhreithniú atá á dhéanamh ar an Acht Teanga. Mar a dúirt mé, tá céimeanna éagsúla á mbeartú chun an próiseas aontaithe scéimeanna a éascú, go háirithe i gcomhthéacs na leasuithe reachtúla atá beartaithe san Acht Teanga. B'fhéidir go bhfuil dóigh níos fearr, níos tapúla agus níos éifeachtaí le é a dhéanamh, ach táimid ag obair go crua ar scéimeanna teanga faoi fhorálacha an Achta mar atá sé i láthair na huair.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: An bhfuil buiséad ann do na scéimeanna seo? Má tá, cé mhéad airgid atá i gceist?

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Tá aontú na scéimeanna mar thoradh ar na comhráite a bhíonn ar siúl idir oifigigh na Roinne agus na comhlachtaí iad féin. Mar a dúirt mé inné, tá foireann iomlán bhreise san Roinn a bhfuil cúraimí scéimeanna teanga uirthi. Tá mé iontach dóchasach, mar go bhfuil foireann ansin ag déileáil go huile agus go hiomlán le haontú scéimeanna teanga, go rachaidh seo ar aghaidh níos tapúla ná mar a bhí go dtí seo. Tá foireann bhreise againn agus, ar ndóigh, ciallaíonn sé sin go bhfuil acmhainní breise ag dul isteach. Ní shílím gur sin an deacracht ná go bhfuil aon deacracht le sin.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Tá airgead ann dó na scéimeanna sin nó chun na daoine ag obair orthu a íoc, an bhfuil?

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Tá an t-airgead ann chun iad a íoc agus táimid i ndiaidh daoine breise a chur isteach ag déileáil le scéimeanna teanga.

Commemorative Events

13. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht his plans to commemorate the exploits of Ernest Shackleton in view of the fact that 2014 is the 100th anniversary of the launch of the Endurance Expedition in 1914; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10728/14]

27. **Deputy Anthony Lawlor** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht his plans to commemorate the exploits of Ernest Shackleton during 2014 as it is the 100th anniversary of the launch of the Endurance Expedition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10742/14]

Deputy Martin Heydon: In light of its being the 100th anniversary of the launch of the *Endurance* expedition by Ernest Shackleton in 1914, I would like the Minister to outline his and his officials' plans to mark this very significant event. From his recent visit to Athy, the Minister will know about the close link between Ernest Shackleton and south Kildare. There is great interest in the region in determining how we can mark this great milestone appropriately.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I propose to take Questions Nos. 13 and 27 together.

The increasing interest being shown in the heroic activities of Irish-born Ernest Shackleton and his companions in this centenary year of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, 1914–1917, is a welcome development. In these days of easy travel and general convenience, it is almost impossible for us to imagine the challenges and discomfort suffered by explorers on polar explorations, including several Irishmen, and to appreciate their heroic achievements.

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Following on the loss of the expedition ship *Endurance*, which was trapped in the ice from January 1915 until it was finally crushed in November 1915, the 800-mile journey of Shackleton, Worsley, Crean, Vincent, McCarthy and McNish from Elephant Island to South Georgia in April 1916 has become renowned as a truly amazing achievement. Across the years, it testifies to the fortitude of the group and their heroic resilience, seamanship and survival skills.

I am pleased to note the various projects in development in Ireland and abroad to mark the centenary of this historic expedition. Against the background of the First World War and the Irish revolution, it offers insight into a bygone age. Keeping tightly to the historic timeline, the commemorative programme will feature this expedition from its outset to its conclusion. I will continue to monitor the programme.

I have a particular interest in Shackleton because of Tom Crean. Recognition must be given to the wonderful one-man show about Tom Crean by Aidan Dooley, which has now enjoyed over 800 performances and has been seen by almost 400,000 people. If one wants a real sense of the challenge involved in the expedition, one should go to this show the next time it is in one's town.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Minister for the response. I wish to refer to a number of points and the tying in of the event to a First World War commemoration. The tale of the *Endurance* and of Shackleton's expedition is one of survival against the destruction of war. The Minister mentioned some proposed projects. It is proposed to have a concert in the National Concert Hall in early October. It would be very fitting and it would chart the story of Shackleton and the *Endurance*. It would be a perfect national commemoration of the event. It is very fitting that it would be in the National Concert Hall because Shackleton gave a talk in the building in 1909. There is a plaque in the lobby to mark the occasion.

I ask that the Minister engage with the promoters of the project to determine what support could be given to it from the State, and to see it as a national commemoration.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: That is a very good proposal and I would be just delighted to speak to the Deputy and the staff of the National Concert Hall about it so as to be facilitating in every way possible.

There are a number of young students in the Visitors Gallery and they are fascinated with this story. It is important that we reach out to the education and culture sectors in general to recognise the achievements.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I understand where the Minister is coming from as Tom Crean was from his own area in Kerry. However, Kildare is trying to develop its tourism industry. Would the Minister be in favour of giving a grant to Kildare Fáilte to develop the Shackleton museum in south Kildare?

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: The proposal seems to be very reasonable. If the Deputy passes it on to me, I will certainly have it examined by my officials.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: Is that a "Yes" or a "No"?

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I will have the proposal examined but the outcome will obviously depend on resources.

Turf Cutting Compensation Scheme Application Numbers

14. **Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the number of turf cutters on special area of conservation bogs have signed the final agreement with his Department on relocation/compensation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10743/14]

Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan: How many people have signed up to the final agreement on compensation? Perhaps the Minister will make a statement on it.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Under the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme, three types of legal agreements have been and are being issued by my Department. The first is a final legal agreement for qualifying turf cutters who are signing up to the annual payment of €1,500, index-linked, for 15 years. The second is a relocation interim legal agreement for qualifying turf cutters who have expressed an interest in relocation but no relocation site is currently available for them. This relocation interim legal agreement provides for the payment of €1,500, index-linked, or a supply of 15 tonnes of cut turf per annum, while these applicants are awaiting relocation to non-designated bogs. The third is a relocation final legal agreement. This agreement has been issued to qualifying turf cutters where a site has been assessed as suitable for relocation and is ready, or can be made ready, for use for domestic turf cutting.

Turf cutters who sign and return the applicable legal agreement to my Department will also receive a once-off incentive payment of €500.

A total of 1,711 legal agreements have been issued and my Department is continuing to issue agreements to qualifying applicants. Applicants have been requested to return the completed legal agreements within four months of the date of issue. A total of 1,209 legal agreements have been returned to my Department thus far. The majority of legal agreements returned are final legal agreements as most of these agreements are from qualifying turf cutters who have opted to receive the annual payment under the scheme. To date, in the region of 1,050 once-off incentive payments of €500 have been made to applicants in respect of these legal agreements.

Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan: An impression is being given by the Minister to the media that the vast majority of turf cutters on the so-called special areas of conservation have given up cutting turf and signed up to his plan. The reality is that but 1,209 legal agreements out of over 9,000 have been returned by those with turbary rights and landowners in the so-called special areas of conservation. That is not the vast majority. It is approximately 15% and the other 85% are being abandoned, not by me but by the State.

I was interested to hear an earlier reply the Minister gave on the bogs issue. He appears to think that the de-designation of some of the NHAs has not left grasslands that farmers need to use in parts that were not de-designated. The Minister said that none of them had been put in those areas. Since he said that I have received two messages. One is from a landowner in Cashel bog in Leitrim, whose house and land are in this designated area. The other is from somebody in Carricknaughton, who has acres of grassland within the area the Minister does not intend to de-designate. What the Minister said earlier is incorrect. He has now created a situation where people will have to ask permission to put cattle on their land. It appears they will also have to ask permission to open the front door of their house, because the Minister has left houses within these designations. Earlier he smiled and suggested this was not the case, but it is. I can bring the Minister to meet the people concerned.

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Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I said there was no turf being cut on grassland. The fact is that this is rather complex. Sometimes bog was not registered in people's names and so forth, so to have 1,200 legal agreements returned to the Department is quite an achievement. Anybody who is familiar with turbary rights and bog ownership will be aware that in many cases bogs were not registered in people's names. It is complicated. When bogs were passed on either through purchase or inheritance sometimes the bog was not registered and that is a challenge for us as well as for the people who are affected. In addition, not everybody with turbary rights was an active turf cutter. It is only people who were cutting turf for the previous five years who are affected, so not everybody who owns a bog or has turbary rights on a bog will have this legal agreement applied to them.

With regard to grasslands, when these SACs were first designated, they were based on information dating back as far as the 1970s and 1980s and obviously there was some land reclamation and bog cut away. Those people are being informed now. Anybody with any connection to the NHAs in this instance is being informed, so it is much broader than the people cutting turf on them. If the Deputy has particular cases in mind, he should bring them to my attention. There is no intention to prevent anybody from carrying out their normal farming practices. I urge the Deputy to bring these cases to me and I will have them investigated.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Government's Priorities for the Year Ahead: Statements (Resumed)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Jonathan O'Brien was in possession but as he is not present I call Deputy Catherine Murphy.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: We are having a week of debate on this topic and, indeed, part of next week's schedule will be allocated to it as well, which appears to be excessive in the extreme. When we consider this week, next week, the week after St. Patrick's Day and the Easter break, and the fact that we have a big legislative programme, one can predict that by next July there will be late sittings and guillotines. That is not the way this Parliament should be run.

This debate is supposed to be about a pivotal moment, taking stock after the troika is gone and what the opportunities will be in the future. This Government will be defined two years hence not by the programme for Government but by the mandate it was given on the basis of the promises made before the general election matched against the outcome at the end of its term of office. Citizens put their faith in the ability of the new Government to achieve a debt write down; it was Frankfurt's way or the way of the Labour Party. It was tough talk and the expectation was that it would be followed by tough action. We were told that not a cent more would go to Anglo Irish Bank and that was expected to mean that the bondholders would not be paid. The relief we got was welcome but the extent of it was really crumbs from the table in terms of interest relief.

We are taking stock against the backdrop of a huge debt. This year, we will spend €8.54 billion servicing our national debt. That is just slightly less than the €8.8 billion education

budget for first, second and third level education. Children born after the bank guarantee have already started primary school. They are in larger class sizes with reduced resources, which will impact on their educational outcomes. It will have an even greater impact on children with special needs. The cuts impact at several levels. The high-profile signing of the pledge not to impose third level fees was not worth the ink with which it was written. This is part of the reason people have lost faith in politicians and political parties.

There is a cost of €8.54 billion for servicing the debt, but most of it is not our debt but was imposed on us. I accept that much of it is legacy debt that this Government inherited. However, it is rising at the rate of €1,000 per second. If I speak for ten minutes, the debt will have increased by €600,000, and I know what the Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, could do in a flash with that amount of money. By 2016, the annual cost of servicing the debt will have risen to €9.1 billion. The debt is curbing the possibility of this country recovering. It is the elephant in the room which must be discussed if we are to discuss recovery. Our current debt is approximately €205 billion, of which 20% went straight to the banks. However, the banks are still not lending to the small and medium businesses that will be at the heart of job creation. The deal struck a year ago on the legacy Irish Bank Resolution Corporation, IBRC, promissory note knocked approximately €1 billion from that sum and while that is important, it is definitely not a game changer. I have drawn on Sinead Pentony's excellent article on debt domination in February's edition of "Village" magazine for updated figures.

The last main recessionary periods in Ireland in the 1980s and 1950s had the same patterns as the current recession - large scale emigration, widespread unemployment, high levels of taxation and cutbacks in vital services. We see those cutbacks in all walks of life. Whenever we discuss something in the House, that is the dominant issue. We are highly dependent on the European Union and the most powerful countries within the Union to achieve a sustainable recovery. I agree with the influential German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas who said in a major paper last year:

If one wants to preserve the Monetary Union, it is no longer enough, given the structural imbalances between the national economies, to provide loans to over-indebted states so that each should improve its competitiveness by its own efforts. What is required is solidarity instead, a cooperative effort from a shared political perspective to promote growth and competitiveness in the euro zone as whole. Such an effort would require Germany and several other countries to accept short- and medium-term negative redistribution effects in its own longer-term self-interest - a classic example of solidarity

11 o'clock

He went on to state, "The actual course of the crisis management is pushed and implemented in the first place by the large camp of pragmatic politicians who pursue an incremental agenda but lack a comprehensive perspective ... They are oriented towards More Europe because they want to avoid the far more dramatic and presumably costly alternative of abandoning the euro." He has also stated the German Government insists on priority being accorded to stabilising the budgets of individual states by national administrations, mainly at the expense of their social security systems, public services and collective good. We are pitting people against each other, almost blaming them for their predicament. We have become familiar with initiatives aimed at the unemployed. In the most recent budget there was a reduction in the rate for those under the age of 25 years; it was more or less positioned to suggest it was good for them and would get them off their couches and away from their big plasma screen televisions and out to work, as if

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their unemployment was of their own making. It is very dangerous to start blaming people in society for something in which they had no hand, act or part in causing. It is very destructive of society to go this way.

The big issue of mortgage arrears has not been grappled with in any serious way. The car kicked down the road is now in the ditch for many. We have run out of road and the people concerned are at the end game. I am sure every Deputy has met very stressed individuals beholden to organisations such as the Irish Mortgage Holders Organisation and New Beginning. We see families presenting as homeless. This is in the bailiwick of the Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, and I will keep raising the issue. Families are presenting as homeless or at risk of homelessness in increasing numbers. On Monday the homeless officer in Kildare County Council saw 16 families. I know this because I rang to make an appointment for others and could not do so. They are generally families with children. On Monday I spoke to a woman with five children and she and her husband are at their wits' end. They have been renting for nine years in the one location and on the local authority list all that time. Their children are settled in school. The Government has done good work in protecting children, but I see them becoming the new vulnerable. They are worried about their parents because they are in an absolute panic. Some of them have been searching for houses for three or four months. This happens every day of the week in my constituency and we must deal with this because it is a crisis. I do not know how to resolve it in the short term, other than through long leases or purchasing houses. It is self-evident that we cannot have ever-increasing rents. We are putting children and their families in a very vulnerable position and displacing those who traditionally have used homeless shelters. More and more people are on the street because they are being displaced in the shelters by others who should not have become homeless.

Nobody should be homeless and we need a plan of action. One reason for homelessness is that people cannot afford their rent. I have met people who work and who are unemployed and who cannot afford their rent. Some of this is for the good reason that recovery is taking place in some locations and I absolutely acknowledge that people in my area are gaining employment, but there is a downside in that those who are not gaining are suffering from a negative effect. It must be managed and seen as a crisis. In my area a family which is moved will be lucky to find a school place and the situation becomes impossible. It is also difficult for people to find work in such an environment as they spend the day traipsing between one school and another to collect their children. There is a serious crisis and I hope it will be acknowledged that we almost need a War Cabinet to deal with it in some locations. I cannot stress this point more strongly.

To date, the word "reform" with regard to public services has really been a code for cuts. Some services are at breaking point. I have no doubt there was room to tighten up and cut down on waste, but there is a point when one moves beyond this and it becomes counter-productive. We are very much at that point in some services. We have class sizes of between 32 and 35 children, including classes of tiny tots. In such cases teachers began to speak about crowd control. If education is to be one of the cornerstones of the future, we cannot be short-sighted. It all comes down not to what we can achieve ourselves but the extent of the debt which inhibits our ability to deal with very important social services. We signed up to the charter of fundamental rights under the Lisbon treaty, but we have very much become subservient to paying back bondholders and the ECB and being good Europeans. There is a point when the citizen of the country must come first, not second. That is my concern.

Our debt is 120% of GDP. If we use the more realistic GNP figure, it is 145%, which in anybody's terms is unsustainable. The noises we hear from the ECB and others contain very

little about retrospective recapitalisation of the banks. Our debt does not seem to feature as an issue for debate in the half-term review or the remaining time the Government will be in office. A comparable situation is that in post-war Europe. Much is said about hyper-inflation in Germany. This happened before the Second World War because of the debt that arose after the First World War. Germany would not be the powerhouse it is today were it not for the generosity of the United States, France and Britain and their absolute act of solidarity. Half of its debt was written off and the remaining debt was scheduled to be repaid over a much longer period. This was a remarkable act of solidarity, given what had happened and the casualties the countries in question had endured. Just as we put job creation as a central feature for the future, we must put the debt issue and its resolution centre stage. The European Commission, the ECB and others can state Ireland is fine, but it is not fine and we will not be until we get to grips with this major debt. We will not be able to deliver the education system, housing, health care or incomes required. I refer to the level of net income at which there would be opportunities to reduce taxation while at the same time providing a decent level of public services. I believe that if there is to be a real and sustainable recovery, it will depend greatly on how matters are run here but it is most certainly positioned elsewhere. It is positioned where that debt resides and this must be dealt with as an absolute priority each and every day, as our opportunities will be greatly limited unless this issue is dealt with in a comprehensive manner.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): When the Government was formed in March 2011, Ireland was facing an unprecedented economic emergency. The parties received a mandate from the people and formed a Government that resolved to restore the country's finances, repair Ireland's broken financial system and rebuild Ireland's reputation on the international stage. The priorities for my Department are influenced by the progress that has been achieved on its previous priorities, which include the clean exit from the EU-IMF programme, the successful post-bailout return by the NTMA to the markets, the control of and stability in public finances, the fall in unemployment for seven consecutive quarters from 15.1% to 11.9% in February and the creation of 61,000 jobs by businesses across the country in 2013, representing the strongest rate of employment growth recorded in the past six years.

I can assure Members that the exit from the EU-IMF programme was by no means an end in itself. The Government was not elected simply to steer Ireland out of a bailout. Given the costs that have been incurred by the people, such as unemployment, emigration and reductions in quality of life, their demands rightly are much greater than that. The Government wishes to see an economy that is growing, creating more jobs and delivering real improvements in people's quality of life. The Medium-Term Economic Strategy 2014-2020, published in conjunction with Ireland's exit from the EU-IMF programme, is the Government's strategy for putting the economy on a path of long-term economic growth. The strategy has at its core the objective of returning the economy to full employment by 2020 and is based on three interconnected pillars. The first is to ensure debt sustainability by reducing the deficit to below 3% by 2015 and eliminating it by 2018. The second pillar is about financing growth and ensuring credit is available for investment, while the third pillar is about supporting employment and living standards and as I stated, the target is to have full employment by 2020.

This is the first year of the strategy and the priorities of the Department of Finance in 2014 are very much driven by the aforementioned three pillars. A central priority for the Government has been the return of the public finances to stability. Sustainable public finances mean a fair and progressive taxation system that supports economic growth while at the same time providing the resources for high quality public services. The spiral of debt that engulfed this

country in the period leading up to 2011 resulted in Ireland's debt-to-GDP ratio hitting 104% from a low of 25% just four years previously. This accumulation of debt was brought about by the biggest public finance and banking crisis the country had ever seen and led to a severe contraction in economic activity. Confidence in the sustainability of the public finances is a precondition for a strong and lasting economic recovery. The Department of Finance is responsible for the implementation of rigorous new national and European debt, deficit and spending rules and institutional reforms. The fiscal targets are a 4.8% deficit in 2014, a 3% deficit by 2015 and the elimination of the deficit entirely by 2018. The Government has demonstrated its steadfast commitment to stick to its fiscal objectives by outperforming its deficit targets in 2011, 2012 and 2013. This has been vital for fostering market confidence in Ireland's recovery. By continuing to reduce the deficit in line with the strategy, the Government will stop adding to the debt. Ireland's gross debt levels, while very high at over 120% of GDP, will peak this year and the net debt position is just below 100%. When the equity stakes in the banks are taken into account, this figure is much closer to the EU average of 75% net debt to GDP.

Confidence in the Irish banks is beginning to return and has helped to reduce their reliance on Eurosystem funding and to bring to an end the bank guarantee. Since April 2012, there has been no emergency lending to the main Irish banks and their reliance on monetary authority funding had fallen to €27 billion at end of January, a level last seen in 2008. Reflecting this, AIB, Bank of Ireland and Permanent TSB all have accessed funding on capital markets at reasonable rates. A priority for the Department of Finance this year is to explore and develop opportunities to reduce further the gross and net debt levels. Sustainable public finances are one element and the State's shareholding in the financial system is another major part of this. The Government already has shown how the State can make a profitable return on an investment in the banks. Since 2009, the State invested €4.8 billion in Bank of Ireland, which has returned €6 billion to the State through sales and guarantee fees. In addition, the State retains a 14% shareholding in Bank of Ireland that currently is valued at €1.5 billion. It is the Government's stated policy position to continue to dispose of its holding in the Irish banking system and to use the proceeds to further reduce debt levels. It will do this through carefully adding value to its banking assets.

The gathering momentum of positive sentiment in the Irish economy is also reflected in the performance of NAMA. It generated approximately €5.8 billion in cash in 2013, including €3.8 billion from asset disposals with the total cash generated in the period of 45 months since its inception to the end of 2013 reaching €16.5 billion. The chairman of NAMA, Mr. Frank Daly, announced last week the agency's intention to repay a further €3 billion in NAMA bonds by the end of March this year and to have repaid half of the NAMA bonds by the end of this year. It is likely that the increase in NAMA asset sales to fund these redemptions will support construction activity in the economy, as purchasers of these assets will want to create income-generating assets as quickly as possible. A strategic review of the agency is under way in the Department. The sales processes for the remaining portfolios in IBRC are ongoing and the vast majority are expected to be concluded by mid-year. The IBRC liquidation is progressing in a satisfactory manner. The sale of the Rock and Salt portfolios on top of the success of the Project Evergreen sale late last year will reduce considerably the amount of assets that now are expected to transfer to NAMA. This bodes well for the ultimate success of the liquidation.

As set out in the medium-term economic strategy, in tandem with potential private sector disposals, the Eurogroup has agreed that retroactive recapitalisation may be decided on a case-by-case basis in line with the commitment from the Heads of State and Government on 29 June

2012. The European Stability Mechanism direct bank recapitalisation instrument, known as the DBR, is the technical mechanism that provides for this. There is still a lot of negotiation to be done on the finer details of this instrument but the agreement now in place gives the Government the option of applying to the ESM for a retrospective direct recapitalisation of the Irish banks. There is significant time for consideration of this option, as retroactive recapitalisation can only occur after the single supervisory mechanism is operational, most likely towards the end of 2014. Any application for retroactive recapitalisation will be considered in light of the potential returns to the State from alternative options for realising the value of the State's bank holdings.

Ensuring an adequate flow of credit availability to SMEs is a key objective for my Department this year. As the economy grows and demand for credit increases, it is essential that competitively-priced financing is available to support business to trade, to grow and create jobs. In the medium-term economic strategy, the Government set out its ambition of developing a more diversified, competitive and responsive financial infrastructure that can finance this growth across the economy. A range of actions were included in the Action Plan for Jobs 2014 to deliver this ambition. In 2014, the Department of Finance will continue to prioritise measures to ensure adequate flows of domestic and international credit to fund households and enterprises. This is essential for job creation and infrastructure development. My Department is specifically focusing on the establishment of the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund as part of the forthcoming NTMA amendment legislation, which will also establish NewERA to accelerate investment in strategic infrastructure; the conclusion of an agreement with KfW to increase the supply of credit to SMEs and to consider the potential for the creation of a State investment bank; and the expanded use of the National Pensions Reserve Fund for SME funding, which includes the funds already established for the purpose of turnaround, SME equity, SME corporate and the partnership with the Silicon Valley Bank and the Chinese Investment Corporation.

Following on from the turnaround of the banking system over the past three years, my Department will continue to work to repair and restore trust in the banks. This is vital to ensure that businesses are sufficiently confident to seek out credit to fund expansion opportunities.

Tackling mortgage arrears is an essential element of this repair job and it is vital that the banks continue to agree solution with customers who are in arrears. This Government has put in place a comprehensive programme of actions to assist householders struggling to pay their mortgages. Consumers and lenders are agreeing permanent restructures for those in arrears or those who think they will fall into arrears. This is the priority for this year. The Central Bank has set mortgage arrears resolution targets for the six main mortgage lenders. By the end of June, lenders will have to put in place solutions for 75% of customers in arrears of more than 90 days. Some 35% of the over 90 days in arrears category will have to be in a concluded solution. This is the minimum expected from the banks this year and my Department will actively manage the banks progress.

As I outlined earlier, the core objective of the medium-term economic strategy is full employment by 2020. This can only be achieved by delivering on the other objectives of the strategy, returning sustainability to the public finances and ensuring adequate supply of credit to business.

My Department's key direct policy area that influences economic growth is taxation, which is primarily set out in the annual budget. My Department will continue to prioritise taxation measures that ensure the recovery is jobs rich. In the past three budgets, we have shown how

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we can, through targeted measures, make our tax system more competitive and thus support a high quality of life and strong economic growth. I mention a €500 million tax package for businesses in budget 2014; support for the tourism sector through the zero air travel tax and the reduced VAT rate to 9%; tax policies to encourage the transfer of land to the younger generation in the agrifood sector; and re-establishing a fit-for-purpose construction sector through the introduction of real estate investment trust legislation, the home renovation tax incentive and an exemption from capital gains tax so that the overhang of commercial property in Dublin will be bought.

In line with the medium-term economic strategy, we will continue to explore opportunities to use tax as an economic tool to drive job creation and to build strong sectors across the economy. For example, as announced in budget 2014, a review of the agri-taxation reliefs is under way. The purpose of this review will be to assess the costs and benefits of the various agricultural tax expenditures with a view to ensuring that the maximum benefit to the sector and the wider economy is obtained. Ensuring the recovery is jobs rich also requires a medium to long-term focus and continually improving productivity as it is the key component of long-term Irish growth levels. This means we will focus on investment in people, building strong sectors and boosting competition and innovation to drive growth.

My Department plays a very significant role in representing Ireland at European and international institutions and we intend to use all of our interactions to ensure these institutions are focused on increasing global economic growth. Higher levels of global growth will be to our benefit as a small open economy, where our relations within Europe and across the world are crucial to our economic prosperity.

Building on the widely acknowledged success of the 2013 Presidency, my Department will continue to intensify its strategic engagement with Europe and international institutions to focus them on action that will lead to higher levels of global economic growth. My Department's immediate international and EU priorities are engaging in the European semester process to ensure that all member states act in the best interests of strong European economic growth; completing the banking union so as to support the creation of a single banking market in the EU. This will reduce the disparity of credit costs between banks in different member states; focusing European investment on innovation and greater competition that will increase the EU's long-term growth levels; earlier and continued involvement in a range of wider European policies and developments; and setting out the benefits of increased international trade for global economic growth.

The implementation of the strategies outlined in the programme for Government has resulted in Ireland's reputation improving dramatically in recent years. As well as the successful programme exit, Ireland's stewardship of the EU Presidency was recognised on an international stage as being well run and very productive. All rating agencies now recognise Ireland as investment grade and *Forbes* magazine recognises Ireland as being the best country in the world to do business.

We have achieved a great deal over the past three years but we must not become complacent. We will continue to place job creation at the heart of all our economic policies. The medium-term economic strategy 2014-2020 is the new blueprint to sustain a competitive economy that can pay its own way, serve society and that can survive and thrive in a reformed eurozone and an increasingly globalised international economy. Full employment by 2020 is the target and I am confident that the steps that we are taking this year will move us closer to achieving this

objective.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan): Three years ago my colleagues and I in the Labour Party sought a mandate from the people. The core themes we put before the people were jobs, reform and fairness. In February 2011, we were entrusted with an historic mandate by the Irish electorate. Every citizen of this country knows the perilous condition of Ireland’s economy, public finances and international standing which we inherited after nearly a decade and a half of Fianna Fáil rule. Since then, together with our coalition partners in Fine Gael, we have worked day and night to bring stability, growth and hope back to our citizens. We are now witnessing very tangible progress – more people are at work, economic growth has returned and a more confident Ireland is emerging.

Key to this turnaround has been the fortitude and resilience of the Irish people. I know Irish citizens have made very significant sacrifices and we owe it to these people to follow through on our programme for Government commitments and to work to ensure that improvements in the quality of life go hand in hand with a revitalised economy. This is especially true in the area of housing.

The programme for Government outlines a number of commitments on key issues such as ghost estates, social housing, urban regeneration and homelessness. These commitments have been, or are well on the way to being, implemented. However, as Members of this House know and as Deputy Catherine Murphy just outlined, the housing situation is rapidly changing. Over the next two years, the Government is determined to take bold steps to respond to emerging demand in the social and private housing sector. These measures go beyond the reforms outlined in the programme for Government.

Before I address these issues, I want to outline to the House the progress achieved on programme for Government commitments. In regard to unfinished housing developments, we committed to bringing forward a coherent plan to give hope to the families and communities whose quality of life was blighted by unfinished housing estates – a very potent example of the destructive dalliance the previous Government had with the property market. Since then we have reduced the number of unfinished estates by 56%. We have brought hope back to thousands of families who previously thought they were stranded for God knows how long in appalling living conditions. I acknowledge the role NAMA, the local authorities, financial institutions and local communities have played in working with Government to resolve this issue – partnership has proved to be the crucial element achieving progress.

Progress to date has improved the lives of thousands of families and yet there is still a significant amount of work to be done. Approximately 1,200 unfinished estates remain and many of these are the most difficult cohort to resolve. Last Friday, my Department received applications from local authorities under the new €10 million fund established in budget 2014, with the support of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, and I hope to allocate funding under this measure in the coming weeks.

The programme for Government focused attention on regeneration and despite very significant downward pressure on the housing capital budget, the Government has maintained a significant regeneration programme. Projects are under way in Tralee, Cork, Sligo and Dundalk, as well as larger projects in Limerick and Ballymun. I am also pleased to say progress is being achieved for communities in inner city Dublin who were cruelly abandoned by the failed PPP

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model advanced by the previous Government. Work on St. Michael's Estate in Inchicore is in its final stages, while plans have been agreed and work will begin this year on Dolphin House and St. Teresa's Gardens. I am in regular contact with Dublin City Council regarding other projects and hope to be in a position to report further progress on same later this year.

The programme for Government highlighted specific actions on social housing and homelessness. The Government is committed to ending long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough. In the past two years in Dublin 1,500 people have moved from homeless services to independent living, with necessary supports. This is the type of housing-led policy that I want to see at the heart of homeless services throughout the country. However, despite the significant achievement in assisting 1,500 people to move from homeless services, there is an increase in the numbers presenting as homeless and, most worryingly, an increase in the number of families presenting. This is an urgent issue, particularly in the greater Dublin region. In the past few weeks we have formed the implementation structures recommended in the first report of the independent oversight group. The most important issue in terms of both short and medium-term responses to homelessness is the supply of appropriate long-term accommodation. In the coming weeks I will be examining all sources of supply, whether held publicly, privately or by NAMA, that can be utilised to provide adequate emergency accommodation and, more importantly, stable long-term accommodation. Securing supply will reduce our reliance on expensive and often inappropriate emergency accommodation and give people security and stability. The family referred to by Deputy Catherine Murphy is in need of such stable, long-term accommodation. I do not underestimate the challenge in sourcing supply, given the lack of new building in Dublin in the past five to six years, but I am determined to examine every available option to tackle the scandal of homelessness.

Increasing both public and private housing supply is a critical issue for the Government, as both the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste outlined in the House yesterday. In the coming weeks the Government will agree and publish its construction strategy which will facilitate an uptake in development and has the potential to create thousands of jobs. As part of the public capital investment in housing, the coming 18 months will see in excess of €200 million being invested to expand and enhance housing stock. Investment in regeneration and unfinished estates will total some €80 million this year and additional measures include a new €65 million local authority mainstream building programme that I will allocate in the coming weeks; an additional €15 million investment that will bring more than 300 long-term vacant local authority housing units back into use; new two year capital investment in housing for people with a disability, the elderly and people who are without a home that will see some €35 million invested this year and next; investment in partnership with the not-for-profit housing sector that will expand the number of social units available; and a €30 million investment in improving the energy efficiency of local authority homes which will reduce energy bills for thousands of families and support green energy jobs. There are two important strands to this investment programme – first, to increase the supply of new social homes and, second, to ensure every available appropriate unit is transformed into a home. With supply at record low levels, the second strand, that is, turning empty units into family homes, is important in addressing the immediate problem of supply, particularly of social housing. I am concerned that many social houses are left vacant for long periods after tenants move out.

This is an opportune time to review where we stand as a country and plan for the future. This is nowhere more important than in the housing sector. The Government is determined to increase construction activity and the supply of social homes, deal with the legacy issues we

inherited, end long-term homelessness and oversee a stable housing sector that works for families, rather than being a cash machine for developers and financiers. The programme for Government provides us with a solid base for that reform agenda. Much of that work has largely been achieved or is substantially under way, but, as the economy recovers, we need to respond to emerging challenges in the housing sector and I am aware that these challenges are acute in many parts of the country.

Innovative public investment, partnership with the not-for-profit sector and a coherent strategy for construction and home building are just some of the issues where policy is now focused in my Department. I do not have a monopoly of wisdom and constructive suggestions from both within and outside the House will be given full consideration. The country is changing. The despair and sense of betrayal that marked the public mood four or five years ago are being replaced. We can once again face the future knowing that the decisions we take are of our own making, not appendages to a troika deal. Much work still needs to be undertaken, but the country has changed for the better. In the next two years the Government will continue to work to improve the lives of families across the country, creating jobs, promoting reform and ensuring fairness.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I welcome the opportunity to make a statement on the Government's priorities for the year ahead. It would be absurd not to say there has been a degree of stabilisation across areas of national endeavour. However, that stabilisation is based on a plan agreed with and imposed by the troika and the previous Government that found itself in a panic crisis. There are no great marks for taking a stabilising approach to what was a survival plan. We relied on troika loans and bilateral loans from the United Kingdom and Sweden to bridge the gap between the excesses of expenditure and income for a period of three years. It has been sold and spun in so many ways that people are confused and exhausted. The reality we are living with is one of hurt across households, among young people and the elderly. It is very palpable and we are hearing it every day. It is truthfully a cry of pain and hurt.

It is not good enough, in the context of the strong numerical mandate given on 26 February 2011, leading to the formation of a coalition Government on 9 March 2011 with the largest ever majority in our history, that the old ways of doing business continue. The unthinking, donkey-like behaviour continues today and that is just not on. There is no imaginative, free, challenging, creative, honest or fair thinking on the part of backbenchers of the two Government parties. It is embarrassing. They come into the House, debate in one way but vote in the way they are told. The debate on the abolition of the Seanad was a case in point. Many Labour Party and Fine Gael Senators and Deputies voiced their deep concerns that the proposal to abolish the Seanad was not safe or sound and they were right. However, the leadership of both parties told them that they were not supposed to think but to vote and they did so. That is shameful.

We are here to discuss the priorities for the year ahead, but the big challenge, the gaping priority, the beached whale, is completely ignored - the debt of the country. It is a sad inevitability that unless we achieve a write-down on the debt and an overhaul of the banker, auditor and political culture which drove the country into economic Armageddon, in a few years time we will still be in a toxic swamp and the distress will not be alleviated. The pain is only in remission. On "Morning Ireland" recently, one of our most experienced and esteemed journalists described the news of the sale by Wilbur Ross and Prem Watsa of Fairfax Financial Holdings of their stakes in Bank of Ireland as "finally a bit of good news for Irish banks." It was weird and unreal to hear that. How on earth could the sale by vulture investors of a shareholding in Bank of Ireland be greeted as good news? If only people paused for a moment and did the simple

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Corn Flakes box sums. These two firms sold 6.4% of the bank for €690 million, yielding a profit of €90 million on their entire shareholding. They now still hold 12.8% of the bank, worth €1.3 billion. There is nothing good for the Irish people about that.

The journalist's statement alone demonstrates that we have come full circle when it comes to our understanding of finance and property in this economy. We simply have not got a clue. For years, the media and politics were cheerleaders for endless economic growth and rising property prices as the hallmarks of a sophisticated economy whose model could be replicated all over the world. They and the banks' boards did not understand banking or the financial engineering of bank balance sheets. This will come out in the banking inquiry. When the chickens came home to roost, it will be seen that there was at least a degree of scrutiny in the role finance and banking played in our economic demise. It took €64 billion of taxpayers' money, representing almost half of the entire economy, for the media and politicians alike to stand back and confront the insidious nature of credit and its oversupply to one area of the economy. Property developers cannot do anything without credit and credit cannot arrive unless there are bank boards. The auditors were meant to arrive at a conclusion as to whether the balance sheets and statements represented a true and fair view of the banks' affairs. Six years later, nothing has happened. It is pathetic.

The deafening silence from the entire Government, which represents two thirds of the seats in the Dáil, as well as the silence from the two major Opposition parties, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin, to the announcement of Wilbur Ross's disposal of his shareholding in Bank of Ireland demonstrates that, after five years, Irish politics, the establishment and the media have gone back to business as usual. On Leaders' Questions yesterday, Deputy Healy hit the bull's-eye. He did the sums and showed that all those Members who stood by lauding this development as a great event were in fact showing collectively how we are idiots and are not looking out for the people. Bank of Ireland has done nothing about restructuring its customers' loans. It claims it has but I know it has not as I have done several *pro bono* help-outs for people with the bank. The way they are treating those individual loans is pathetic.

The politicians will look after politics while the bankers look after the banks. Our national broadcaster will report increasing share prices in banks as gospel evidence that a corner has been turned. In January 2007, the market capitalisation of Anglo Irish Bank was about €10 billion, lauded as the best banking model in the world by consultancy firm Oliver Wyman, which will do the eurozone bank stress tests soon. Of course, Anglo collapsed with the same balance sheet a year later with losses of between €35 billion and €40 billion. That is how clever the markets are.

Do we believe that if the vulture investors are now departing our seas, it means our banking system and culture are improving? We need to wake up and smell the coffee. There are too many families hurting. That is why I get annoyed, justifiably. I get angry when I see the Government standing back and not doing anything about this. It is too easy to go to events such as today's European People's Party convention and congratulate each other.

The debate is over. We are not getting a write-down, separating bank debt and sovereign debt. Why should the Irish people be loaded with all the losses of a private banking system? Will there be a recognition that we need a retrospective separation of bank debt and sovereign debt? The bank debt is losses.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, used to believe

that.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: It is not over yet.

Deputy Peter Mathews: It does not matter because our bond yields are cheap and the focus now is on getting people to spend more money, as well as getting property prices to rise again.

When Wilbur Ross, Fairfax and Kennedy Wilson came to these shores, the type of green that filled their hearts was not the shamrock we will all be proudly wearing in a few days’ time. It was the green with George Washington’s face, the dollar. Does anyone believe that Wilbur Ross or Kennedy Wilson give a damn about this country or its economic recovery? These are not Chuck Feeney philanthropists but cold, hard, calculating capitalists in search of high yields, high returns and high risk. However, they did not even take a high risk with their Bank of Ireland undertakings, as the Government basically presented them with candy floss. They took a gamble on Ireland and have tripled - in some cases quadrupled - their money on the country. They took this gamble because at every step of the way the Government reduced their risk and gave them sweetheart deals to cement their investments.

A gargantuan area of economic life that, until very recently with the sale of Irish Nationwide residential mortgages, has been completely ignored is the sale of bank loans from Bank of Ireland, AIB, NAMA, Permanent TSB and Anglo Irish Bank, not to mention the other non-domestic banks such as Bank of Scotland Ireland and Ulster Bank. The loan sales that have been undertaken in this country and the transfer of wealth from domestic Irish owners to foreign vulture capitalists have been of the magnitude of two thirds of the entire economy. We spent weeks in this House debating the sale of State assets such as the ESB, the national lottery and Coillte. These asset sales collectively amount to a small fraction of the State-owned bank assets the Government has sold at enormous discounts and losses to the taxpayer who owns these banks. The Wilbur Ross fairy tale is a central component of these sales which has all but been ignored by this House and the media alike.

In the summer of 2011, Kennedy Wilson bought a business from Bank of Ireland that was responsible for managing borrowers’ property loans, much of which were UK commercial property loans. One month later this same company was part of the private consortium that bought shares in Bank of Ireland. This private investment was fronted by Wilbur Ross and was widely regarded at the time as a sign that investor confidence was returning to Ireland and our banking system. Behind the scenes, however, there was a much bigger play being fronted by Kennedy Wilson which concerned the main part of its own business, which is buying up bank loans. A few months after the Bank of Ireland private consortium investment, Kennedy Wilson bought €1.3 billion of UK commercial property loans from the same bank in what Ernst & Young later described as the single largest European commercial property loan sale in 2011. When the Government sold its State assets, it appointed an independent broker to sell the lottery and Bord Gáis businesses. Why were the bankers allowed do sweetheart deals with impunity? There was no open, transparent market process for these loan sales. This is in spite of the fact that Bank of Ireland was in receipt of almost €5 billion of taxpayers’ money and subject to European Commission state aid rules. Since the sale of those loans to Kennedy Wilson, the former head of the non-core division for Bank of Ireland - the division which was responsible for selling the loans - was appointed managing director of Kennedy Wilson. The head of the unit in the Department of Finance responsible for overseeing the private investment into Bank of Ireland and the bank’s loan sales left at the beginning of 2013 and was given a job as head of group treasury in Bank of Ireland. Both Wilbur Ross and Fairfax are either co-investors, or direct investors in

Kennedy Wilson in a vulture triumvirate that has made billions of euro from the carcass of the Irish banking system. These profits were facilitated by weak politicians looking for a quick win and what appear to be civil servants and bankers looking for a new job.

Is it any wonder that Wilbur Ross, Fairfax, Prem Watsa and Kennedy Wilson regularly hail Richie Boucher as a hero of the Irish banking system when he has been instrumental in making these investors billions of euro in profit? This vulture triumvirate has made billions of euro from the collapse of the domestic financial system, which was overseen and led by the same man they now herald as their financial hero. There is no question that the profits these people have made are the stuff of Wall Street legend; “heroic” is a good a description. However, I find it hard to believe that when the cameras are off and the journalists have gone home, Wilbur Ross, Fairfax and Kennedy Wilson think of Richie Boucher and the Government as anything other than amateurs in a game in which the big boys always win.

The same neoliberal or establishment philosophy exists in Europe where the boys in Frankfurt have scant regard for bullying a country that represents just 1% of the entire eurozone into bailing out unguaranteed, unsecured senior bondholders. Three years after bullying one tiny nation’s taxpayers into bailing out bank bondholders, the ECB imposed the exact same financial bullying tactics on Cyprus to make ordinary depositors and taxpayers pay the price for the lending mistakes of their banks. For the educated financiers in Frankfurt, sovereign countries such as Ireland or Cyprus, rich in history, culture and independent spirit, represent a dot in the financial ocean that is the eurozone. They are an irrelevant distraction whose peoples can be squeezed for every euro they earn to preserve the integrity of the eurozone financial system and, as they see it, the greater common good.

In the summer of 2012 when Spain and Italy faced the financial abyss that Ireland faced, Frankfurt did not tell them to get in line or that a bomb would go off in Madrid or Milan if they did not. The ECB board members panicked. They saw their own personal credibility on the line and they saw the financial implosion of the euro system as their legacy. Instead of threatening proverbial bombs like our Minister faced, Spain, Italy and the entire eurozone economy was given the Draghi pledge, which has fundamentally altered the eurozone crisis. The ECB will buy whatever it takes. Ireland could have done with the Draghi pledge four years ago when we piled €64 billion of taxpayers’ money into a financial drain of bondholders, bankers and pension funds across the world.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: Agreed.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The international investors and foreign newspaper writers who backslap the Government for restoring the international credibility of the country, are the same people captured by the financiers who profited in the billions from the taxes of Irish workers.

This country will sink as quickly as it has risen from the ashes unless we achieve a write-down on our debt generated by bank losses. I listened carefully to the Minister for Finance recently explain that he was having a hard time pleading for a bank debt deal from his European colleagues. The reason he explained he was having a hard time was our bond yields are lower than those of many of the countries that would have to contribute to such a write-down; this is pathetic. The Irish people and media, by and large, trust the Minister when he speaks; they trust his words and admire his Limerick wit. The Irish people also, by and large, trusted Bertie Ahern when he spoke; they admired his words and were dazzled by his political acumen.

As long as the economy grows and the population's spending power improves, statistics relating to our national debt which we cannot afford will be a distant mirage for most people in their day-to-day lives. I refer to medical cards, carer's allowance, young people abroad, hollow JobBridge placements and all the factors that make for a tough life at the moment. We should get real with Europe. The false dawn being celebrated this week by the Government parties will not last forever. Eventually the large economies of Italy and Spain will be insulated to an extent that the ECB will no longer be required to step in and bail them out. Why does anyone believe that at the next time of crisis, the ECB members will look more kindly on this nation? Of course they will not. All the hard earned economic gains that taxpayers will have made and the suffering will be in vain and we will be thrown to the wolves again, as we were in the past.

Starry eyed diplomacy where we seek the love and adoration of our partners in Europe or our financiers in Frankfurt has not served this nation well. The lowering of our interest rates on our official sector bonds, the restructuring of the promissory note - which was a given but I do not have time to show how that occurred - and the extension of the maturity on our loans are all welcome events, which have improved the overall debt profile of this country but they are by no means even close to sufficient. How can it be that the Taoiseach, Tánaiste or any Minister has not told the House or the Irish people during the debate that they will fight with every ounce of their being for a write-down on Irish bank losses debt? Even the Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Deputy Brian Hayes, who is a declared candidate for the European Parliament elections, is silent on the issue. He recently publicly confirmed: "I just think now is the time where we continue to negotiate and it's better that these are done, effectively, behind closed doors." We have heard that for three years.

Amazingly, other candidates running for Europe include Eamon Ryan, the former Minister, who has openly acknowledged some of his ministerial colleagues were asleep in bed when the Cabinet secretary phoned them to ask whether they supported the guarantee of €400 billion of bank debt on the backs of the Irish taxpayer. The same former Minister described Morgan Kelly's who made a calculated assessment in May 2010 as a "prophet of doom" for claiming the country would become insolvent unless it abandoned its policies to bail out the banks. Four months later, the Merrion Hotel was booked out and teams of economists from Frankfurt, Brussels and Washington launched their economic takeover of the State. That was 28 November 2010. It was a snowy and cold night and I was in RTE was Myles Dungan. The six Irish banks owed the ECB €135 billion at the time and that is why these people were here. It was shocking. Mr. Ashoka Mody, chef d'équipe of the IMF element of the troika has said Ireland should get a debt write-down. Six weeks ago in Davos, Ken Rogoff said we should get a debt write-down and it is the right thing for Europe to do.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It is not over yet.

Deputy Peter Mathews: Yet, yet, yet. We have not heard the voices of the Government. Let us get real here. The people had a decade of platitudes and false dawns, which resulted in what the IMF has called the single largest financial crisis in human history. That is quite an accolade of failure that the previous Government oversaw. This Government has stabilised the economy using the plans of others. It has cut public spending, increased taxes and reduced the gap between taxation and expenditure but this was planned anyway. Our debt mountain is such that not even Hilary and Tenzing would be able to climb it. Household debt is €172 billion and represents 105% of our GDP; non-financial corporate debt is €330 billion or 202% of our GDP; and government debt is €193 billion or 118% of our GDP. This represents a total combined debt of €695 billion or 425% of GDP, the highest in the OECD.

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Ireland has a massive insurmountable debt problem that the Minister for Finance tells us is sustainable and that his junior Minister, Deputy Brian Hayes, says should be quietly negotiated behind closed doors. The bonds that the Government was forced to issue by the ECB to repay the debt it had provided to Anglo Irish Bank should be written off. Patrick Honohan should be told to cancel them because they are odious. The taxpayer did not incur these losses and does not owe this debt. We cannot afford this. Writing off this debt from the balance sheet of the ECB would be a dot on the financial ocean that is the eurozone but it would be important to ignite a sustainable economic recovery on this island.

12 o'clock

Second, the ESM must be used as a vehicle to recapitalise retroactively the Irish taxpayer for the investments it has put into Bank of Ireland, AIB and Permanent TSB. Again, these investments of billions of euro were largely made with the aim of maintaining stability in the European financial system. We paid our price, and now taxpayers should be given relief for the sacrifice they have made. The Government has fallen completely short on its pre-election promises. I am very conscious of this, as someone who ran for Fine Gael in the last election. Since then, I have been expelled. During that campaign, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Varadkar, promised the Irish people with much gusto that “not another cent” would be given to Anglo Irish Bank. Fine Gael subsequently published a banking policy document promising the Irish electorate that, if elected, Fine Gael would unilaterally impose losses on senior bondholders in Anglo Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide if our European partners did not agree. Most famous of all was the great rhetoric from the Tánaiste, who told the Irish people they had two stark choices, “Labour’s way of Frankfurt’s way.” I question how a Minister of State at the Department of Finance who believes we should adopt the same tactics that have failed to get us a bank debt deal is in any way equipped or sufficiently fired up for the Irish people to send him to Europe to get us a deal. We have entered the realms of the twilight zone for the Irish people to even contemplate sending Eamon Ryan, the former Cabinet Minister who sunk Ireland into the economic abyss, out to Europe to negotiate for us a deal on our bank debt. He would be laughed out of the European Parliament trying to convince the larger countries that even though he was the Minister who sealed our fate with the bank guarantee, he was asking them to forgive him his €400 billion mistake and compensate the error.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Could Deputy Mathews move that the debate be adjourned?

Deputy Peter Mathews: I have only one more sentence. What kind of message would the Irish people be sending to Europe if we sent such representatives to do our bidding? Here is my last sentence.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Brilliant.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The failure of this Government to include a debt write-down of approximately €50 billion from Europe as the overriding priority underpinning all our engagements with our European counterparts is a failure that will cost the Irish taxpayer dearly. We need to get our money back from Europe because if we do not, my children, the Minister’s children and our children’s children will face the same catastrophic financial cost that this generation has already faced. We were led to trust in the kindness of strangers. Have we been left out on a limb to be disappointed by the strangers to kindness?

Dáil Éireann
Leaders' Questions

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: The Tánaiste's Government has been bedevilled by crisis after crisis in the health services.

Deputy Pat Rabbitte: Good man, Seán. That is a good one.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: Those crises have had a real impact on patients the length and breadth of the country. The Minister, Deputy Rabbitte, may think it is a matter for hilarity, but for the people who have had negative experiences within the health services it has not been fun. Last year the Government decided to cut nurses' and midwives' pay by a further 20%. Today, graduates who have completed a four-year degree course are working alongside other graduates for 20% less than their colleagues who took up employment in 2011 and 2012. They are expected to do exactly the same work and carry the same responsibilities. The Government sought to justify that cut by introducing a graduate nurse programme. The scheme, which might be described by some as a scam, is totally unfair to the newly qualified nurses and midwives. We find as a result that they are emigrating to the UK and other places around the world while the HSE is out there trying to recruit nurses on the international stage to take up positions in this country. The suggestion that teachers would have a similar 20% pay cut inflicted on them was removed by the Government, but that did not happen for the nursing profession.

Does the Tánaiste believe the way nurses and midwives have been treated in this country is fair? Is it acceptable that they have to work alongside their colleagues for €22,000 per year? The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Burton, spoke about creating a situation in which we could have a living wage, but the reality is that the Government is imposing a fundamental unfairness on one section of Irish society, namely nurses and midwives. The Irish public has great respect for this profession. Will the Tánaiste reverse that Government policy and ensure that young, fully qualified graduate nurses are paid the same as their colleagues?

The Tánaiste: The hypocrisy of Fianna Fáil knows no bounds. Twice when Fianna Fáil was in government it unilaterally cut the pay of people who work in our public services without a by your leave or agreement from anybody. This Government, by contrast, engaged in negotiations with the trade unions representing staff who work in our public services, including those who work in our health services, and agreed with the trade unions a formula for the management of public service pay over the coming years. All those trade unions in the public services, including those in the health services and the nursing unions, have agreed to that arrangement and to the way pay is to be managed in the public service.

We have a pay regime in our health services which is agreed with the trade unions, covered by the Haddington Road agreement. That covers all aspects of the management of pay within the public services. This year we have recruited an additional 260 people for primary care teams, including 52 speech and language therapists, 72 public health nurses, and a number of general nurses, occupational therapists and physiotherapists. Even within the limitations of very difficult financial circumstances the HSE has again begun the recruitment of staff to support our health services and deliver the health services we need in this country.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: The Tánaiste may use all the pejorative terms he likes. It is true that his predecessor in government cut public pay rates across the board, and there was an equality in how that was approached.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: Here we are talking about an additional cut on top of those initial cuts. We are talking about young nurses and midwives being singled out for particular attention by the Government.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: They were delighted.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: Will the Tánaiste go outside the gate this afternoon and talk to those nurses and midwives who are protesting about the circumstances in which they find themselves?

Deputy Gerald Nash: Chancer.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: Will he go out there and tell them they have agreed to this situation? If he does, he will get his answer and it will be unambiguous. In January 2013 the Government advertised 1,000 posts for these “yellow pack” nurses. From responses to parliamentary questions I understand that in January this year only 600 of those 1,000 places had been filled. Why have the positions on offer not been taken up? Why have only a little over half of the positions been availed of by graduate nurses?

The Tánaiste: As I said, nurses’ pay was the subject of negotiation and agreement with the trade unions representing nurses. The number of nursing staff increased by 100 in the first month of 2014, reflecting the take-up of posts under the graduate initiative. Nearly 500 nurses and midwives have commenced employment in recent months on that graduate scheme. More than 200 others are going through the recruitment process and more than 1,000 applications have been received for that scheme.

In fairness, we need to take on board a number of points. The first is that the issue of pay has been the subject of agreement, which is to be welcomed. Second, we are recruiting. There was a time when we saw quite significant declines in the numbers of nurses employed in the system and I remind the Deputy that in 2010, 2,500 nurses were taken from the system, with another 3,000 going in 2011. We are now seeing recruitment of nurses in the health service, which is good, and it is being done subject to the agreements reached, which is also good.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Rehab Group is in receipt of in excess of €83 million of public funds, and the group and its enterprise enjoys the benefits of charitable status in the State. Last week, Ms Angela Kerins, the current chief executive officer of Rehab, appeared before the Committee of Public Accounts. At the meeting she refused to reveal details of the pay levels of senior executives within Rehab, and when pressed, she made a commitment that within the days following the meeting she would put the information on the public record. A week on, Ms Kerins and Rehab have failed to make the information public.

In the course of the same week I received much correspondence. One piece came from a young woman on an rehabilitative training programme from Rehab, and she had no difficulty sending me her payslip, which I have in the Chamber. This young person receives an income of €31.80 per week and has travel expenses of €15 deducted, meaning the net income as reflected by the payslip is €16.80. This person has no difficulty with her income being known publicly. Will the Tánaiste join me and the Committee of Public Accounts in insisting that Rehab and Ms

Kerins make public the full information on payments to senior executives?

Mr. Frank Flannery, a former chief executive and acting member of the board at Rehab, was invited to attend last week's meeting but he did not show up. Mr. Flannery will be invited again before the committee and to make himself available to give the information in response to questions that we have. Will the Tánaiste join me, the Committee of Public Accounts and the Taoiseach in saying to Mr. Flannery that he should attend the committee at the earliest possible opportunity?

Deputy Finian McGrath: He was too busy in the Oireachtas restaurant.

The Tánaiste: I have no hesitation at all in saying that the pay of senior executives in Rehab and any organisation funded by the State through the HSE should be made public. We are discussing this issue, in a fashion, because the Government took an initiative in this regard. The Minister for Health is conscious that a large number of organisations receive substantial amounts of State funding for the delivery of services and the Government has pursued a general policy in respect of public service pay that included an audit of section 38 and 39 organisations. That put the issue on the agenda in the first place. The pay of senior executives in organisations such as Rehab should be publicly available. If a body is in receipt of public funding, why should that not be the case? With respect to the invitation to Mr. Flannery, he should attend the Committee of Public Accounts and I encourage him to do so.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I thank the Tánaiste for those responses, and it is very clear at this stage that Members of the Oireachtas are of one mind on this issue, whether on the Government or the Opposition benches. We are all absolutely insistent at this stage that full details in respect of payments to Rehab executives must be made public without any further delay. I welcome that the Tánaiste, along with members of our committee, is sending that message on behalf of the Oireachtas and Government to the current chief executive, the former chief executive and the entire Rehab organisation. I hope those parties will respond in kind. We have been faced with a case in which an organisation in receipt of very substantial public moneys and enjoying charitable status has thumbed its nose at the general public, volunteers and donors. I very much hope the same people will not show disregard to the Government of this State and elected Members of this House. I hope Ms Kerins and her colleagues in Rehab will speedily, finally and fully disclose the pay rates of senior executives.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are over time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste has made his position on Mr. Flannery clear and we are of one mind on the issue. He must appear before the Committee of Public Accounts and has an absolute obligation to do so. Will the Tánaiste make that known to the Taoiseach and Cabinet colleagues, and if necessary will he make direct contact with Mr. Flannery? I hope that will not be necessary but if it is, given the seriousness of the issue and the track record of this organisation in disregarding any form of public accountability, neither the Taoiseach nor the Tánaiste should shy away from having that conversation in correspondence with Mr. Flannery.

The Tánaiste: There are two issues. The first is the obligation of organisations in receipt of substantial sums of taxpayers' money from the State for the delivery of services to be fully transparent and accountable. That should be the case. There is also the issue of the very good work that organisations such as Rehab do, along with many of the other charities that have been in the public domain in respect of issues with regard to salaries, etc., in the past months. There

is an obligation to the volunteers working for the organisations and the people relying on them for services, as well as the many people who contribute very generously to the charities concerned, that there be full information on where money goes. There should be details of levels of payment and so on, so the information should be made available.

The Taoiseach has already expressed his view on Mr. Flannery's attendance at the Committee of Public Accounts and it is a matter for the committee to pursue the issue with Mr. Flannery. My view is clear that he should attend, so I encourage him to do so.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: On Tuesday Wilbur Ross and Fairfax sold some of their shares in Bank of Ireland. They bought the shares for €600 million and they are now worth just over €1.9 billion, leaving a gain of approximately €1.3 billion. There is no issue as such with this profit, as these investors saw an opportunity and took it to make a killing. What is of issue is the action of Bank of Ireland on the ground every day that is driving up the share price. When it comes to the issue of resolving the mortgage crisis, Bank of Ireland is squeezing Irish families harder than any other bank.

Every Deputy in the Dáil is trying to help families who are struggling to repay mortgages. One of the first questions we always ask in such cases is the name of the bank, as we know that if the bank is Bank of Ireland, the chance of the family having a successful outcome is much less. I will relate some of the responses of Bank of Ireland to the finance committee regarding sustainable solutions. Deferred interest, payment moratorium and permanent interest rate reduction are not Bank of Ireland solutions. Bank of Ireland is the only bank that charges interest on the shelved portion of the split mortgage, and Richie Boucher admitted to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform that in over 90% of the offers it makes, the family will end up paying more money back to the bank. To join the dots, Bank of Ireland is squeezing struggling Irish families harder than any other bank. The result for shareholders is profit but the result for many Irish families is disaster. For many families struggling to pay their mortgage the difference between financial recovery and ruin is whether they bank with Bank of Ireland.

In his speech on Tuesday the Tánaiste laid out four principles by which we should act - sustainable prosperity, shared prosperity, a threshold of decency, and openness and transparency. I wholeheartedly agree with all four principles. By standing idly by and allowing Bank of Ireland do what it continues to do, the Tánaiste is violating his own principles. The Government could solve this problem very simply by providing a standardised set of solutions to be used by all banks. Will the Tánaiste continue to allow Bank of Ireland go on squeezing Irish families, or will he stand by those excellent principles and insist on a standard set of solutions for all families seeking to resolve their mortgages and apply fairness and consistency?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Donnelly for agreeing with the four principles I set out in my speech on Tuesday, for what I believe is the way forward, now that we have come out of the bailout, jobs are being created and the economy is growing again. Over the next couple of years we have to ask for whom is this recovery. As far as I and the Government are concerned, recovery is not just a matter of getting the numbers right but of making sure it becomes real for people.

We have to cast our minds back to where we were three years ago when the Bank of Ireland shares were bought. The banks were at the point of collapse. Nobody wanted to buy shares in an Irish bank. As part of the recapitalisation of the banks the State invested €4.8 billion in Bank

of Ireland. That investment has performed well from the State's point of view, and €6 billion has been returned to the State through sales and guarantee fees. In addition, the State's ownership of 14% of Bank of Ireland shares is valued at €1.5 billion.

The Government expects all banks to deal fairly with mortgage holders and those in distress. The most recent Central Statistics Office, CSO, figures show, for the first time in five years, a drop in the number of people in arrears of more than 90 days. That is a welcome turn and I would like to see it continue. Approximately 86,000 mortgages have been restructured. Just short of 80% of those restructures are holding. We expect the Bank of Ireland, like every other institution, to deal on a case-by-case basis, and fairly, with people in mortgage arrears and difficulty. The Government will continue to pursue that policy with the banks and through the Central Bank.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: The problem is that policy is not working. Anyone on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and any Deputy will tell the Tánaiste that. Bank of Ireland is acting in a completely different way. As an example, I am dealing with a family in Wicklow, which cannot make full capital and interest payments. They can make partial capital payments with full interest and their business is beginning to grow again. Bank of Ireland has written to them saying it is not offering any sustainable solution. It is taking them out of the mortgage arrears resolution process, MARP. They must make full capital and interest payments, which they know they cannot do, or the bank will repossess their house. I have gone through the detail of this case. If this family was with AIB it would offer them a split mortgage, reduce the capital payments, and if the payments were not fully covered when they retired it would offer them a debt for equity swap. The family would stay in the house, get on with raising their kids and growing their business. That is what should happen and would happen if they had borrowed from AIB but they did not. They borrowed from Bank of Ireland, which will evict them and pursue them for the residual debt so that it can continue to drive up its share price, and its shareholders can continue to cash in. That is the reality on the ground and it has to stop.

Richie Boucher made it crystal clear to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform that he will not play nice in the way the Government wants him to. The Government could stop this in a heartbeat. All it has to do is say it has solutions that AIB and various other institutions are using, and tell Bank of Ireland it must use them too.

I urge the Tánaiste to answer my question, which is so important for the many families Bank of Ireland is destroying. Will the Government not ask Bank of Ireland to play nice but insist it apply the same level of debt solution as other banks? It is a huge potential win for the Government but much more important, for thousands of families around the country.

The Tánaiste: The debt solutions Deputy Donnelly refers to are solutions the Government promoted. Over the past couple of years we have given priority to dealing with the mortgage crisis many are experiencing. We have introduced and discussed with the banks a range of measures which can be taken to address these problems, including the introduction of the personal insolvency service, the arrangements for split mortgages and a variety of approaches institutions can take to avoid putting people out of their homes.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The question was about Bank of Ireland.

The Tánaiste: We made it clear from the beginning of this crisis we wanted to avoid people

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losing their homes. I said several times that during the recession people's biggest fear was losing their homes, not their jobs or businesses. That is why we put in place a range of options and measures, which all financial institutions can use to deal with the mortgage problems.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: Bank of Ireland is not using them.

The Tánaiste: When I answered questions here about mortgage issues and put these options forward very often they were derided. I am glad to see Deputy Donnelly advocating that banks use the instruments-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Tánaiste is not answering the question. It was about Bank of Ireland.

The Tánaiste: -----and methods the Government advocated in the first place. Bank of Ireland should use those options, like every other financial institution.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Government needs to tell it do that. It should haul it in.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: The Government should make it do that.

Order of Business

The Tánaiste: It is proposed to take No. 19, statements on the Government's priorities for the year ahead (resumed). Tomorrow's fortnightly Friday business shall be No. 46, Criminal Law (Incest) (Amendment) Bill 2012 and No. 47, Misuse of Motor Vehicles (Public Spaces) Bill 2012.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: Yesterday the House passed Second Stage of the Protection of Residential Mortgage Account Holders Bill 2014, tabled by Deputy Michael McGrath. We are very grateful for the Government's support. I notice, however, that No. 93 on the C list of the Government's legislative programme is the Sale of Loan Books to Unregulated Third Parties Bill. Government spokespersons yesterday accepted the need to offer protection to mortgage holders against the risk of what vulture capitalists might do if they got hold of these mortgages. Will the Government be bringing forward from 2015 its proposed legislation or will it act immediately on the legislation introduced by Deputy Michael McGrath?

The Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection has been working diligently on the issue of admissions to schools. An admission to schools Bill to provide for openness, equity and consistency in school enrolments has been promised. In my experience, many schools try to be open, consistent and honourable in their approach, but perhaps the Tánaiste can clarify the matter further.

International Women's Day is 8 March. A report was recently published which discussed ways of making Irish politics and the Parliament more family friendly. One of the initiatives advocated in the report was the introduction of maternity and paternity leave for Members. When I introduced a Bill to this effect, it did not exactly receive enthusiastic support from the Government. I ask the Tánaiste whether the matter can be revisited and if he wishes to comment further.

The Tánaiste: The sale of loan books Bill is due for publication next year. The Minister for Finance has made clear his disposition to legislating for Irish Nationwide Building Society mortgages, if that is considered necessary.

The admission to schools Bill is due this session. On the third matter, the Government has for the first time introduced legislation that places an obligation on political parties to field a minimum number of candidates who are women. There will be a penalty for parties which do not comply and the measure will apply from the next general election. The question of whether general employment law should apply to Members of the Oireachtas can be considered in this House and I would be interested in hearing the arguments in favour of the proposal.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The programme for Government commits to introducing consolidated and reformed domestic violence legislation to address all aspects of domestic violence, threatened violence and intimidation in a manner that provides protection for victims. I have raised this promised legislation consistently, but we still have no sign as to when we can expect it. The State has not yet signed the European Convention on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. The Minister for Justice and Equality has advised me that the reason for this relates to problems with Article 52 of the convention and provisions for emergency barring orders which raise dilemmas around property rights. I do not find this an acceptable rationale for not signing this important convention. When does the Government propose to sign the convention and what has it done to resolve the legal difficulties?

The Tánaiste: The Government takes the issue of violence against women seriously. That is why we made our commitment in the programme for Government. We have studied carefully the report that was issued this week. Even though it indicates that the level of violent incidents against women is lower in Ireland than the European average, the figures are still shockingly high. I will ask the Minister for Justice and Equality to reply directly to the Deputy on implementation of the convention. I do not have a note on the matter.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I also asked about the legislation.

The Tánaiste: The legislation required to give effect to the commitment in the programme for Government will be introduced.

Deputy Dominic Hannigan: We had positive news on job numbers earlier this week. We need to do more, of course, and part of the solution is to help small businesses to access credit. What is the status of the credit guarantee (amendment) Bill which will make it easier for small businesses to operate?

The Tánaiste: I do not have a date for that Bill, but we are looking at ways of promoting more widely the various initiatives the Government has introduced in the past couple of years on non-bank funds. Yesterday I attended a meeting with the chief executives of the chambers of commerce and this was one of the issues we discussed. One of the difficulties is that many business people who should be able to access these funds do not know about their existence or how to go about accessing them. Legislation will be introduced shortly to provide for the strategic investment fund. We are also working on proposals for the establishment of a strategic investment bank.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: The Tánaiste recently met representatives of the Stardust victims' committee who presented him with new evidence on the cause of the fire and asked for a short and snappy commission of investigation. I ask him to comment on that issue.

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When is the insurance Bill due for publication and will it offer help to households which cannot obtain flood insurance?

The Tánaiste: I met representatives and relatives of the victims of the Stardust tragedy. They gave me material which I am studying.

I do not have a date for the insurance Bill.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: When will the criminal law (sexual offences) Bill be published? The annual report of the anti-human trafficking unit of An Garda Síochána contains disturbing figures on trafficking. Of the 23 minors trafficked, 19 were Irish, all of whom were reported as the victims of sexual exploitation.

The Tánaiste: That Bill is due for publication later this year.

Deputy Brian Walsh: On the vehicle immobilisation Bill, there are inconsistencies between local authorities in the operation of their clamping regimes. Some regimes are operated by management companies and small car parks associated with businesses. When can we expect the Bill to bring consistency to this area?

The Tánaiste: Is that the road traffic Bill?

Deputy Brian Walsh: Yes.

The Tánaiste: The heads of the Bill were approved by the Government last year and the Bill is due to be published this session.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: We hear many poignant stories about adoption. There is a clear need to assist people in this regard. Legislation has been promised to provide for an information and tracing service for applicants seeking information on adoption. Has that Bill been discussed by the Cabinet? If the heads have been approved, when is the Bill likely to be brought before the House?

On the proposed legislation allowing for the retention of records of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, the Residential Institutions Redress Board and the Residential Institutions Review Committee, has the Bill been discussed? Have the heads been approved and when can we expect the Bill to be introduced?

The Tánaiste: On the adoption (tracing and information) Bill, further clarification of legal and constitutional issues is being sought and it is expected that Bill will be published later this year. It is not possible to indicate a date for the retention of certain records Bill at this stage.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: When can we expect the noise nuisance Bill, which is to extend and improve the powers available to enforcement authorities to prevent, reduce or abate noise nuisances by allowing for on-the-spot fines and providing for mediation between neighbours?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: That applies to Deputy Durkan beside Deputy Fitzgerald there.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Will it apply here at all?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Deputy Dooley's party has a few of them up there.

The Tánaiste: On the noise nuisance Bill, to extend and improve the powers available to

enforcement authorities to prevent, reduce or abate noise nuisances by allowing for on-the-spot fines and providing for mediation between neighbours, it is not possible to give a date for the publication of that Bill at this stage.

Finance (Local Property Tax) (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2014: First Stage

Deputy Terence Flanagan: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to require the making of an order which allocates funds raised by the local property tax to each local authority and for that purpose to amend the Finance (Local Property Tax) Act 2012 and to provide for related matters.

The spirit of the Bill is to ensure that a percentage of the property tax collected in a local authority area is retained for use in that area to maintain and improve local services.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle for giving me the opportunity to move the Finance (Local Property Tax) (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2014. This Bill, if enacted, would give effect to a Government commitment, made on 12 March 2013 by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Hogan, that 80% of the local property tax collected in a local authority area will be retained for use by the local authority to fund local services. This commitment has not been included in local property tax legislation leaving it open to be renegeed upon. Unfortunately, this has already happened this year, with a significant proportion of the property tax being used to fund the establishment of Irish Water instead of local services as promised.

Many constituents have raised concerns with me about the property tax. There are some who do not want to pay a property tax and do not think it is a fair tax. However, most have informed me that they do not have a problem paying a property tax if it will benefit local services in their area. They want to see a difference being made on the ground in their local community.

Services that are the responsibility of a local authority include the following - libraries, open spaces, public parks, street maintenance and street lighting, and fire and emergency services. These are services that benefit all members of the community.

It is only fair that taxpayers are provided with concrete assurance as to where their hard-earned money paid as property tax will be used in their areas and perhaps a breakdown of this money and how it is spent could be provided by each local authority to each household in order to ensure full transparency and accountability of local property tax moneys collected.

It is my worry that if legislation is not introduced to ensure that 80% of the tax is allocated to the local authority and the local authority has the power to set property tax rates in the future, local authorities may be more likely to seek increases in the property tax rate of up to 15% in the future. This leads to concerns that hard-pressed families will be charged even more tax when some are already not satisfied with the services they receive from their local authority. A further hike in property tax would be the final straw for many families which are already struggling financially.

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It is extremely worrying that property prices in Dublin are increasing rapidly once again. People now face the prospect of being priced out of the housing market. For many, renting is the only option available for the foreseeable future. Dublin residents are paying the highest level of property tax in the country because of the higher price of property in the city. It is only right that taxes paid on Dublin properties should be ring-fenced and remain in Dublin to benefit the communities in which they are paid.

This Bill will also bring Ireland in line with other countries the local services of which are already administered by local authorities and financed by local service charges similar to a property tax.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle, the Bills Office, the Library and Research Service and support staff for help with this Bill. It is a short and concise Bill and I hope it will be debated and enacted quickly and as soon as possible by the Government. It simply ensures that the Government keeps its promise about how the local property tax should be used and provides greater transparency for taxpayers by showing them where exactly their money is being spent.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, I ask Deputy Terence Flanagan to move that Second Stage be taken in Private Members' time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Government's Priorities for the Year Ahead: Statements (Resumed)

Deputy Terence Flanagan: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to contribute briefly to statements of the Government's priorities and to put on the record the fact that the country has moved on so much over the past three years since the Government came to power. However, there is always room for improvement and areas that need to be improved upon.

I will mention briefly some issues in my constituency which relate to housing. I am glad that the Minister of State with responsibility for housing, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, is here as she might take on board some of my thoughts on the different areas.

On the issue of homelessness, the Government has a target to end homelessness by 2016. It is a major issue. I am concerned about the increase of almost 50% in the number sleeping rough in Dublin in recent months, some of them not too far from the gates of Leinster House. Action is needed to ensure that those in need of shelter have access to accommodation. There have been some suggestions that the increase in the homelessness count may be as a direct result of the pressures in the private rented sector. It is an issue that ties in with both the Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, and the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Burton, as to the

amount of rents that are being provided by social welfare.

A more permanent solution is needed as well, including more affordable housing. With the prices, particularly in Dublin, rapidly increasing yet again, this will be a further issue in the coming months and the years ahead. The construction of new homes, and rolling out a new project in that regard, would be welcome news, particularly for the 100,000 who are on the waiting lists.

The Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, is working hard with NAMA to get the agency to release the various housing units to local authorities, but that process is dragging on. It needs to be sped up to get NAMA to hand over these homes, particularly when we look at the waiting lists, both in Fingal County Council and Dublin City Council, in my area where some are waiting upwards of ten years to get housing. It is not acceptable when one considers the amount of units in NAMA that are empty and the quality of the housing is deteriorating consistently because it is not being lived in. I hope the Minister of State will be able to push the matter forward in the months ahead. Action on flooding is needed and the Minister of State, Deputy Brian Hayes, is trying to get a memorandum of understanding with the Irish Insurance Federation. The industry can provide a fund to help homeowners who cannot obtain flood insurance. In my constituency, homes in Sutton, Clontarf and Donnycarney have been hit in recent times. It is a concern that the issue continues and that homeowners cannot obtain home insurance.

Although the management company sector is regulated, issues remain with regard to the value for money apartment owners get within their complexes. There is also a lack of accountability in respect of the money spent. Homeowners pay up to €1,500 and they have concerns about the running of management companies. The area must be further examined.

I acknowledge that the Minister for Health, Deputy James Reilly, is focused on accident and emergency units. In my constituency, Beaumont Hospital is under pressure because of the waiting times for people to get into accident and emergency units. The hospital could do with funding. The special delivery unit works hard to deal with that.

Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann 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 Terence Flanagan - the need for faster broadband on the north side of Dublin; (2) Deputy Eoghan Murphy - the increase in demand for primary school places in September 2014 in Dublin South-East; (3) Deputy John O'Mahony - the closing down of five community district offices and 20 community welfare clinics in County Mayo; (4) Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn - the need to assign a clinical paediatric diabetes nurse to Letterkenny General Hospital; (5) Deputy Heather Humphreys - the importance of remembering the 40th anniversary of the death of Senator Billy Fox; (6) Deputy Peadar Tóibín - the need to provide a housing solution for persons forced into homelessness; (7) Deputy Dessie Ellis - the issue of non-payment of utilities by developers in control of unfinished estates such as Chambers Park and Abbeyfield, Kildare; (8) Deputy Joe Higgins - the need to address concerns regarding homeless families, rising rents and landlords refusing to accept tenants who depend on rent allowance; (9) Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick - the development of the coastal walkway to prevent flooding in Dundalk and

Blackrock while bringing benefits in terms of tourism, recreation, and tackling obesity; (10) Deputy Gerald Nash - the need to assist with the costs of treatment and associated costs for children with neuroblastoma; (11) Deputies Seán Crowe and Jerry Buttimer - the passing of the anti-gay Bill into law in Uganda; (12) Deputy Clare Daly - the need to discuss allegations that Travellers, including children, are being entered onto the PULSE criminal database system; (13) Deputy Mick Wallace - the need for an inquiry into allegations of racial profiling within An Garda Síochána; (14) Deputy Brendan Smith - the need to raise immigration reform for the undocumented Irish in the upcoming St. Patrick's Day visit to the United States; (15) Deputy Robert Troy - the abolition of the subsidy to the bus operator servicing the route between Cavan and Longford; and (16) Deputy Dominic Hannigan - the way in which NAMA is going to fulfil its social dividend.

The matters raised by Deputies Sean Crowe and Jerry Buttimer, Brendan Smith, Gerald Nash and Eoghan Murphy have been selected for discussion.

Government's Priorities for the Year Ahead: Statements (Resumed)

Deputy Brian Walsh: I propose to share time with Deputy Patrick O'Donovan. I thank the Government Chief Whip's office for sharing Government time to allow me to participate in this debate. I affirm my support for the Government's priorities for the forthcoming year, which were outlined in the House over recent days. Contained among the priorities are a number of ambitious targets that will represent the parameters of progress as we map our continued recovery in the years ahead. The Government is right to be ambitious. The substantial progress made in a relatively short time since it came to office - three years - warrants such ambition. The Ireland that was flat on its back in 2011 has been helped to its feet and has taken sustainable steps in the direction of recovery, and the Government now plans to put pace in its stride.

Many of the economic millstones that weighed heavily around our necks have already been removed. The disastrous bank guarantee has ended, the promissory note payments are gone and the troika has departed our shores. The economy is growing and we have returned to international bond markets. We have all become experts on bond markets and bond yields in recent years. Bond yields that were in excess of 14% when the Government assumed office three years ago have fallen to just over 3%. Bond yields are a reflection of the risk international investors associate with Ireland. It is a clear signal that our international reputation has been restored.

While unemployment is still far too high, it has stabilised, and in the past 12 months more than 1,000 jobs a week have been created. That said, many people have yet to see appreciable difference in their daily lives as a result of this progress. The challenge for the Government will be not only to foster further growth but to ensure that its benefits are distributed equitably among people who have made considerable sacrifices over six years. Government priorities include many significant measures aimed at boosting the domestic economy. The Government has form here. What it did in respect of the tourism industry, a reduction in the VAT rate, was a stimulus measure introduced shortly after entering office and has been accepted as an effective tool that increased activity in the sector. The Gathering was very successful, targeting not just the areas typically associated with tourists coming to Ireland but all counties. The economic benefit that accrued was shared across the country. The abolition of travel tax in the recent budget is another example of a measure that will boost tourist numbers. In fairness, the airlines,

and Ryanair in particular, have reciprocated and have embraced the opportunities presented. In Galway, we are happy to see additional routes managed by Ryanair in and out of Shannon and Knock Airports.

One of the most effective instruments the Government has at its disposal to stimulate domestic demand is to reduce taxation. I welcome recent comments by the Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance, who have indicated that if prevailing conditions allow they will examine the feasibility of reducing the tax burden on hard-pressed middle-income earners in future budgets. This would increase domestic spending and demand and help boost the domestic economy. It would not only boost the economy but would boost morale and provide hope to people that there is light at the end of the tunnel. It would be an acknowledgement that the sacrifices people have made over the past six years have not been in vain.

At a time when each day heralds new changes and challenges on the political agenda, such as GSOC and Irish Water in recent weeks, it is easy to forget how far we have come since we hung on edge of the cliff of economic catastrophe just three years ago. Against this catastrophic situation and a backdrop of crisis and calamity, the people went to the ballot box in 2011 and voted in their droves for candidates standing for Fine Gael and the Labour Party. These were the parties that promised to lead the country from ruination to recovery. I was one such candidate, although, due to events that transpired since, I have found myself outside the parliamentary party under whose banner I was originally elected. This situation arose last July when, regrettably, I was unable to consolidate my stance on legislation with that of the Government. This was a single issue on which our positions could not be aligned and I have voted to support the Government on every item on the legislative agenda since then. I endorsed the difficult decisions that this Administration has taken in the course of its efforts to repair the broken economy it inherited. Any changes that have since occurred regarding my relationship with the party do not alter the mandate I received from the electorate as a Fine Gael candidate in 2011. When I lost the party Whip last July, I could have chosen another path. I could have become bitter, as others have done, and I could have borne a grudge. I could have spent the next two years sniping at the Government benches and touting populist policies in the interest of self-promotion rather than the common good. However, that would not be in the public interest. The public has no interest in tokenistic factionalism and intra-party politicking that does nothing to improve people's lives. The people are not exercised by party political infighting, the reopening of old wounds of leadership battles, or the petty score-settling that is perpetrated in the guise of reform.

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They are more concerned with retaining jobs, having a decent income with which to provide for their families, a good education for their children, a reliable health service for when they are sick, and compassionate, dignified care for when they are old. They gave all of us who were elected as Fine Gael and Labour Deputies a mandate to take the hard decisions and rebuild an economy so their aspirations could be realised. I would be reneging on my mandate were I to suddenly start opposing difficult Government decisions taken in the national interest just because I had a disagreement with the Government over one Bill. It never ceases to amaze me how politicians in general can so easily shift and change their positions depending on prevailing circumstances. How can Members spend two years consistently supporting the Government in all the difficult and unpalatable choices it must make and then suddenly assume chameleon-like status and regularly oppose the very same Government policies and start engaging in the politics of populism? This is precisely the reason the public have become cynical about politics

and politicians.

Despite being criticised and sneered at by some for the stance I have taken, I intend to honour the mandate I received and will be supporting the priorities the Government has outlined this week for the year ahead, which priorities I am confident will make a real and appreciable difference to people's lives.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Government's priorities for the forthcoming two years. Before I do so, I must compliment my colleague from Galway West on his honesty and frankness regarding the new political rainbow that has formed in this Dáil. I refer to a new troika of negativity that involves people who were once great advocates of everything the Government was doing but who, for one reason or another, fell out of favour with the Government. The previous speaker has really summed up in a very succinct and honest way the stances taken by some Members.

This is an important debate but some of the media coverage that has been devoted to it has been regrettable. On my way to the House this morning I was listening to RTE's "Morning Ireland". The Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources was being interviewed. He gave a speech in the House yesterday on his priorities for the years ahead. Rather than honing in on the Minister's legislative and policy priorities, the interviewers did what they do best in many cases, that is, they honed in on a few soundbites from some of the far-flung benches of a very disparate bunch in respect of what we are doing here this week. One cannot have one's cake and eat it. This is a very old but true adage. On the one hand, members of the Opposition complain that the Government's priorities and series of legislative initiatives are being driven by the Government itself and that the House does not have ownership while, on the other hand, we have been having in the House for the past few days a debate in which Members can bring forward their own ideas and suggestions on where the Government should now focus to rebuild the country that was so devastatingly wrecked by the previous Administration. Rather than taking up the challenge of making suggestions, Opposition Members outlined a catalogue of negativity. We are delighted that the Opposition benches are graced with the presence of two Members today considering that there is normally no one in them on occasions such as this. It is no wonder that the Opposition is as it is when it uses the opportunity to make suggestions that might hold the Government to account in a constructive manner to do nothing other than whinge. Thus, the Opposition is seen as a bunch of whingers with nothing to offer and nothing concrete to suggest. It comes in and criticises for the sake of criticising. People have had enough of that.

This week should be used as an opportunity to provide a blueprint to allow the programme for Government to be honoured in its entirety and for Members to identify their priorities. I have a number of issues that could be built upon that I would like the Government to note.

My first point concerns the Department of Finance and a man who was instrumental in re-directing the course of this country, namely the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, a colleague of mine from Limerick. Everybody would agree he has done sterling work. This view is contrary to what Deputy Healy was saying yesterday; he was trying to grab at any old straw of publicity by suggesting in a totally daft way that the Taoiseach should sack the Minister for Finance. As we know, the Minister for Finance has overseen the evacuation of the troika from Ireland and restored sovereignty.

The Minister for Finance should consider the use of personal pensions as a method by

which people might be able to clear personal debt. Although changes were made in the Finance Bill two years ago regarding people with AVCs, many people who have pensions or who have stopped paying into pension funds are locked in and are subject to a penalty if they use their funds to clear debt, be it personal debt or mortgage debt. The Minister might consider this.

Another issue I wish to raise regarding finance concerns use of the credit union movement in a partnership model involving local authorities. I advocate an arrangement almost akin to what the European Investment Bank is allowed to do on a national basis. Our credit union movement is fantastic and has been one of the mainstays in maintaining local economies. If the Department of Finance and Government considered initiatives whereby credit unions could have strategic relationships with local authorities to bring forward infrastructural projects that currently cannot be carried out because they would go onto the State's balance sheet, they could serve as a means of stimulating the local economy.

The Government is very keen on focusing on agriculture and driving employment in the agriculture sector. As we gear up for Food Harvest 2020 and abolish milk quotas, there is undoubtedly a move towards encouraging more young farmers into the sector. While tax incentives have been introduced by the Government to maintain the number of young farmers, more could be done. In addition, work could be done on agricultural education. In my constituency there is the Salesian college in Pallaskenry, a long-established agricultural college. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, along with Teagasc, needs to ensure that agricultural colleges are adequately staffed to reflect the demand placed on them. There is an agriculture college in the constituency of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

Country-of-origin labelling presents a huge problem. In my area, the poultry issue was a case in point. The manner in which imported poultry was labelled had an impact on the processing of poultry. The farming organisations have been raising this for a number of years. This week the farming organisations have focused on the price of beef. Again, I encourage the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to get all the stakeholders around the table to ensure this is properly addressed. He will know from his constituency that input costs are not decreasing. The prices of diesel, feedstuffs, etc., are increasing but the price of the finished product of the farmer seems to be decreasing. However, the reduction does not seem to be passed on to the consumer. There is an anomaly that needs to be addressed.

With regard to the overall development of rural areas, I welcome the fact that the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas was established under the auspices of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government in the past 12 months. I look forward to the publication of its report because it could play a very important role in the development of rural areas.

Let me proceed to the Department of Social Protection. Great steps have been made in the detection of social welfare fraud but, by the same token, much more could be done. The introduction of the identity card is work in progress. More could be done in this regard also.

We are often inclined to forget about the self-employed. Over the remaining two years of the Government's term, I would like to see initiatives introduced whereby the self-employed would have a fund from which they could draw on a rainy day. This will involve PRSI changes. If self-employed people were allowed to make additional voluntary PRSI contributions such that they would have something to turn to during hard times, it would be beneficial. At present, they have nothing.

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As Minister of State Deputy Dinny McGinley will know, I spent some time teaching before I became a Member. I raised with the Minister for Education and Skills certain issues time and again. I acknowledge he is trying to do his best. In primary education especially, it is crucial that children be allowed to participate actively in the use of information technology. Information technology in classrooms must not be about the teacher standing in front of an interactive whiteboard with the children as passive agents. The children must be actively involved. The best way to achieve this is by ensuring they are not told to put their iPads or laptops into their schoolbags on arriving at school but, rather, actively encouraged to use these devices on arriving. The environment in which children are being taught, especially in primary school, needs to be examined. The inspection regime that is currently in place for primary schools needs to reflect the environment in which children are taught. Currently, the inspection in a whole school evaluation examines the teaching and learning. One cannot look at the teaching and learning of children in primary schools without looking at the environment. I can give an example. If a child is in a classroom with 30 or 40 children and six or seven of the children must be moved to allow a child to leave to go to the bathroom, something that is not factored into a whole school evaluation, how can that environment produce an adequate result in terms of the teaching and learning for that child?

The Minister has introduced junior certificate reform, but I do not believe that will work unless it is carried out in tandem with leaving certificate reform. Across all spheres in education there is a move away from learning by rote. The leaving certificate is the ultimate test of learning by rote. Basically, it is an intensive test, over approximately two hours, of how much a young person can regurgitate onto a sheet of paper, without really assessing their overall knowledge of the subject. Learning by rote has been decreasing at primary level, junior certificate level and even at tertiary level, but it is still grudgingly retained at leaving certificate level. That must be addressed.

An issue I have raised on many occasions in the House is the labour market. The courses at third level, be they in institutes of technology, post-leaving certificate courses or degree, masters or doctorate level courses, must reflect the economic circumstances in the country. I have a problem with young people receiving career guidance without finding out whether they will be employable in Ireland after finishing a third level course. They do not get that information at present. They do not get the statistics on how many people will end up with a job in a particular area. That must change and I urge the Department to do it.

With regard to the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, an issue I have raised umpteen times on the Order of Business is foreshore licensing and development. Our ports have the potential to generate a great deal more economic activity, particularly given the location of this country relative to the rest of the Continent. The port of Foynes in my constituency, for example, is the deepest and most sheltered port on the west coast of Ireland. We must have a proper foreshore licensing regime that reflects a modern economy and under which planning applications can be made and dealt with in a realistic timeframe. The Victorian legislation in that regard must be removed from the Statute Book.

Housing aid for older people is another labour activation method. Huge numbers of people across the country benefit from it, including in my constituency. With little support from Government it makes a big difference in terms of labour activation. Over the next two years, as the country goes into recovery mode, there should be a further enhancement of that scheme. I mentioned the development I would like to see of a relationship with the credit unions. Credit unions are located in every town and village in the country. In the same towns and villages

there are many people in the retail sector who are in dire straits due to commercial rates. This problem did not arise today nor yesterday. The sooner the valuation changes are implemented, the better. I support a method of self-valuation, at least on a voluntary basis. If a person can value their house for private property tax, there should be an element of individual input into the valuations for commercial properties as well.

In the justice area, I welcome the announcement regarding Garda recruitment. The Minister for Justice and Equality has provided leadership on Garda recruitment and the renewal of the Garda fleet. However, a number of gardaí are due to retire this year and the Government and Garda authorities must plan adequately for that and ensure Garda strength is maintained after the next round of recruitment is completed.

I have raised the accessibility of the courts on many occasions in the Dáil and in the committee of which I am a member. The courts should not be the preserve of the rich, as they are at present in many cases. When the Oireachtas communications committee did its cyberbullying report it found that one must have money to vindicate one's good name in this country. I welcome the introduction of a new court of appeal. The Minister is due to bring forward legislation in that regard this year. However, the completion of the legal services Bill is important because accessibility to justice should not be dictated by virtue of the amount of money one has in one's bank account, regardless of one's address.

With regard to the Office of Public Works, OPW, as recently as last week I raised the issue of land drainage. It affects every rural constituency in the country. We now have a situation where a multitude of agencies must examine a river before a shovel can be put into it to take out a bucket of gravel. I note the presence of the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in the House. There is a multiplicity of agencies responsible for land drainage, but nobody does the work on it. We cannot expect the OPW, alone, to do it. I have proposed many times in the House, in the context of the proposed rural development programme, that a scheme similar to the agri-environment options scheme, AEOS, the rural environment protection scheme, REPS, or GLAS should be developed, in partnership with Inland Fisheries Ireland, the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the OPW, to allow farmers and land owners who have drains, streams and the like running through their land to clean and maintain them in such a way as to ensure there will not be a recurrence of the flooding we have seen throughout the country, which is due in no small way to the lack of any type of such maintenance. There are over 50 different publicly-funded agencies in charge of the Shannon, from Cavan to its mouth at Ballylongford. Is it any wonder it bursts its banks every year?

In the health area, one of the commitments in the programme for Government on which I believe progress should be made is the introduction of minimum standards and inspections for services, both public and private, provided to elderly people in their homes. Elderly people and vulnerable adults are in receipt of private and public home care and it is essential that minimum standards are implemented before there is another "Prime Time" investigation that will inevitably unearth huge problems in that area.

I have raised the issue of orthodontic services with the Minister, Deputy Reilly, and progress has been made on it. Young children and young adults all over the country are on waiting lists for years. Under the system in the UK and other countries orthodontic services are rolled out on an orthodontic therapy basis. The officials in the Department are examining this, but there must be a sense of urgency because these are things that can be fixed in a very short amount of time.

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Type 2 diabetes is at epidemic proportions due to the fact that there is an obesity crisis in this country. There must be a greater level of public awareness and more resources so we can try to come to terms with it. It will be the single biggest public health issue for this country not only in the next generation but also in the current one, in terms of heart disease, hypertension, stroke and so forth, if it is not properly addressed.

I am a member of the transport committee and I acknowledge the work of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport on transport. As an island economy, Ireland is hugely dependent on the haulage industry, but as recently as this week we have seen hauliers being blackguarded in respect of interpretations of capitage and the introduction of a new tax proposed by the Northern Ireland Executive. I welcome the fact that a Sinn Féin Member is present. Perhaps the Northern Ireland Executive will be able to stop this move, as we should not have partitionist economics in this country whereby lorry drivers from the Republic will be faced with a charge of up to €1,000 being imposed by the Northern Ireland Executive for the simple pleasure of crossing the Border. We have moved on from that type of partitionist mentality under the Good Friday Agreement and I urge Sinn Féin, one of the parties in government in Northern Ireland, not to introduce it.

The development of the motorway from Galway to Limerick is hugely important for the west of Ireland. It is important to provide a counterbalance on the west coast in terms of a critical mass of population that can be linked, in less than an hour and a half, to Dublin. Also in the transport area, there have been huge improvements at Shannon Airport with the introduction by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, of the 0% travel tax and the lower rate of VAT in the hospitality sector. The Opposition Members opposed it when the jobs initiative was introduced but they then became great proponents of it, so much so that they thought it was their idea and we should all row in behind them, as with everything else.

The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Varadkar, has worked on the local improvement scheme and the community involvement scheme, but we should re-introduce the separate funding heading for the local improvement scheme. Many people in rural areas who pay road tax and are living on isolated *culs-de-sac* have watched their roads deteriorate over a number of years. They need support. They tell us that if they are paying road tax, they should occasionally be given the option of having their road tarred.

With regard to sport, perhaps the Minister would consider the possibility of extending the Gateway initiative with the local authorities for front-line services to the sports partnerships. The sports partnerships are now an integral part of local authorities. They might be an opportunity for people with a detailed knowledge of sport to provide their skills and knowledge to younger people and to those who are unemployed looking to get out in their communities.

The issues of energy and natural resources and the Shannon LNG project are very close to the heart of the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. It is also close to my heart as the project is in a neighbouring townland to my constituency. We need to see a commitment on a change in policy on how the project can be delivered. It has the potential to create massive employment and investment in the Shannon estuary region, which the mid-west region from Tralee to Ennis has sought in recent years.

In recent days in a jocular way I suggested it might be time to move a motion of no confidence in the Opposition given the behaviour of some of its members. This debate is an opportunity for them to bring forward their ideas. If only they used these three days to give us a break

from the whingeing and change the record and bring forward suggestions, because I am sure they meet some of the same people as I do, who ask me questions about small business, roads, heritage and agriculture. The Opposition should use these three days to bring forward suggestions on how we can make the next two years of the programme for Government two years of recovery, considering the first three years were years of clean up.

I commend the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Ministers from Fine Gael and the Labour Party for taking on the challenge of recovering the country's sovereignty and rebuilding it from the ashes of the economic collapse of the previous administration. I wish them well in the next two years. I hope some of the suggestions I have made will be taken on board.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The next speaking slot is shared by Deputies Barry Cowen, Sandra McLellan and Seamus Healy.

Deputy Barry Cowen: As a democratic and republican party, we are obliged, and acknowledge, that our people are sovereign and we will always accept their will. We did so graciously after the last general election. We respected the people's decision and we wished the present Government well; yes with a heavy heart, but in the circumstances one had to hope it would live up to the expectations and trust placed in it by the Irish people.

In the election campaign we levelled with the people. We had agreed the broad parameters of a four year plan. We had acknowledged financial targets had to met, and there had to be debt reduction and a reduction in capital expenditure. Against this, despite the other parties having been made aware of and allowed full access to the State's financial affairs, the public at large were offered an alternative to this unfortunate reality. They were offered a five point plan and the NewERA document and the 100,000 jobs associated with it. They were offered a democratic revolution. More importantly they were offered a softer and easier way. The plans and agreements entered into by the previous administration would be torn up and it would be Labour's way rather than Frankfurt's way. It was the contention of members of Fine Gael, in particular the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, that not another red cent would be given to banks. Red line issues would dominate Fine Gael and the Labour Party in government, including child benefit, no hike in education fees and bondholders would be burned. The only thing to be burned apart from turf were credit union bondholders who lost out in the IBRC debacle.

Despite this the Government will remind us at every opportunity it has met the financial targets laid down. It took approximately 30% of the funds that needed to be taken out of the economy, compared to the 70% removed by the previous administration. The choices made associated with this 30% have inflicted much more pain than the removal of the previous 70% and this is borne out by independent assessment. The Government's budgets have been judged by independent assessment to be regressive rather than the progressive budgets of the previous administration. It has inflicted more pain, whether it likes it or acknowledges it, on the less well off, the underprivileged, the elderly, the sick and disabled, students and on rural Ireland, where my constituency is based.

The Government tells us it has not touched core social welfare rates. Will it tell this to pensioners who have lost their phone allowance, fuel allowance and home benefit packages or to home helps and their clients? Will it tell carers it has not touched core social welfare benefits? Will it tell those in the greatest need who have had their medical cards removed or their prescription charges trebled? Will it tell students whose fees have increased and who find it increasingly difficult to access grants from "Susi Quinn"? Will it tell rural communities which

have lost gardaí and Garda stations and where post offices are under threat as we saw last week? Will it tell rural communities which have lost rural transport schemes, community welfare offices and access to community welfare? Will it tell those who have had their REPS schemes decimated? Will it tell those students and their parents who do not now have access to career guidance counsellors in their school?

Will it tell communities with small rural schools with two, three or four teachers that it has reconfigured the pupil teacher ratio in these circumstances to allow teachers to be lost and parents to begin to wonder whether the school can thrive? Will these parents have to consider moving their children to schools with greater commitments from the Government? This will mean the schools will not be closed directly by the Government, but they will be left in a position whereby they must amalgamate or close. When this is done to schools it inflicts huge pain and damage to the heart of rural communities. In many instances the school is the centre of rural communities. It gives them and their inhabitants a sense of place and identity, and to take this away is a grave injustice.

At the start of this debate we explained we felt it was a backslapping exercise on the part of the Government. Earlier this week I heard the Taoiseach state there would be a question and answer session but there was not. It offered an opportunity for many of us to respond directly to our counterparts who have the privilege of high office and governing the country, but this privilege has not been afforded to me. Moreover, it was not afforded to Deputy Bily Kelleher in respect of the health portfolio. Despite this, I wish to highlight inefficiencies that exist in the structure of local government. In the area of local governance and funding to local authorities, for example, can the Government acknowledge the obvious decimation of rates income? Will it acknowledge the reduction in local authorities' housing rental income? As the Government is responsible for setting up the quango that is Irish Water, it obviously can acknowledge that the income from that sector is gone. Will the Government acknowledge that planning income is as good as gone? Moreover, income from car tax and development charges has fallen, the allocation from central government has been reduced and the grants from the National Roads Authority to local authorities have fallen in value. In addition, allocations in respect of rural water scheme allocations have been reduced.

I will turn to the biggest sin and the biggest infliction on local authorities, whereby the Government gave a commitment that based on property tax, income would be ring-fenced for local authorities. However, in the first full year in which that income has been raised, none of it - not one red cent as the Government itself states - is being allocated to local authorities. Fianna Fáil will remind the public of this when we campaign in the coming weeks for the local and European elections. We will categorise and prioritise for people in order that they can discern precisely how much was collected in their own community, their own county and their own constituency. We will tell them in clear and definite terms that not a single red cent was allocated to local authorities. We will tell them that not a single red cent of what they have paid is going towards the provision of services and facilities in their local authority area.

If anything, everything is being taken from them. As I stated, provision of water services have been centralised away from them. Even local democracy itself has been centralised with the abolition of town councillors and town councils. I believe this step will be perceived to have been retrograde when the time comes that people cannot access local authority members who can work on their behalf. It now is obvious that in the absence of funding being made available to the local authorities, why should one have available local authority members to do anything with what they do not have?

Deputy Sandra McLellan: In the Government's statement of common purpose, the Taoiseach claimed: "On the 25th February a democratic revolution took place in Ireland. Old beliefs, traditions and expectations were blown away." Far from being a revolution, one now sees the continuation of Fianna Fáil politics. The current programme for Government, with its water charges, home tax and cuts to public services is cut from the same cloth as was Fianna Fáil's programme for national recovery published in the dying days of the previous Government in December 2010. While Fine Gael can claim it is doing what it promised to do, the Labour Party has been a total disappointment to those who voted for it in the hope of receiving solidarity and support but who have got nothing but cuts and austerity heaped upon their shoulders.

As for tourism, the programme for Government states "international access is vital to tourism recovery". A ten year review of the tourism industry in 2003 anticipated that 10 million visitors would visit Ireland on an annual basis by last year. The big attractions are our heritage and the links the international Irish diaspora have with the country. On 11 September 2013, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport launched a wide-ranging review of Ireland's tourism policy on which views were requested by Friday, 1 November 2013 and regarding which some meetings have taken place with the various stakeholders. However, the industry needs to have sight of that report as soon as possible before the advent of another tourist season. If the Government still believes the 10 million figure can be achieved within five years, there is a need for a supportive policy environment, a clear business strategy and appropriate investment. The Government must ensure there will be a clear focus on, investment in and upgrade of, national heritage sites to make them attractive to the domestic and international tourism markets.

I take the opportunity to welcome the commitment of the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Ring, to the sports capital grant. The €40 million allocated this year will be greatly welcomed by sports clubs, athletics clubs and local authorities throughout the State. However, I ask the Minister of State to try to ensure this funding continues on an annual basis. In continuing with the spirit of being constructive and welcoming positive developments, I record my support for two initiatives taken by the Minister, Jimmy Deputy Deenihan. First, the historic towns pilot scheme was very welcome and I saw at first hand the major benefits of this scheme in my home town of Youghal. This initiative was imaginative and highly effective. As I believe this pilot was very successful, the Minister should continue to expand and develop this programme. I also wish to mention the allocation of funding to the Irish walled towns. Again, my home town of Youghal has benefited greatly from these allocations and I note that Youghal has the second most extensive town walls on the island of Ireland after Derry.

In respect of Moore Street, the programme for Government states: "We will develop a cultural plan for future commemorative events such as the Centenary of the Easter Rising in 2016." The Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht claimed the families and relatives of those involved in 1916 would be "central" to commemorative events. Sinn Féin has requested to meet the Minister to discuss serious and genuine concerns, particularly about the status of No. 18 Moore Street, the revised planning application and the agreed inspection of the national monument. Moore Street, which is central to the events of 1916, remains in a decaying state. In any other country, Moore Street and the surrounding streets would be celebrated and remembered in an honourable fashion but here, the Government view it as a piece of real estate to be sold to the highest bidder. The original planned assault on Moore Street by developers would have seen the complete destruction of the historic terrace between Nos. 10 to 25, inclusive. The designation of Nos. 14 to 17 as a national monument was the first major setback for the developer's plans. I take the opportunity to congratulate the relatives of the signatories of the 1916

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Proclamation, who have done more to preserve Moore Street than any city council official or Minister and who continue to work tirelessly to ensure the preservation of Moore Street remains on the political agenda.

I can confirm Moore Street remains a political priority for my office. It is of key importance that the entire terrace, that is, Nos. 10 to 25 Moore Street, be protected, preserved and restored. The terrace must be seen as a unit, that is, a block of buildings occupied by republican forces at the end of the 1916 Rising and the site, in No. 16, of the last meeting of the Provisional Government. While the preservation of Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street alone would be welcome, they would be robbed of all of their historic architectural context and much of their attraction, were the remainder of the terrace to be destroyed. Ironically, if Chartered Land has its way, its development could do more damage than Britain's artillery bombardment of 1916. The Dublin City Council Moore Street advisory committee report states the Chartered Land plan would have "a severely negative impact on the setting and integrity of the National Monument". The preservation of the national monument and the surrounding streetscape would allow for the development of an historic 1916 quarter. This would encompass Moore Street, O'Connell Street and the GPO area. It would have ample scope for commercial and retail development, thereby helping to rejuvenate this neglected part of the capital and this development could link up with the plan to develop a Parnell Square cultural quarter.

In his last letter before his execution in Kilmainham Gaol on 8 May 1916, Éamonn Ceannt wrote, "In the years to come Ireland will honour those who risked all for her honour at Easter in 1916." Members should live up to those words and ensure Moore Street is properly preserved.

One cut I wish to highlight in particular is that of the withdrawal by the Arts Council of all funding from the Arts and Disability Awards Ireland scheme. The Arts and Disability Awards Ireland scheme is a unique all-Ireland project that is supporting and developing disabled and deaf people's involvement in the arts. It received funding from both arts councils on the island. The scheme has allocated a total of €640,565.45 to 216 projects on the island since its inception in 2000. The scheme had been valuable in promoting the careers of disabled and deaf artists. The future is now uncertain for disabled and deaf artists, as the cut in funding signals the end of the Arts and Disability Awards Ireland scheme. I appeal to the Minister to use whatever influence he can, both financial and political, to ensure that funding is restored to this worthwhile project.

In regard to children, the Fine Gael-Labour Party programme for Government states: "A new approach is needed to break the cycle of child poverty where it is most deeply entrenched. We will adopt a new area based approach to child poverty", yet the level of child poverty continues to grow. One of the major contributing factors is the Government's policy of cutting child benefit. Linked with this is the €400,000 cut to the national children's strategy, the €800,000 cut to the early intervention programme, the proposed €2 million cut to youth programmes in 2014 and the cut of €1.7 million to the school completion programme. These will adversely affect young people and their communities the most. The Life Centres, an out-of-school programme, provides education up to senior certificate standard. These will all be closed by September this year. This is short-sighted and vindictive.

By any measure of progress, the programme for Government has failed those who are most in need. Sinn Féin has continued to show that there is an alternative route out of the current economic recession and we will continue to do that in an effective and measured way.

Deputy Seamus Healy: This Government is selling off Ireland to foreign vulture capitalists. The Tánaiste, Deputy Eamon Gilmore, accused the former Fianna Fáil-Green Party Government of economic treason, but that economic treason continues under the Labour Party-Fine Gael Government as the country is sold off to foreign vulture capitalists with Deputy Eamon Gilmore as Tánaiste. Mortgages on homes, shopping centres, business premises and indebted farms are being flogged off at a discount by the Government. The policies of Michael Davitt and James Connolly must be revisited to stop this.

When the crash came and the banks failed, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party borrowed billions of euro and paid off, in full, the big international gamblers who had lent to the banks. The Irish people were burdened with huge debt repayments for generations. The Tánaiste called it economic treason. In addition, when the neoliberal or extreme capitalist tax base they had put in place collapsed, they borrowed more money abroad instead of increasing income tax and imposing wealth tax on the super rich, most of whom made a fortune out of the boom and have continued to do so. For every developer who lost a million euro, another wealthy person has a million euro or more in cash. Savage cuts and austerity were put in place.

The new Government was going to do the devil and all, including burning bondholders, and it said it would be Labour's way, not Frankfurt's way. However, there were no significant tax impositions on the rich. Instead, regressive home taxes were imposed and water taxes are planned for householders. The burning of bondholders, of course, was out. Savage cuts were continued to services, the welfare system and pay and pensions to service the increased foreign debt. More money borrowed abroad and was put into banks by the new Government which had said they would not get one more red cent.

National debt rose to 120% of all national production, the highest in the developed world. Now €9 billion a year, or €750 million a month, is being paid out by the Exchequer to service the national debt. Frankfurt's way has prevailed. Frankfurt then decided that not only would the national debt have to be serviced, but reducing the budgetary deficit to 3% of GDP would not be enough, and the structural deficit would have to be eliminated. Again, the Labour Party-Fine Gael Government capitulated to the fiscal treaty, although though it is grossly unfair to Ireland.

At current meagre growth rates, more than €4 billion a year will have to be paid back, mainly to foreign investors, in addition to the €9 billion debt servicing I mentioned earlier. Yesterday's EU report on Ireland states that to eliminate the structural deficit by 2018, as required by the treaty, we must change from a deficit of 4.8% of GDP this year to a surplus of 4.9% in 2018, involving the extraction of a further €14.5 billion out of the economy. Given the Government's capitulation to the fiscal treaty, there will be at least another four years of particularly savage austerity and the continuation of misery, austerity budgets, low growth and emigration into the indefinite future.

The sell-off has continued and, as part of that, in July 2011, that financial wizard, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, sold €1.12 billion of Government shares in Bank of Ireland to Wilbur Ross and a North American consortium. Now the shares are worth €3.8 billion and Wilbur Ross thinks the Minister and Richie Boucher are marvellous. Why would he not think that? Without any risk, he has made a huge profit of €2.7 billion. The reason the shares rose is that investors had been assured by the Minister that Bank of Ireland was a pillar bank, supported by the Government. The Minister saved Wilbur Ross and his vulture capitalist friends a further €325 million at the expense of the State when he voluntarily sold €1.3 billion

in preference shares, which the bank could not redeem, to a third party.

Yesterday during Leaders' Questions, the Taoiseach told me that Mr. Ross's investment in Bank of Ireland meant there was less of a capitalisation requirement for the taxpayer. That is totally untrue. The sale of €1.12 billion in State shares had no effect on capitalisation. It merely meant that those shares were replaced by €1.12 billion of shares held by this North American consortium. I call on the Taoiseach to correct the record of the House. It is a disservice to democracy if a Taoiseach can tell a blatant untruth to the House to cover up the fact that Wilbur Ross and his vulture capitalist associates walked away with €2.7 billion euro of the people's money because of the ideological position of the Government on private banking.

However, there is more to come. Next week, the liquidators of IBRC are to sell the roofs from over the heads of 13,500 Irish people to foreign vulture capitalists at a huge discount. The Government has refused to give the homeowners the protections available to customers of the Irish banks. The Minister, Deputy Noonan, who met the Lone Star cowboys in Davos, thinks it might reduce the selling price if they were given that protection. The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton, told me during Leader's Questions that because the vultures were getting a discount, they would be expected to go easier on distressed mortgage holders. Does she think we are all fools?

The State owns 90% of AIB and Permanent TSB. As the Labour Party-Fine Gael Government is ideologically committed to privatising banks, the Minister will sell off these banks before the next election. Given the Government approach, all those holding mortgages with these State banks are in danger of being sold off as part of the privatisation.

The recently screened television documentary, "Who's Buying Ireland?" featured vulture capitalist funds which are buying up assets all over the country. NAMA is now in on the game also. NAMA has acquired €74 billion in bank loans and its CEO said it is now moving into the phases of managed disposal of property and loan assets. Its strategy is sell them off to foreign capital. NAMA currently has 1,000 Irish properties for sale. In short, mortgages on homes, shopping centres, business premises and indebted farms are being flogged off at a discount by this Government to these foreign vulture capitalist firms.

However, that is not all. The neoliberal Labour Party, through its Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resource, Deputy Pat Rabbitte, has sold off Bord Gáis to foreign capitalists and is committed to further sales. As a result of the continuation of this economic treason, the amount of money lost to the economy - money generated by the work of Irish people who are going abroad now and in future years - will be catastrophic. This will include mortgage and loan repayments by Irish residents and an increase from €9 billion to €13 billion in Government debt servicing costs as soon as the fiscal treaty kicks in. This money will not be circulating in Ireland, generating jobs and sales here. It will be doing so in other parts of the world or sitting in the bulging bank accounts of foreign companies. Worse still, these companies will be able to increase repayment demands on these loans in order to suck more money from Irish people. They will be able to impose increased mortgage repayments and upward-only rent reviews. They will be able to repossess Irish homes and businesses. In other words, the equivalent of the old rack-renting absentee landlord will be able to deploy the modern equivalent of the battering ram. This is further economic treason. This Government needs to be reminded of the words of James Connolly and Michael Davitt. Furthermore, Connolly's social and economic policies must be implemented. We need a new reconquest of Ireland by its people - a new leadership of the labour movement and the people.

Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dinny McGinley): Fáiltím roimh an deis chun labhairt sa Dáil maidir leis an athbhreithniú ar chlár an Rialtais mar a bhaineann sé leis na cúraimí atá orm mar Aire Stáit sa Roinn Ealaíon, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta. Tugadh gealltanais shonracha i gclár an Rialtais maidir le cur i bhfeidhm na straitéise 20 bliain don Ghaeilge, cruthú fostaíochta sa Ghaeltacht, athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 agus athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar na cláir maoinithe a chuirtear ar fáil d'eagraíochtaí Gaeilge. Tá sé i gceist agam labhairt leis an Teach inniu faoin méid atá déanta maidir le cur i bhfeidhm na ngealltanais sin, ceann ar cheann.

Tá sé ráite i gclár an Rialtais go dtabharfaidh an Rialtas tacaíocht don straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge agus go ndéanfaidh sé na spriocanna indéanta atá luaite inti a sheachadadh. Tá an Rialtas thar a bheith tiomanta do chur chun cinn na Gaeilge. Tá cur i bhfeidhm na mbeart éagsúil faoin straitéis mar bhunchloch dár bpolasaí chuige sin. Tá dul chun cinn á dhéanamh maidir le raon leathan gníomhaíochtaí faoin straitéis a chur i bhfeidhm de réir a chéile ar bhealach córasach laistigh de na hacmhainní teoranta atá ar fáil. Léiríonn an tuarascáil ar an dul chun cinn atá déanta le trí bliana anuas, a foilsíodh anuraidh, agus na pleananna forfheidhmithe a d'fhoilsigh na Ranna Rialtais ábhartha ag an am céanna, 11 acu san iomlán, go bhfuil cur chuige soiléir ann maidir le cur i bhfeidhm na straitéise.

Ní miste a lua go bhfuil allúntas ar leith de €500,000 curtha ar fáil don straitéis don chéad uair riamh i mbliana mar chuid de Mheastacháin Athbhreithnithe mo Roinne. Is léiriú fol-lasach é seo ar chur i bhfeidhm an ghealltanais i gclár an Rialtais. Cuirfidh an maoiniú seo ar chumas mo Roinne tabhairt faoi ghníomhaíochtaí éagsúla a thacóidh leis an phróiseas pleanála teanga ar an talamh. Airítear anseo tacaíocht d'eagraíochtaí pobail chun cabhrú leo tabhairt faoi phleananna teanga a ullmhú agus a fheidhmiú faoi Acht na Gaeltachta 2012. Tá an próiseas pleanála teanga faoi Acht na Gaeltachta 2012 á chur i bhfeidhm ag mo Roinn i gcomhar le hUdarás na Gaeltachta agus le Foras na Gaeilge. Táthar ag tabhairt tús áite do na limistéir pleanála teanga Ghaeltachta atá aitheanta chun críche an Achta. Foilsíodh na chéad fhógraí faoin Acht i mí na Nollag 2013 i gcás Chiarraí thiar; Chois Fharraige; agus Ghaioth Dobhair, Rann na Feirste, Anagaire agus Loch an Iúir. Táim ag súil go mbeidh deich bhfógra eile foilsithe i mbliana agus go ndéanfar na fógraí eile ina dhiaidh sin. Ar ndóigh, tá an t-údarás freagrach faoin Acht as tacaíocht a thabhairt d'eagraíochtaí maidir le hullmhú agus cur i bhfeidhm pleananna teanga sna limistéir pleanála teanga Ghaeltachta.

Maidir leis na bailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta, tá sé i gceist ag mo Roinn próiseas comhairliúcháin a reáchtáil maidir le roghnú na mbailte is oiriúnaí le bheith aitheanta faoin Acht mar bhailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta. I gcás na líonraí Gaeilge, tuigtear dom go bhfuil sé i gceist ag Foras na Gaeilge scéim na líonraí Gaeilge a fhógairt ag tús na bliana seo chugainn. Mar is eol don Teach, cuireann Acht na Gaeltachta 2012 an creatlach reachtúil ar fáil chun tabhairt faoin bpróiseas pleanála teanga ar bhonn comhordaithe. Táthar ag súil go mbeidh an pobal, an earnáil dheonach, an earnáil phoiblí agus an earnáil phríobháideach ag obair as lámha a chéile chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don Ghaeilge sna ceantair éagsúla a bheidh aitheanta faoin Acht. Is trí phleananna teanga a ullmhú agus a fheidhmiú ag leibhéal an phobail a thabharfar tacaíocht don Ghaeilge mar theanga phobail agus teaghligh i gceantair Ghaeltachta agus i gceantair eile taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht.

Mar is eol don Teach, tá cruthú fostaíochta ar an gcéad chloch ar phaidrín an Rialtais. Chomh fada is a bhaineann sé le cruthú fostaíochta sa Ghaeltacht, níl dabht ar bith ach go bhfuil obair den scoth déanta ag Údarás na Gaeltachta ón uair gur bunaíodh é sa bhliain 1980 agus freagracht air as forbairt eacnamaíochta, sóisialta agus cultúrtha na Gaeltachta. Creidim gur

éirigh le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta infheistíocht shubstaintiúil a mhealladh chun na Gaeltachta thar na blianta. Tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach a chinntiú go leanfar leis an infheistíocht sin chun pobal labhartha na Gaeilge a choinneáil sa Ghaeltacht. Tá comharthaí le feiceáil ar fud na Gaeltachta mar thoradh ar an infheistíocht a dhéanann an t-údarás inti. Bhí an líon ba lú cailiteanais post le 30 bliain anuas i gcliantchuideachtaí an údaráis le linn 2013, rud a léiríonn an obair fhiúntach atá ar siúl acu chun bonn seasmhach a choimeád faoin fhostaíocht sa Ghaeltacht. Is ábhar sásaimh é gur éirigh leis an údarás 616 post a chruthú anuraidh agus go raibh 7,650 post i gcliantchuideachtaí an údaráis ag deireadh na bliana, ag tógáil san áireamh an aeráid dúshlánach eacnamaíoch atá ann faoi láthair. Tá sé mar sprioc ag an údarás 520 post nua a chruthú i mbliana, mar atá ráite sa phlean gníomhaíochta um fhostaíocht 2014 a d'fhoilsigh an Rialtas an tseachtain seo caite.

Ina theannta sin, tá forbairt an ionaid do chuairoteoirí ag Teach an Phiarsaigh san áireamh mar chuid den chomóradh ar 1916. Beidh an t-ionad seo tábhachtach do chruthú fostaíochta, go díreach agus go hindíreach, agus don turasóireacht chultúrtha i gceantar Ros Muc i nGaeltacht Chonamara. Mar thoradh ar an phacáiste spreagtha caipitil de chuid an Rialtais, tá allúntas ar leith de €500,000 curtha ar fáil i mbliana do Theach an Phiarsaigh ionas gur féidir ionad do chuairoteoirí a thógáil i Ros Muc mar chuid de chlár cuimhneacháin 2016. Tá na céimeanna cuí idir lámha ag mo Roinn i gcomhar le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta, Comhairle Contae na Gaillimhe, Fáilte Éireann agus Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí chun an togra seo a chur i gcrích in am do chomóradh 100 bliain Eirí Amach na Cásca. Tá mé fíorbhuíoch don Aire, an Teachta Deenihan, atá mar chathaoirleach ar an ngrúpa comhairle maidir leis na himeachtaí seo, as an tacaíocht atá sé ag tabhairt don tionscnamh.

Maidir leis an ngealltanais a tugadh i gclár an Rialtais faoi athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003, is féidir liom a dhearbhuí go bhfuil an t-athbhreithniú sin críochnaithe anois agus go gcuirfear dréacht-chinn an Bhille chun an tAcht a leasú faoi bhráid an Rialtais go luath. Ba iad aidhmeanna an athbhreithnithe a chinntiú gur meicníocht é an tAcht a thacaíonn le forbairt na Gaeilge ar bhealach atá éifeachtach agus éifeachtúil ó thaobh costais de agus go bhfuil na dualgais a eascraíonn ón Acht cuí chun soláthar sásúil seirbhísí trí Ghaeilge ag comhlachtaí poiblí a chinntiú, de réir an éilimh atá orthu ón bpobal. Fuarthas thart ar 1,400 freagra ar an suirbhé agus 262 aighneacht le linn an phróisis chomhairliúcháin a eagraíodh mar chuid den athbhreithniú. Tá sé i gceist na dréacht-chinn a chur faoi bhráid an Chomhchoiste um Chomhshaoil, Iompar, Chultúr agus an Ghaeltacht agus iad a fhoilsiú ar shuíomh Idirlín mo Roinne, i dteannta thorthaí an phróisis chomhairliúcháin, chomh luath agus atá cead an Rialtais faighte chuige sin.

Chomh maith leis na leasuithe éagsúla atá beartaithe mar thoradh ar an athbhreithniú ar an Acht, beidh forálacha a bhaineann le cónascadh Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga le hOifig an Ombudsman san áireamh i ndrúacht-chinn an Bhille. Ba mhaith liom a threisiú anseo inniu nach gcuirfidh an cónascadh seo isteach ar neamhspleáchas an Choimisinéara Teanga i bhfeidhmiú a chuid cumhachtaí agus go bhfanfaidh an oifig sa Ghaeltacht. Tá na céimeanna cuí tógtha ag mo Roinn chun an coimisinéir nua a cheapadh i gcomhréir le halt 20(3) d'Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003, a deir gurb é Uachtarán na hÉireann a dhéanann duine a cheapadh mar Choimisinéir Teanga ar chomhairle an Rialtais tar éis do Dháil Éireann agus do Sheanad Éireann rúin a rith ag moladh an duine a cheapadh. Ós rud é go bhfuil na rúin sin rite anois, tuigtear dom go ndéanfaidh an tUachtarán an tUasal Rónán Ó Domhnaill a cheapadh mar an dara Coimisinéir Teanga go han-luath.

Maidir leis an ngealltanais a tugadh i gclár an Rialtais faoi athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar na

cláir mhaoinithe a chuirtear ar fáil d'eagraíochtaí Gaeilge, tá an t-athbhreithniú sin tugtha chun críche ag Foras na Gaeilge. Mar thoradh air sin, rinne an Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh-Theas socruithe nua maoinithe a fhaomhadh, in ionad múnla reatha bunmhaoinithe Fhoras na Gaeilge, ag a chruinniú i mí Iúil 2013. Faoi na socruithe nua, beidh tosaíochtaí straitéiseacha ar leith á seachadadh ag sé eagraíocht cheannais a bheidh ag feidhmiú ar bhonn uile-oileáin agus atá roghnaithe ag an tráth seo ag Foras na Gaeilge. Is iad Gaelscoileanna, Conradh na Gaeilge, Gael Linn, Oireachtas na Gaeilge, Glór na nGael agus Cumann na bhFiann na heagraíochtaí ceannais atá i gceist.

2 o'clock

Tiocfaidh na socruithe nua maoinithe i bhfeidhm ón 1 Iúil 2014. Cinnteoidh an cur chuige úr go mbeidh níos mó airgid ag dul i dtreo sheirbhísí túslíne a sheachadadh sa dá dhlínse seachas ar chostais riaracháin na n-eagraíochtaí.

Ina theannta sin, tá Foras na Gaeilge ag tabhairt faoi na fóraim chúí a chur ar bun le tacú leis an chur chuige úr seo, is iad sin, an fóram comhpháirtíochta uile-oileáin agus an fóram forbartha teanga uile-oileáin. Beidh an fóram comhpháirtíochta uile-oileáin comhdhéanta de cheannasaithe na n-eagraíochtaí ceannais agus Foras na Gaeilge. Bunófar an fóram seo chun cur chuige comhoibríoch ag na heagraíochtaí ceannais a chinntiú. Beidh an fóram forbartha teanga uile-oileáin ionadaíoch de shainleasa teanga áitiúla atá maoinithe ag Foras na Gaeilge ag leibhéal an phobail. Tabharfaidh an fóram seo aischothú don fhóram comhpháirtíochta ar fheidhmiú na dtosaíochtaí straitéiseacha ar an talamh. Mar fhocal scoir, tá súil agam go bhfuil léargas tugtha agam don Teach ar an obair atá ar siúl chun na gealltanais shonracha a bhaineann leis an Ghaeilge agus an Ghaeltacht i gclár an Rialtais a chur i gcrích. Mar a thuigfidh an Teach, is obair leanúnach atá i gceist. Tá mo Roinn ag tabhairt faoi ar bhealach córasach i gcomhar leis na páirtithe leasmhara ábhartha taobh istigh de na hacmhainní atá ar fáil dúinn ag an am seo.

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan): Three years ago when Fine Gael and the Labour Party formed a Government, Ireland was a very different country, a fact conveniently forgotten by Deputy Barry Cowen earlier. During the term of the previous Government, Ireland had entered into a period of extraordinary turmoil, decline and instability. When we came into office, unemployment had ballooned, our finances were out of control and the State was being kept afloat by an international bailout. This was the first time in our history that we had ever needed this type of support to manage our affairs. Internationally, Ireland had gone from being an economic poster boy to an economic basket case. Our reputation had been severely tarnished. Clear and decisive actions were needed to make Ireland an attractive place to do business once again, to get our finances under control and to tackle the scourge of unemployment.

That work started on our first day of office and continues to this day. Top of our agenda has been, and remains, job creation. Up to 61,000 new jobs were created in 2013, more than 1,000 a week. The unemployment rate has dropped from a high of 15.1% to the current 11.9%. While this is still unacceptably high, it is very much moving in the right direction. Progress is being made on a range of programme for Government commitments in the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht which will continue for 2014. We will also support the focus on job creation which is such an important part of the work of every Department.

For example, the film sector, supported by the Department through the Irish Film Board, is one that supports significant employment and also has the scope to grow. Ireland's film and

6 March 2014

audiovisual sector has seen an expansion of 42% between 2011 and 2013. Only yesterday I visited Ardmore Studios, the venue for the filming of the €33 million series “Penny Dreadful”. This is one example of Ireland’s recent success through the enhancements to the section 481 tax relief introduced in the past two budgets. With this, the Department will continue to strongly support film sector and jobs growth over the course of this year. When I visited Ardmore Studios yesterday, the producers of “Penny Dreadful”, Chris King and John Logan, along with its main star, Timothy Dalton, were complimentary of the studios and the Irish crews involved, such as set designers, costumers and make-up artists. I hope this will result in other film and television productions coming to Ireland for filming. It was believed that “Ripper Street” might not return, but last week it was announced it would. The series “Vikings”, a major success in America, will return next season. Recently, I saw “Calvary” at the Jameson Dublin Film Festival, which will be a big hit. “The Lobster”, which will soon be shot in County Kerry, involves big movie names such as Colin Farrell and Rachel Weisz. It shows how vibrant the industry is. We have an objective to double employment in it to 10,000 over the next three years.

I have also prioritised supporting jobs in the heritage sector. Over 2014, the Department will be focusing on the roll-out of restoration and renovation projects at protected buildings in every county. For this year, €5 million will be invested in heritage buildings from the sale of the national lottery licence and through the built heritage jobs leverage fund. This is the most significant investment in built heritage since 2008, which I hope will also have a strong jobs dividend. It should be remembered that before we took office, funding for built heritage had been reduced from €15 million to €3 million, a major blow for the sector. I am delighted that we will be able to provide funding for this sector through the national lottery licence and fund. There has been a great response from local authorities and we will be assessing their applications.

The programme for Government committed us to expanding private support of the arts. To achieve this, the Department introduced a philanthropy scheme in 2012 and 2013, both of which have helped to encourage arts organisations to build partnerships with potential sponsors. In addition, on my recommendation, the Arts Council introduced the RAISE programme, which is working to significantly enhance fund-raising skills in ten arts organisations. It will be interesting to see how this affects the income of those organisations. The whole idea is to reduce the sector’s dependency on funding from the taxpayer and move it more towards the business sector. We are generous, giving €500 million a year in donations, but the arts sector only gets 0.6% of that. This is probably due to the fact that the arts sector was not good at looking for funds in the past. We will look to increase funding from the business sector. With the economy improving, I hope we can restore taxpayer funding to what it was before the crash too. However, there is great potential in the private and business sectors to fund the arts which I hope this scheme will encourage. A seed capital scheme to encourage philanthropy will also be introduced this year. An allocation of €300,000 will be provided for a small capital grants scheme. There will be a maximum allocation of €10,000 per project, with up to 70% of the cost of the project to be funded by the Department and the balance of 30% to be funded from the project’s own resources or philanthropic sources or a mixture of both. The scheme will be launched shortly and it is a further indication of the ongoing work being done to support the development of a culture of philanthropy in the arts sector. In addition, as part of our commitment to ensure the broadest engagement with the arts, in 2013 a total of €8.3 million was allocated to fund 452 individuals and 872 organisations to tour Ireland. This gives people opportunities to take part in cultural activities, supports a network of venues, festivals and arts organisations and supports employment in the creative sector.

With regard to the decade of centenaries, a series of commemorative projects have been delivered, with the focus to date on milestone events, including the Home Rule Bill, the Ulster Covenant, the 1913 Lockout and the foundation of the Irish Volunteers. The coming programme will include a range of keynote capital projects, seminal exhibitions and a multifaceted cultural programme engaging the public, community and private spheres. A dedicated website, www.decadeofcentenaries.com, has been launched with information on the commemorative events taking place. In addition, €6 million will be allocated in 2014 from the sale of the national lottery licence to help to fund a number of commemoration projects, including exhibition and interpretative facilities at the GPO.

I refer to a new agreement I have entered into with Bank of Ireland at College Green, Dublin. This will result in the development of a new cultural and heritage centre with Bank of Ireland making space available and covering costs and my Department managing, operating and animating the new centre. The bank will provide funding for the refurbishment and fit-out of the 600 sq. m space and the national cultural institutions will provide the curatorial expertise regarding which exhibitions will be held there in the next ten years. This is a major development and I thank the bank and its chief executive, Mr. Richie Boucher, in particular, for the interest he took to ensure this happened. It is a positive expression of support for the creative industries by the bank and a recognition of the importance of the decade of centenaries. There is more footfall on Westmoreland Street than in other parts of Dublin city centre and, therefore, it will be successful.

When open, the public will enter the new centre through the magnificent Gandon-designed portico on Westmoreland Street. More than 600 sq. m of exhibition and performance space is being made available, allowing cultural exhibitions and performances to take place. The programme will have a significant focus on the social, economic and political events of the decade of centenaries, as well as incorporating a strong artistic component. A number of Members have tabled parliamentary questions in the past three years about progress in the provision of a space by Bank of Ireland and I am sure last week's announcement by the bank and my Department will be greeted enthusiastically by all Members.

Work in the preparation of this space for use will continue this year, alongside planning for the delivery of a range of commemorative events, including the foundation of Cumann na mBan and the outbreak of the First World War. There will be a major event shortly to commemorate the establishment of Cumann na mBan. The Women's History Association of Ireland is very much involved. The President will lay a wreath in Glasnevin Cemetery and an academic seminar on the establishment of the organisation will be held in the National Museum, Collins Barracks. It is important to recognise the contribution the organisation made to the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence because it was significant. I would like Members to support these events as much as possible. The all-party committee will be involved, but this will be a significant event because these were extraordinary women who made a major contribution to the establishment of the State.

The programme for Government committed the Government parties to making progress on turf cutting, which has been an issue from some time. The State signed up to the habitats directive in 1992, prior to which all bogs had been surveyed going back as far as the 1980s. A total of 426 special areas of conservation, SACs, had to be designated under the directive, of which 53 were raised bogs. It was then decided to postpone the restriction of turf cutting on these bogs. When I was appointed to office, one of the first things I was told was that the European Commission was taking Ireland to court. The formal notice had been sent to the

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previous Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Micheál Martin, in January 2011. We had no option but to implement the law, as the State had to agreed to do, otherwise we would have been taken to court and hit with huge fines. We have worked on this issue since and the vast majority of turf cutters on the 53 SAC raised bogs have complied. They have accepted the monetary compensation and we have spent €7.8 million in compensating them in the past three years. We promised in the programme for Government that we would review natural heritage areas, NHAs. This has been done and as a result of the review, 45 NHAs will be de-designated; 36 will be subject to compliance, with no turf cutting after three years, while 25 new areas will be designated to compensate for the active raised bog areas that will be lost. This has been well received generally in the turf cutting community. If we had proceeded with the proposal agreed to by the previous Cabinet in May 2010, approximately 3,000 turf cutters would have been affected. When the additional NHAs are taken into account, only 500 will be affected; therefore, this is a positive reconfiguration based on scientific surveys.

My Department has made a great deal of progress in a number of areas. We have committed to reforming a number of the national cultural institutions. I acknowledge the co-operation of staff with the introduction of shared services, which is important, and in accepting that there will be changes and amalgamation. However, they have been receptive to these changes. I acknowledge the various sports involved and the various individuals, the chairpersons of those boards and the directors of the national cultural institutions. The numbers of people who have attended the national cultural institutions have been very positive.

The National Gallery of Ireland is being developed. Over €26 million will be spent on upgrading the Dargan and Milltown wings of the National Gallery. They have not been upgraded to any extent since 1864 when they were provided. This will ensure the National Gallery will be one of the best in the world and will have the proper climate, environment and security to bring in exhibitions from all over the world. We need to bring in very valuable paintings that we cannot bring in now. That is a very positive development. More than 300 people will be employed while the work is ongoing in the next two years. It is hoped that this will be one of the seminal projects for the commemoration of the 1916 Rising in 2016. Last Saturday I was in the National Gallery where there was a series of lectures and workshops on the poets and artists of the First World War and that period. I recognise the work of the National Gallery in that respect.

Deputy John Browne: I welcome the opportunity to say a few words about the debate that has been before us for the last three days, which many would see as an extension of the recent Fine Gael and Labour Party Ard-Fheiseanna. It is totally unacceptable that the national Parliament would be used in such a way to promote the Labour Party and Fine Gael propaganda we have heard in the past three days. We have heard Minister after Minister competing with each other to give out what they perceive as the good news. The Ministers did not mention the fact that the prescription charge is being doubled and that medical cards and phone allowances have been withdrawn. The domiciliary care allowance is practically impossible to get approval for under the current Minister, home help hours have been cut and respite grants have been reduced. There have been savage cuts to services for people with disabilities and huge cuts to grants to county councils for housing aid for the elderly and other housing supports for people with disabilities. We have had reductions in the fair deal in my county. All these areas I mentioned affect the less well-off in our society. While the Government Ministers have claimed that they have managed to balance the books, it is very obvious that they have done so on the backs of the less well-off in our society.

Last Monday I attended a meeting in Wexford General Hospital for the help line to outline what was in store for us in Wexford. We were informed that the allocation to Wexford General Hospital will be reduced by €3 million and that home help hours available for Wexford in 2014 will remain as in 2013 despite the fact that the Minister for Health tells us we are an aging society. In Wexford, home help is available to people only if someone dies and the help that person had is passed on to a new applicant. That means people must remain in hospital much longer. It falls to economics, because it costs much more to keep a person in hospital than it would to make home help available for one or two hours per day or per week. I have had many representations from people with disabilities. They seem to be very severely hit, particularly in the lack of money for housing and upgrades to housing.

In Wexford, and I am sure it is the same in every other county, very few, if any, council houses are being built under the Government. In the past few weeks the Minister of State with responsibility for housing, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, and the Government have said they will kick start the building industry and allocate allowances to councils for social housing. I certainly hope that will happen because now, unless houses are handed up by residents, no houses are available for the ordinary consumer. In this area there are many false economies and wastage of money. The rental accommodation scheme, RAS, has cost millions of euro. There are other schemes, and at the same time people are not able to avail of a local authority house. This should be near and dear to the Labour Party and the Minister of State with responsibility for housing. I hope there will be an allocation of money sooner rather than later to local authorities to build or buy houses for the thousands of people on their housing lists. I also hope extra moneys will be available for housing aid for the elderly and other similar schemes.

Before he left, the Minister, Deputy Jimmy Deenihan, mentioned the 1916 commemoration. I remind him that 1916 does not all revolve around Dublin. Enniscorthy was very much at the heart of the 1916 Rising. We had Captains Thomas Weafer and Séamus Rafter and the famous meeting when the leaders of the 1916 Rising came to Enniscorthy and addressed a gathering outside the Athanaeum there. If there is funding available for Dublin, I hope a relative amount would be available for towns such as Enniscorthy that played a significant role in the fight for freedom. Going back to 1798 and Vinegar Hill, Enniscorthy has a history of republicanism and of being at the vanguard of the fight for freedom in this country. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Sean Sherlock to remind the Minister, Deputy Jimmy Deenihan of this. I have already written to the Minister to ensure funding is available for commemorations in Enniscorthy and other parts of the country.

Although the Minister of State, Deputy Sean Sherlock, is at the forefront of this, I remind him of the importance of science, technology and research. We have had an excellent base from which to make further progress. Some two thirds of Ireland's research and development is in the private sector, creating new product and service innovations that will drive exports, growth and jobs. Productive, high-calibre research undertaken by highly skilled research teams working closely with industry partners must continue to be a priority. The research and development tax credit is a function of increases in expenditure using 2003 as the base year of comparison. The incremental approach needs to be reviewed in light of pressure on company budgets. To encourage investment in the sector all research and development in a two-year period should be eligible for tax credits subject to EU competition approval.

It is also important to encourage the widest possible uptake of the research and development tax credit. Revenue and Enterprise Ireland should actively target the Irish SME sector with a user-friendly information guide on how the relief works. That is important. Many major

companies are availing of the research and development tax credit but I am not sure about some of the companies in the Irish SME sector. I support what the Minister of State, Deputy Sean Sherlock, is doing in that area. Perhaps he could improve the terms and conditions available to companies.

The agrifood sector is one of the major success stories of the previous Government and this Government. The combination of thriving family farms and world-leading food production companies has the potential to be a key element in the economic recovery. We have seen that over the last two or three years. Food Harvest 2020, which was initiated by the last Fianna Fáil Government, has been taken on board by the current Government. It is a tremendous opportunity for the development of the agrifood, fisheries and forestry sector. Some of the experts say there is potential in a short period of time to create at least 4,000 jobs.

The abolition of the milk quotas in 2015 will be an ideal opportunity greatly to expand output from this sector. It will cost a lot for farmers who have not been in milk production to get into it. They will probably need a substantial amount of grant aid and support in this area. I read recently comments from a Teagasc expert who maintained it would cost between €500,000 and €750,000 for a farmer to get into viable milk production when the quota is abolished. That is a significant amount of money that would not be available to younger farmers; perhaps, therefore, the Government should consider a low-interest scheme for farmers to get involved with milk production, as we could create jobs in the area. I ask the Minister of State to ensure the agricultural sector is adequately looked after.

Youth unemployment is another major problem in my county, and I am sure it is replicated in other counties. Many young people were in the building industry because the money was good and opportunities were plentiful. They left education at a very young age to enter that industry but now these people are 23, 24 or 25 and they have few skills. It is important that we look at training in order to reskill such people and make funding available for that. The old FÁS schemes and companies provided training, but in many cases this was done in areas where job opportunities were not available. It is important that future education and training should upskill people for viable industries such as farming, fishing, tourism and other areas where there are job opportunities.

We must tackle youth unemployment. People in Europe discuss how funds are available but they seem to be trickling down very slowly. People on both sides of the House should put their heads together to focus on tackling youth unemployment in this country, as the high numbers out of work are unacceptable.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I wish to share time with Deputy Dessie Ellis.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I am the Sinn Féin spokesperson for the environment and local government and there are a number of promises in the area which remain unfulfilled. Unfortunately, one of the commitments carried through was to continue with the Fianna Fáil and IMF plan to create a water utility and introduce domestic water charges. The programme for Government refers to the existing “inefficient” water system, but so far we have seen the costs of Uisce Éireann escalate way beyond what was initially forecast. All of the extra funding has been for consultants, water meters, salaries and setting up a glorified corporate structure for Uisce Éireann.

The local property tax was claimed to be earmarked for “parks, libraries and public lighting”, as indicated by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Phil Hogan, and other Ministers. It is what the newspaper and television propaganda told us last year. Now we find the money is being raided to the tune of €486 million to subsidise Uisce Éireann. In effect, people will be paying for Uisce Éireann not only through water charges - which will come after the local elections - but through the local property tax and motor taxes, which, in turn, will have an impact on local services. There will be three new taxes in the form of the local property tax, water charges and a new health insurance policy to be paid every year. That is fine for those who can afford it, but there is a section of the population that cannot do so. It will come on top of income tax, the universal social charge and PRSI. Will the Government reduce income tax by €1,600 per person?

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Is the Deputy being rhetorical? His colleague has reserved a position on universal health insurance.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Will the Government reduce taxation by €1,600? The programme for Government also promised greater devolution of powers to local authorities, but we have seen little evidence of this. There is also a change in the balance of power between county managers and democratically elected councillors. As we know, county managers hold most of the cards; in recent days we saw how the Dublin city manager was able to ignore the democratic decision of the city council in Dublin with regard to the continuing waste of millions of euro on the Poolbeg incinerator. The privatisation of social housing provision continues apace and instead of a local authority building programme, which is urgently needed, we have millions of euro being poured into the pockets of landlords and developers for rent supplements and leases. The promise to cede greater democratic control to local communities, including over local economic development, is totally undermined. Perhaps the Labour Party could address that issue in the next week or two. The privatisation of local community development projects will arise from their being put to private tender.

We have not yet seen a climate change Bill, which is urgently required. I brought forward a Bill to the House last year which was opposed by the Government, despite setting clear targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. We also set out clear five-year benchmarks to this end, but we have not seen action in that regard. The environment committee put together a very detailed report last year with Professor John Sweeney and although it was submitted to the Minister, it has not returned from the Department. We need that Bill now.

The programme for Government pledged to introduce a waiver scheme for low-income households, pensioners, etc., but we have not seen that despite asking in the House repeatedly about it. The Government must also revisit the building regulations issue, as new regulations took effect on 1 March on foot of a statutory instrument issued by the Minister, Deputy Phil Hogan. It will penalise people both in rural and urban areas who are trying to build house extensions. There must be regulations in place but the Government seems to be confused between multi-unit developments, which require strict regulations, and the people carrying out self-build projects, which have generally been to a very high standard.

Unfortunately, there is much to be done, as many promises have not been kept. As the Government has gone in the wrong direction with some of its decisions, I ask the Minister of State to relay to the Government that they should be revisited.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Just a week ago the Constitutional Convention voted overwhelmingly

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to enshrine the right to housing in Bunreacht na hÉireann. This has long been Sinn Féin's position and, while welcoming that decision wholeheartedly, we call on the Government to move forward on the issue. The Labour Party and Fine Gael are failing to protect and uphold the right to housing. There are almost 90,000 families on housing waiting lists around the country, which equates to almost 200,000 men, women and children in desperate need of housing and secure accommodation. There are also 5,000 homeless people. Despite this, only 29 homes were built for social housing purposes in Dublin last year. There are 16 newly homeless families in Dublin every week but the Government has nevertheless claimed it will end homelessness by 2016. It is either naive beyond belief or it is lying. NAMA, which has been proposed as a solution to housing shortages, has delivered fewer than 500 homes out of a promised 4,000.

Despite what some might say, it gives me no great pleasure to say these things. I would be very happy if I did not receive calls every day from new people at risk of losing their rented homes, languishing on huge waiting lists or living in crumbling housing in desperate need of refurbishment while local authority homes lie idle with no money for repairs. This is unfortunately the case. The Minister stood here this morning and quoted figures showing great boosts in spending, but we have heard such figures before and they never seem to really materialise. We know for certain that the housing budget has been cut by over €1 billion since 2008, and in 2013 the Government, in its wisdom, decided to cut a further €58 million from housing for 2014. The effects of these cuts are much more tangible than the promises of the Minister.

This morning I dealt with a woman whose rent had been raised by nearly one third, way above rent supplement limits. She has lost that home and is now living in Cavan where she cannot afford the rent while she waits tenth in line to be housed in Finglas. She cannot obtain rent supplement in Cavan or she will lose her place and be stranded, away from her family. I recently dealt with a family who for four months had been living in a hotel, having been made homeless. They had been requested, at very short notice, to leave the hotel that day. As they lugged their possessions around town seeking a place to stay and awaiting a call from the homeless section of the council, I called everyone I could to ensure they had a roof over their heads that night.

This is the story of the Government's housing policy and its abject failure to address the housing crisis. No plan has been put in place with local authorities to significantly boost social housing numbers. Instead, the Government is talking about removing responsibility from developers to provide social housing, quoting imaginary job figures it has produced in the style of an Anglo Irish banker. It needs to build more social housing, using funds from the European Investment Bank, as we have often suggested. I am told it is applying for this only now, three years after taking office. We need to use social housing bonds and local authority trusts to allow councils to raise funds to build more stock, as and when it is needed. The Government has no problem with this policy. It states it will do nothing about it, despite a commitment in its programme. We need to allow councils to purchase houses in unfinished estates where this would release the bond, allowing an estate to be completed and providing much needed social and affordable housing.

The Labour Party has made much of its success in stopping the trend of cutting funds for the homeless by the Government, but funding is only part of the picture, as its programme recognises, stating "prevention is better than cure". The Labour Party has directly contributed to homelessness. The Government has increased rent supplement contributions, cut rent supplement, the dole for younger people, child benefit, payments to single mothers and other supports. The Labour Party has failed to protect rental accommodation scheme tenants who are being evicted

by greedy landlords watching rents soar for just €50 or €100. These are the causes of homelessness. Water charges will also make it harder to keep one's home. Tackling these causes would help prevent homelessness. Sinn Féin agrees with the policy of housing-led and housing-first approaches, but they can only really work when the State is willing to provide adequate housing and no longer relies on the private market. The stagnation in the development of residential properties is, in part, due to the rental market being so incredibly profitable. It is also under-regulated, as there is no deposit retention scheme and the Private Residential Tenancies Board has been given more work for less pay, which appears to be the new Labour Party motto. There is still time for the Government to make a real difference, but it would require an about-turn, as we are in a real crisis. We need radical action, not massaged figures. Focus Ireland, Threshold and other groups tell us this is a human disaster in the making and it is on our doorstep.

Deputy Finian McGrath: We need to consider the details, implementation, major mistakes and false promises made in the programme for Government and the urgent need for reform and change. I mean radical, sensible change in order that all citizens will be treated in a respectful and equitable manner. The words "equality" and "respect" are often absent from this debate and Irish society. We need to be serious about these issues and give them top priority. All parties promised reform and change at the last general election. How far have they succeeded?

There has been a lot of talk about the consultants to Irish Water and the expenditure of €180 million and financial and business models, but why, three years on, is there a delay in the business model? Is there another scam before the local and European elections are held on 23 May? We need to tackle this issue. People are jumping up and down about consultants and other aspects of Irish Water, yet approximately 40% of water in Dublin is leaking from the pipes every day. I would like to see some Ministers jumping up and down about saving money and plugging these leaks. The questions of the free water allowance and the subvention must also be considered professionally. There is no point in doing laps of honour this week to celebrate the exit from the bailout when people want these problems solved immediately.

The abuse survivor, Louise O'Keeffe, had a major victory at the European Court of Human Rights, but why did the Government persevere in challenging her in that court? Why did it spend taxpayers' money on sending its top legal people to hound her? That was a scam and a scandal, yet there was no debate about this case. There are other victims of child sexual abuse. The Government should back off and stop using public money to pay legal people to torment these victims. Louise O'Keeffe showed great courage, having put up with horrific abuse by a local schoolteacher and in dealing with the trauma of fighting her case and practically going penniless to prove her point. The Government has some neck in sending people to challenge wonderful, brave individuals such as Louise O'Keeffe. That is another example of its use of public money. It should cop itself on and stop tormenting victims.

The Government promised to introduce universal health insurance by 2016. I strongly support this policy, but the targets are already in doubt and there are concerns about whether the Government has fully thought through its implementation. Help has been offered recently for homeowners in mortgage distress. What about the long-term arrears of many of these families? The Government has stated it will reduce health care costs, but people are frightened about their health care. They are leaving the private health insurance market in droves because of the cost.

The Government argues regularly that it has protected base lines in social welfare, but it forgot to announce to the public - it knows this anyway - that the dole for people under the age of 26 years had been cut by €44. Senator Feargal Quinn introduced a magnificent Bill on

upward-only rent reviews in the Seanad where it was passed, but when it comes back to the Dáil, the Government will vote it down. An example of another broken promise is the recent abandonment of the commitment to reach 0.7% of GNP in foreign aid.

Deputy Dessie Ellis spoke about the scandal of housing lists and the numbers of families affected, but the bigger issue is the homelessness crisis in Dublin city. A total of 4,613 people are using homeless services, of whom 1,958 are newly homeless. The Government has to up its game in that respect. I speak as a former full-time voluntary worker with Simon and soup runner in Dublin city. I worked with Simon in a voluntary capacity before I ever got involved in politics and have direct experience of the problem. The soup runners and front-line workers can provide the solutions for many of these complex problems, if we listen to them.

The dirty dozen cuts have been written out of the story in the past 12 months. A full year payment of property tax is due in 2014. Child benefit has been cut by €10 for the fourth and subsequent children in a family. Prescription charges have risen to €2.50 per item. Stamp duty on pensions was increased to 0.75%. Over 35,000 people will lose their medical cards. The telephone allowance for the elderly has been abolished. Yesterday I was contacted by a senior citizen in my constituency who was very upset about losing the allowance because €9.50 was a lot of money to him. The jobseeker's allowance was cut to €100 a week for those aged between 18 and 24 years. The bereavement grant of €800 was abolished. College fees, the subject of another broken promise, will increase to €2,750 this year and €3,000 in 2015. Maternity benefit was cut to €230 a week, thereby costing new mothers €832 this year. The first-time buyer's mortgage interest supplement was closed off to new entrants. The threshold for the old age pension has increased to 66 years. These are the dirty dozen cuts, but there are many others.

When the Government introduced employment measures such as the employment investment incentive, the seed capital scheme and the Revenue job assist scheme, I applauded them as wonderful ideas, but I would like to see facts and figures for the numbers assisted and jobs created. We regularly hear people say the only game in town is "jobs, jobs, jobs," but then we see people like Wilbur Ross make a killing on Bank of Ireland shares, even as the crisis continues for those with mortgages. Mr. Ross and other billionaires appear to have fantastic financial advice when it comes to getting away with stunts.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Is that Deputy Shane Ross?

Deputy Finian McGrath: No, I refer to Wilbur Ross, the multi-billionaire.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: He sold them the week before.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: He was a big exponent of selling shares.

Deputy Finian McGrath: They have fantastic advice.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: There is a little revisionism in the Technical Group.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I am speaking as an Independent Deputy. These guys have the top advisers when it comes to financial matters and I wish the Government would employ people who could similarly advise the 96,474 with mortgages in arrears for more than 90 days or the 1,014 who face repossessions. We need to do something about the 16.9% of mortgage accounts in arrears. The Government regularly rants about jobs, but when Independent Deputies brought forward proposals to develop and support the local post office network, it adopted a

dismissive attitude. We are trying to protect 3,000 jobs in the post office service. The position is similar in the reform of medical and GP services. The Minister for Health needs to sit down with the IMO to negotiate. The main issues for me are job creation and the economy; health, disability and housing; education; developing the peace process on this island; and a common-sense foreign policy that protects Ireland's interests and is always independent.

Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Sean Sherlock): This morning on radio I heard Deputy Joe Higgins describe this debate as narcissistic. However, I view it as an opportunity to explain to the House what I am doing in the area of research and innovation and what endeavours are under way in the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. My aim is as much to inform the House on ongoing developments as to articulate - I will not use the word "celebrate" - the achievements of the Government to date, given that 250,000 jobs were destroyed during the three years prior to our taking office. It is only right and proper that we should come to the House to give an account to the tribunes of the people. I would not describe myself as a narcissist. These days when I pass a mirror, I tend to avoid looking at my reflection. My hair is receding and turning somewhat grey, while my waistline is expanding. Similarly, I think it is unfair to describe the Government as narcissistic.

The Government recognises that we must employ the best of our research and innovation infrastructure to create jobs. Its strategy is to accelerate the economic and societal return on our science, technology and innovation investment, to further strengthen enterprise engagement and take-up of public research and to drive commercialisation. In other words, we want to turn good ideas into jobs. In this way, implementation of research prioritisation which has been under way since March 2012 will see the majority of public research funding aligned with 14 priority areas. These are the areas in which we are most likely to get economic and societal returns, particularly in the form of jobs, as well as underpinning platform areas of science and technology and certain integrating infrastructure to support the priority areas. Instead of putting all of our eggs into the construction basket, we are investing taxpayers' money smartly in areas in which we know we will get a return not only for large urban areas but also in regional development. The report of the research prioritisation steering group identified the 14 areas of opportunity which should receive the majority of competitive public investment in science, technology and innovation in the coming five years. The areas were identified on the basis of existing strengths of the public research system, strengths of the indigenous and foreign direct investment enterprise base, opportunities in the global marketplace and the potential to deliver jobs. A key goal in the process of research prioritisation will be a significantly enhanced focus on collaborative research with enterprise by growing the number of researchers in enterprise and enhancing the flow of researchers between academia and enterprise.

The whole-of-government prioritisation action group which I chair is tasked with implementing research prioritisation and significant progress has been made since its inaugural meeting in the spring of 2012. The group operates under the broader authority of the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and jobs and meets on a regular basis. The priority areas encompass the areas of energy, food, health, ICT and innovation in business processes and services. Considerable activity has emerged from each of these core areas not only in Dublin, Cork and Limerick but also through the institutes of technology which have a wider regional constitution. Action plans have been developed for each of the priority areas to identify the actions required across research funding organisations. Engagement with relevant stakeholders on the draft action plans took place at the end of 2012 and the plans were approved by the Government in June 2013. Many of the actions focused on addressing specific needs of enterprise in the research

community and ensuring appropriate funding was put in place to underpin these 14 areas.

3 o'clock

Coupled with that, during the Presidency of the Council of the European Union which Ireland held, I was a party to the negotiation on Horizon 2020, an €80 billion fund which is one of the most significant pillars of EU funding. We have set a target for Ireland to draw down €1.8 billion during the lifetime of that programme. I chaired some of the negotiations on that pillar of funding. I am proud to say that the delivery of €1.25 billion to Irish academic institutions partnering with industry will allow us to create the types of job we need to disrupt that flow of emigration so that when graduates are coming out of the universities and institutes of technology there are potential pathways for them to map onto the areas of opportunity of which I spoke, such as ICT, food and medical devices, in a way that allows for them to gain the necessary accreditation from tertiary up to PhD level, but also encourages the creation of the intellectual property and new innovations that are so vital to industry in a way that creates jobs.

We have also, since 2012, put in place a new intellectual property protocol. This outlines new structures to encourage more businesses to commercialise research and development by ensuring that they can access the results of State-funded research with greater clarity and certainty. Any business that has an idea can take that idea to an academic institution to see whether it can innovate in a way that creates wealth, new intellectual property, new licensing and, ultimately, jobs, because this is what it is all about. The prioritisation action group, PAG, is also considering how application procedures for research funding can be adjusted to assess relevance to and impact on the priority areas. We have a core standard. It is an excellent standard that is monitored by Science Foundation Ireland, which is leading the way as the core funding agency in this regard.

Furthermore, in response to recommendations to align the supply and demand of trained researchers, the Irish Research Council has rolled out an employment-based PhD and master's degree programme in which awardees will be employees, with the majority of time spent in-company. Rather than having PhDs staying within academia - the vast majority of them move out into industry anyway - we are, through a structured PhD, encouraging an increasing number to spend time in companies during the course of their PhD work. This is vital to disrupting the pattern, in a positive sense, to create more companies, spin-outs and spin-ins to sustain the economy for the future.

We have created seven world-class Science Foundation Ireland research centres, which we will fund over six years. These centres support the key growth areas. The Higher Education Authority has undertaken a national inventory of all significant publicly funded infrastructure and equipment, and an online portal is being developed. In parallel with compiling this national inventory of all research equipment of large infrastructure, the HEA has developed guidelines for third level institutions on providing access to users from the institutions and enterprise. We are opening up the infrastructure to enterprises and to other institutions so that it is not kept within silos and individual institutions are not proprietorial about the pieces of infrastructure they have within their campuses. We are trying to open up the landscape and break down the silos in a way that allows for greater collaboration, not only in a politically expedient way between institutions, but in a deeper way. It is important that we do so because we are such a small country.

The Higher Education Authority, in co-operation with Quality and Qualifications Ireland,

QQI, is currently developing a consistent quality framework for postgraduate education and training, incorporating the structured PhD model.

Research prioritisation is about enhancing the relevance and impact of the public investment in research while maintaining the excellence of our research base, further strengthening enterprise engagement and take-up of public research, and driving commercialisation. This is an apolitical space. No one political philosophy in this House underpins what we are doing. I would give due credit to previous Governments that laid the foundations for where we are now through the programme for research in third-level institutions, which allowed us to build out the bricks and mortar. The current paradigm is to drive public investment in research and innovation that yields the maximum impact for society. With seven large-scale SFI centres, we believe that partnership between industry, Government and academia allows the creation of economies of scale in a way that allows us to leverage the opportunities of Horizon 2020, the EU funding stream of €80 billion, which was negotiated on the basis of our studying the great societal challenges of our time - aging, food, health, transport, smart grids, smart cities, etc. By working in parallel with those thematic areas in Ireland, we will achieve greater leveraging opportunities. We believe that by adopting this simple philosophy we will create an impact within a three- to five-year period. It is making an investment for the future. It goes beyond a typical five-year Government mandate. We are trying to lay down a foundation for the next phase of development from the point of view of research and innovation. Over the next six years, the total investment will be over €300 million. SFI, through its multi-annual programme, will provide €200 million and industry will come up with €100 million, in cash and in-kind contributions. By bringing industry to partner with the academic institutions through the creation of these centres, we will create an international impact.

The process is collaborative and, as I have said, it works across all institutions. Its purpose is also to map out new opportunities with other jurisdictions. We are strongly of the view that we can collaborate more with Northern Ireland and are aware of the opportunities that will exist between institutions on both sides of the Border. When we launched Horizon at national level, we were cognisant of the need to ensure that, by partnering with institutions in the North, we could create economies of scale that would allow greater leveraging for funding opportunities across each of the thematic areas of which I spoke earlier.

We have 156 distinct companies across seven research centres. There will be more research centres to come. Our creation of seven centres of a significant scale has been a success, but we must carefully monitor its impact. We have put in place a set of metrics - clear indicators. If it is taxpayers' money, we must ensure we achieve that impact and are monitoring the work of each of those seven centres. However, the seven centres involve all of the academic institutions in some way, shape or form, and as I stated, it is based along thematic lines. In the research centres, the areas on which we are focusing include big data, data analytics and marine renewable energy. We are looking outwards, towards the sea. People talk about our being a maritime nation. We are looking at the potential for marine renewable energy. We are bringing a lot of industry partners into that and a new maritime research centre is being created in Cork. We are also looking at pharmaceutical manufacturing - in which there are lots of activities throughout the country - as well as drug synthesis, connected health, neonatal care, photonics, and functional foods. We are looking not only at the production of core food products but also at the areas of gut health, in which one can add additional functionality to foods, for example, from the point of view of delivering medicines. We are looking at the next phase of food production.

We are also looking at nanotechnology. All of these areas are ones in which Ireland is a sig-

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nificant international leader. We are not starting afresh on the journey. These are areas of core competence in which Ireland has a significant international reputation. This allows us to bring in industry that has been long established and new companies to partner with us to try to create the necessary impact. These are multidisciplinary research teams which cut across enterprise, education, health, the public sector, energy and the environment.

In the jobs announcements in 2013 Science Foundation Ireland, SFI had links with 72% of IDA Ireland jobs announcements. The kernel of that is that more of the wins in the foreign direct investment sector are predicated on our strong research and innovation base. It is all about human capital, not just corporation tax. The investment created through IDA Ireland is also predicated on this strong research and development base. We must continue to focus on this and not take the foot off the pedal. The number of jobs associated with the 30 projects was 1,757, of which SFI had links with 1,265. SFI directly supports a cohort of approximately 3,000 researchers across Ireland's higher education institutes.

With regard to the policy area for which I have responsibility, science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, we are very much aware of the current Project Maths process. We are driving through the education system a need for greater conceptual understanding by all students of mathematical and scientific concepts. The bonus points for mathematics at post-primary level and Project Maths are having an impact. There will be challenges further down the line. As long as the universities and the higher education institutes control the CAO and CAS systems, there will be a challenge in respect of inflating points where demand increases. We are cognisant of this point. We have also set up a STEM educational review group chaired by Professor Brian McCraith of DCU. We are looking at introducing industry to partner the Department of Education and Skills to move beyond the disparate number of STEM-related projects happening throughout the country. We have many great STEM-related activities that encourage greater understanding by primary and post-primary students in the area of STEM, but we want a national co-ordinated approach. If we partner with industry in a more co-ordinated way, the hope is industry will begin to contribute upfront cash to replicate it in areas that do not have this kind of activity.

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Fergus O'Dowd): This is a very important debate, one that transcends each Department because it is all about the collective performance of the Government and the collective changes made. This brings us to the most important issue, employment. The key issue raised by Deputy Finian McGrath was job creation. Where the Government is working most of all is in creating new employment. This week some 62,000 more people are at work than at this time last year, which is a significant change. It brings hope to people and an income to a family. It also creates an incentive to go out to work. That is what reforms do for us.

In my position in the Department of Energy, Communications and Natural Resources I am working on the area of natural resources, a key wealth creator across mining and inland fisheries. It is a significant source of employment and makes a real contribution to our economic welfare and revenue base. The significance is that in 2012 Ireland was Europe's largest producer of zinc metal in concentrate, with 32% of all European zinc mine output, and the tenth largest producer in the world. Output in mining, as measured by sales turnover, amounted to €426 million that year, directly supporting almost 1,400 jobs and nearly 2,000 additional jobs across other sectors. A significant share of the revenue went directly into the economy, including over €100 million in wages and salaries and €56 million in taxes and rates.

We have worked hard to achieve these successes, actively promoting exploration and updating research data, with the result that there are now over 600 mineral prospecting licences in the country, the highest ever. The extent of our effort and success is recognised in the international benchmark report of the Canadian-based Frazier Institute. The most recent report, published this week, ranks Ireland fourth in the world among 112 jurisdictions for good mining policy. We are up there with countries and areas such as Sweden, Finland, Canada, western Australia, Nevada in the USA, Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada, and Norway. We have maintained our top ten placing in successive years and scored highly across key categories, including infrastructure, quality of the geological database, taxation, socioeconomic and community development conditions and security.

I also work in the area of offshore oil and exploration. Those with the resources and a willingness to invest in high cost and high risk offshore exploration have real choices in where they choose to invest dollars, pounds, euro or yen. In the final quarter of 2013 almost 20 countries had licensing rounds, including Libya, Egypt, Malaysia, Angola, Australia and New Zealand. Ireland competes for exploration dollars in a competitive world and we have worked hard to revise our regulatory regime and increase research support to the sector with the objective of increasing interest in the Irish offshore. Against the background of limited interest in Irish offshore exploration - there were only two applicants for the 2009 round and for the same block - the 2011 Atlantic round marked a fundamental new departure by offering acreage on Ireland's Atlantic margin and permitting entry at significantly lower cost without a drilling commitment. This approach proved to be successful and saw significantly increased interest. A total of ten of the 13 licence options have turned into full frontier exploration licences and we now have the highest ever level of offshore authorisations. We are about to embark on the next Atlantic margin licensing round. Building on this momentum is key and last November I announced at the annual Atlantic Ireland conference the parameters of Ireland's next licensing round which will include all of Ireland's major Atlantic basins, offer two year licensing options and close in September 2015. The formal launch of the opening of the round, complete with full details, is planned for later this year. Advance notice was important to industry in order that it could make timely decisions on devoting resources to planning for participation. It also provides sufficient clarity for seismic contractors considering new data acquisition in 2014 and will allow time for applications under the round to be informed by data from new surveys.

In recent years we have significantly adapted our licensing regime, building on regulatory changes with regard to planning consent and safety. We are taking two further initiatives, one of which is a review of our fiscal terms. In the context of both public and parliamentary debate regarding the fiscal terms for oil and gas production, independent expert advice has been procured to examine the fitness for purpose of Ireland's fiscal terms. Wood Mackenzie is the company appointed to provide advice on the fiscal gain that is achievable for the State and its citizens, together with the mechanisms best suited to produce such a gain. This firm has been selected in accordance with EU tender procedures and is a global leader in commercial intelligence for the energy, metals and mining industries.

While there are many comments on our existing terms and their evolution, we should not overlook the fact that 2012 saw one well drilled in the Irish offshore area and three fields producing 0.4 billion cu. m of gas and no oil. By comparison, in Norway 172 wells were drilled and 77 fields produced 114.8 billion cu. m of gas and 694 million barrels of oil. We must really concentrate on these facts.

Ireland's regional seismic survey, which commenced in June last year, is by far the larg-

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est regional seismic survey ever of the Irish offshore area, and its aim is to address one of the most glaring data gaps. Full-fold seismic data on over 10,000 km were acquired in 2013 and the second-phase 2014 programme will seek to bring the total coverage to a figure as close as possible to 18,000 km. The processing of the raw data from 2013 is under way with the aim of having this available for release at the same time as the launch of the next licensing round.

The 18,000 km full-fold seismic survey is also designed to fill in data gaps that exist, particularly in the Southern Porcupine, Rockall and Hatton basins. Most important, the survey should go a long way towards revealing the true oil and gas potential of Ireland's frontier basins. The total cost will be of the order of €20 million and is being funded from leveraged industry contributions. When complete, this will provide a regional grid of high quality seismic data over Ireland's frontier basins and should allow resource potential to be predicted with much greater confidence and enable both the industry and the Government to evaluate adequately future licensing opportunities.

As Minister of State with responsibility for natural resources, my remit covers the Geological Survey of Ireland, GSI. Aside from its role in the provision of geological information and planning tools as the geoscience agency for Ireland, it is also involved in a number of specific initiatives. INFOMAR, for example, is a flagship national scale project. This long-term programme maps out all of our valuable marine territory, which is almost ten times our landmass. It is being undertaken in conjunction with the Marine Institute and is funded by my Department. Previous studies have shown that the return on investment is over four times the cost of data acquisition, and this return is spread across multiple sectors, public and private, multinationals, SMEs and research organisations. In 2013, the project was again reviewed externally and was deemed successful and on track, and the Government committed €15 million in the period to 2018 to support this world-class endeavour. As important as the data are, they are not simply being collected as an end in themselves as they are also being used to encourage the development of offshore energy, with the mapping being key to identifying suitable sites and cable routes for wind, wave and tidal generators; safer offshore navigation, with new charts recently produced for Dublin Bay and Kinsale; modelling of tides and currents, which is vital for the aquaculture and coastal protection engineers; and production of maps on the nature of the seabed, be it mud, sand or gravel, to assist with environmental protection and more efficient fishing practices.

Jobs and job creation are at the heart of what we are doing. In the geoscience sector, we have worked with Enterprise Ireland to form a business cluster, Geoscience Ireland. There is an acknowledged need to internationalise the skills and services provided by the wider geological community, and that is what we are doing.

We spent €5 million on the Tellus Border project. With regard to counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan and my county, Louth, we now have scientific data on soils, water and rock content with detail almost specific to each farm. Every single farmer will have a formula allowing for the purchase of fertilizer specific to his land. The project also helps to identify mineral resources such as gold. There is a gold map that we should all have a good look at. I hope that it will result in the development of a mining industry in areas where there would not otherwise be employment.

Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan: I was to begin by discussing something different but given that the Minister of State referred to oil and gas exploration, I must refer to a conversation I had with Mr. Eddie Hobbs on the telephone this morning about his book "Own Our Oil". He

seems quite convinced about what he is saying. He does not believe successive Governments have done a good job on this issue. Time will tell whether he or the Government is correct. In the past half-hour, I wrote to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Communications, Energy and Natural Resources asking that the authors of the book be allowed to discuss this issue at an upcoming meeting. People can talk about conspiracy theories and whatever they want but I hope that the Minister of State would want the best deal for Ireland; I imagine that he does. Therefore, the best way to achieve this is to talk to everyone with a legitimate opinion on the matter. When we meet people on the doorsteps, we realise this is a topic that causes frustration. The Government always tells us the matter is not as simple as might be assumed and that we have not found anything yet. Although it says we are not losing hundreds of millions of euro, we need to nail the debate once and for all. Will the Minister of State ask that the people who wrote the book, including approximately 14 authors in addition to Eddie Hobbs, be invited to the committee to have the issue debated? If we can address it in a better way, it will be good for us all.

Many speakers have said the Government had cheek to close the doors for a week and a half in order to do a lap of honour. I would say it was very brave to come into the House to try to defend what it has done over the past three years. Bar cochlear implants, I cannot really think of anything positive.

In the area of health, midwifery really stands out as a problem. Midwives in some hospitals must work twice as hard as their international counterparts. The international average is 29.5 deliveries per midwife but our average in some hospitals is 55. No matter what anyone says to try to defend that, it will not come up to the mark.

When I heard the current Minister for Health, Deputy James Reilly, state years ago he was thinking of getting involved in politics, I was very hopeful. Given that he had a medical background and knew what he was on about, I believed we might see some positive changes. However, the fact is that it is now too late to be blaming Fianna Fáil. The current Government has been in power for three years. How can the health service be as safe as it should be if midwives have to work twice as hard as the international standard would suggest?

In advance of the election, Deputy Frank Feighan, Senator John Kelly and I participated in a radio interview. I said I agreed with quite a few of Fine Gael's policies and that my only concern was that it did not believe in them itself. As it turned out, that is true. With regard to Roscommon Hospital's accident and emergency unit, I agreed with Fine Gael's policy. Deputy Kenny, now the Taoiseach, stood up on a soapbox in the square in Roscommon town and told us he would keep our unit open. Subsequently, when the cock had barely crowed, he had it closed. His argument was that he was sorry for the confusion and perhaps did not explain himself well enough. He explained himself well enough all right. Mr. Martin Kenny from Sinn Féin would be a Deputy now if the Taoiseach had told people in Roscommon town on the day on which he made his promise what he is saying to us now. I am not saying Mr. Martin Kenny's election would have been a good or bad thing. The Taoiseach, hiding behind supposed confusion, actually said HIQA recommended the closure. This was not true; HIQA recommended no such thing. Then the Minister, Deputy Reilly, said it was due to the dire coronary care problems there and the higher mortality rates of people who went there with cardiac problems. He completely manipulated the statistics on that and was not comparing like with like. He was not allowing for the fact that there is an older population and older people going into Roscommon hospital. No; he hid behind it. How can people in Roscommon be happy with the performance of this Government?

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There was another person who convinced me, so perhaps I am a little gullible. In their first few months as Members of the House the Technical Group tabled a Private Members' motion. To be honest, I did not know what a Private Members' motion was until I discovered I was going to be helping to put it together. Deputies Maureen O'Sullivan, Donnelly and I said our piece in the House. We made the point that we would not make a political football of mental health because it was too important for that. We said we would leave it to the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, give her a year, or perhaps two, and see what would happen.

I will outline what has happened. We now have a situation - these are not my words and let nobody accuse me of being irresponsible for telling the truth - where clinicians describe the psychiatric unit in Galway as "Dickensian" and what is happening there as "bedlam". These are the words of clinicians who work there. I hate having to say this because people will have to use that service and one does not wish to scare them away. However, one must deal with the facts. Three years into this Government's term of office there were patients lying in wet beds because water was leaking through the roof. Patients are shivering in corridors waiting to use one of the three showers. There are three showers for 31 people.

Last week, Deputy Frank Feighan suggested in the Dáil that I go and look at the hospitals and see the great work that is taking place. In fairness, he was referring to Roscommon hospital. I made an attempt to see the psychiatric hospital in Galway, along with Deputies Naughten and Keaveney and Senator Michael Mullins, but we were not allowed in. We were told it was because of patient confidentiality. That would have been legitimate if there had been anybody in the ward, but there nobody in it. On the one hand we were told, to shut us up, to go in and see the great work that is being done, but when we went to try and see it, we were not let in. If we go back to the public and say we are not allowed to see if the conditions are as they were described by the clinicians, what will happen? People will not trust the service.

We were told, on being refused entry, that we were wrong and that there were actually five showers. It is similar to the way some people might treat a child when giving him or her money, telling the child it is more money than it really is. We are not stupid. We do not believe what we are being told because we are not allowed to see it. We were also told that the leak was only a minor one. In fact, there is the equivalent of a duck pond on the roof of that unit. The roof is held up by RSJs which are covered up with some type of material to hide them. We were told that is not the case, but it is. It is a fact. As somebody who suffered from mental health problems in the past, as many people have - and no doubt in the future the black dog will be back to visit - it terrifies me that this would be one's only option if one got sick. My biggest fear of mental illness in the past was that I would have to use the services. That fear has not been alleviated in the slightest.

There was a brilliant system in Ballinasloe. There were 22 beds in St. Brigid's Hospital and it was working well. It was a model for how A Vision for Change should work, but the Government dismantled it. When the local community tried to stop it from being dismantled, gardai were called. Clients of that service and their parents were literally fighting with their hands to try to hold onto that service, but the answer was "No". There was a vote in the Seanad on it and Senator Lorraine Higgins, who is supposed to represent people in Ballinasloe, betrayed them and voted to close it. When I hit her about it on Twitter her comeback was to mention that I never got the swimming pool in Castlerea opened all year round. We are talking about people sleeping in wet beds and shivering in corridors, and the best response we can get from the Senator, who should not have that job anyway, is, "Nah, nah, neh, nah, nah, you didn't get your swimming pool". We are dealing with people who are talking about killing themselves

and all we get is a lame political comeback. That is a complete and utter failure on the part of the Government. When it comes to health, it has been a miserable failure.

I am sure Members at this stage are sick of the phrase, “Labour’s way or Frankfurt’s way,” but it must be said again when discussing our banking debt. In fact, it is not our banking debt but the banks’ debt that we took on our shoulders. As a result of the Government’s cowardice and inability to even ask, we have a debt of €70 billion for the future. It affects the future of my children and their children as it is leaching money out of their and their friends’ prospects. Amazingly, I heard Mr. Jim Higgins, MEP, say on a local radio station, Shannonside FM, last week that there is good news on the way and that before the next general election there will be retrospective recapitalisation of the banks and we will get the money back. I thought I had missed something so I checked it out. Nobody else appeared to have this information or to be saying this. On the one hand we have a Government which claims it has a victory and that we are doing all right, but on the other hand there is an MEP who is trying to get re-elected and says on the radio that we need not worry because this money is coming back to us. The way the Government is going about it, it will never come back to us.

All we are seeking is fairness. We joined the European Union when it was a community. A community is supposed to look after its members. Regardless of people saying it will cut off our money supply and will do this or that to us if we demand a debt write-down, the core issue here is the principle of community. Does a community do that to somebody when he or she falls on hard times? Does it threaten to kick one when one is down? It should not, but it did. Whatever about the detail regarding the money, the facts are clear. It is no longer a community, it is a bully-boy club run by France and Germany under the guise that they will go to war if they do not have this community. It is not our fault that they went to war and we should not have to pay the price for it now.

The Government understands the concept of a write-down. If one has a bugle or a company such as Independent News & Media, INM, one gets a write-down of tens of millions of euro. We own 99.9% of AIB and we had to make a decision on whether to give the money to INM and the Denis O’Briens of the world or to give debt write-downs on mortgages for people who are struggling to live and being tortured by the banks. We decided to give it to the multimillionaire, and then we thank him for paying the Republic of Ireland soccer manager’s salary. Actually, we are giving that man ten times more out of one of our banks alone than he is paying a manager who could not even win last night.

With regard to farming and the Common Agricultural Policy, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Coveney, did the rich farmers, as well as his own family members and many of the Government’s families’ members, proud. These are the farmers on single farm payments ranging from €40,000 to €80,000. The Common Agricultural Policy does not exist to pay back the loans undertaken by rich farmers for the houses they bought in Bulgaria and Spain during the boom. That money is there to keep small farms going, to keep families on farms, to create employment in farming and, most importantly, to guarantee food security for Europe. All it is guaranteeing now is rich farmers’ houses in Bulgaria and Spain. George Lee spoke about this at one stage but he has gone very quiet on it. I wonder why. I would love to hear him speak up on it again. Billions leaving the country which should stay in our local communities is, to use an overused word, a disgrace. The small farmer, no more than the rich farmer, only needs to sleep in one bed, only eats one dinner and only needs one pair of socks a day, but the poor farmer spends all of this money locally while the rich farmer spreads it around the world by the look of things. This money should have gone to local communities.

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The IFA will defend this. It is time members of the IFA woke up and realised whose side the organisation is on. The next time they go to a mart they should refuse to pay the bloody levy because they are paying a levy to fund an organisation which is screwing them more than Alan Shatter would have some of the whistleblowers if he had his way. It is not on. The money was for farming communities but it is going to ranchers and the Larry Goodmans of the world and this is completely and utterly wrong.

Another policy of the incoming Government with which I agreed was that it would stand by turf cutters. Deputy John O'Mahony stated at a public meeting on 15 February 2011 in Mayo that under Fine Gael turf cutting would be allowed in 2011. Guess what happened? I went out and cut my turf, as did Michael Fitzmaurice and many other turf cutters, and we were attacked. We were accused of being bad citizens for doing what the incoming Government stated it would be all right with us doing. It changed its mind afterwards. It stated it never realised how difficult it was going to be to deal with Europe over turf cutting. It did not understand the hospital situation or how complicated the debt situation would be either. I suppose come the next general election when members of the Government put together their policies and make promises, we will only be able to conclude that, God love them, they do not understand what they are saying so we had better not vote for them.

At this stage turf cutters are being dragged through the courts and we are listening to rubbish from the Minister telling us the problem is solved. This morning it was quite clear from his contribution the problem is not solved. One does not solve the problem by dealing with 15% of the people and excluding the rest, and then pretending to the media, who are only delighted to gobble it up, the problem is solved. The problem is not solved and it will only be solved when the Government listens to the stakeholders and takes on board what they say. At present it is listening to them and then ignoring them. This problem will not go away until the Government starts working with the people.

We had a plan which was voted on here. Everyone agreed with it and I was carried out of the Dáil shoulder high. What a great day. All that was going through my head was how do I tell these people the Government will shaft them in a couple of months time. I tried to, but they kept cheering because they thought the problem was solved. It is not solved. We even had a situation where the Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, in a phone call to the head of the turf cutters described him as a true patriot. He has gone from being a true patriot to being a criminal. It all depends on the audience; he is a true patriot if the Taoiseach is speaking to him but he is a criminal if the Taoiseach is speaking to another audience. There is a big distance between these two explanations of this human being. I agree with the first analysis of the Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, that Michael Fitzmaurice is a true patriot, because who else would have travelled the country night after night paying for his own diesel and chips along the way and looking for funding from no one? He visited every bog necessary and put together a plan which we presented. All that has happened is betrayal, twisting the truth and trying to spin things to make them sound good, but the public knows the truth.

There is not much I can do about the Government closing our accident and emergency department as I cannot kick in the door and pretend I am a doctor and run it, and other than protest and disagree there is not a lot I can do in opposition about it closing down our local schools and post offices. The great thing about the turf issue is if the Government tries to close my bog, if it takes me going in there with my bare hands to pull it out, the Government will not be able to stop me and it will not be able to stop the thousands of others who will do so. This is why the issue is one which will nail the Government in the end.

We heard a lot about local government reform before the Government came into office, and documents were thrown around the place with loads of information about this and that. Yesterday I contacted the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and had an hour long chat with someone about how the system will work. I had a good understanding of how it will work as I debated the topic here, but I wanted to hear what would happen if someone contacted the Department and asked how it will work. As things stand the number of councillors in Roscommon has reduced from 26 to 18. Other than this change all that has happened is the three areas are being called municipalities.

I asked the Department what legal requirement there is to hold any meetings and whether there is an onus on the chairman to call these meetings. I was told strictly speaking if no meetings were held nothing could be done. It is a bit similar to when I was on the corporate policy group on Roscommon County Council and the mayor was looking for favours so only one meeting was held during the year. Guess what? There was nothing we could do about it. Are we facing a situation where local government reform will be a bit like Windscale changing its name to Sellafield; local area meetings and road meetings will be called municipality meetings and then we will all meet anyway in the main council meeting where we will have less influence than we used to because it has become more local? What has changed? We were told about a structure of three regions taking in various counties and this system would feed into it. This has not been readied or prepared so in reality we have not had local government reform.

There is an idea the Government is bringing local government closer to people. How is local government being brought closer to the people of Boyle when its town council has been closed? I know it did not have much power, and there was not much it could do with the minimal power it had, but the answer was not to get rid of it but to reform it and make it better. In response to the suggestion the meetings held in Roscommon are bringing local government closer, I suggest the Government watches the episode of “Sesame Street” where Grover explains to people what “near” and “far” mean. One will notice that when people are far away they are a little bit smaller and when they are closer they are bigger. I seriously think the Minister does not understand the difference between near and far if he can close down local councils and call it bringing local government closer.

The benefits of reforming local government and giving councillors real power is important, particularly when it comes to business and rates. Under the new system there will be nothing councillors can seriously do to reduce rates without cutting services. These will be the options presented to councillors. The job of rooting out where money is being wasted will not happen because councillors who do this gets punished, as I and several other members of Roscommon County Council, including Sinn Féin Councillor Michael Mulligan, did. One cannot be the person who watches the pennies and also the person who wants to get stuff done in the area. Until we reform this system to put the elected representative in the driving seat we will not see rates reduced without a reduction in services. When I was mayor, as I have stated in the House previously but it is definitely worth repeating, I was told by the director of finance that if I sought any more detail on the budget he would leave the room. Under the new system being introduced he will still be able to leave the room and there will be nothing one can do about it and rates will not be reduced. Consequently, it is a shame the Government, which claims to care about creating jobs, did not change that because if it did care, it would have done something about it.

The major issue that is hitting the Government at present, and deservedly so, is that of the manner in which both Garda whistleblowers, Sergeant McCabe and former Garda Wilson, have been treated. In Mullingar at 6.30 p.m. today, the public will have an opportunity to come out

and support these brave people who are trying to do a tough job but which is being made more difficult by the Minister and by their boss, Mr. Callinan, who described them as disgusting. This evening, at 6.30 p.m., people will have an opportunity to show how these people are in fact the opposite. They are wonderful and brave people but unfortunately, in this country when one blows the whistle, the authorities do not look up. Instead, they look for a way to ram it down one's throat and if it does not choke one, they pray it will poison one when it reaches one's stomach. This is precisely what we are dealing with. Moreover, this is not the only cover-up that is going on and so many cases are being presented to me and to my colleagues, Deputies Joan Collins, Wallace and Clare Daly, that we are under massive pressure in trying to deal with them. New and astonishing stories emerge every day that, when one looks into them, actually turn out to be true. In one of these cases, that is, the death of Shane Tuohey, his father contacted me today to tell me they had received a response from the Minister, Deputy Shatter, to the effect that nothing could be done for them. Anyone who would read the details of Shane Tuohey's death need not be Inspector Clouseau, Colombo or Jessica Fletcher to solve this one but the Minister still cannot see anything wrong. It is a case of "nothing to see here". When he was in opposition, the Minister was all gung-ho about doing something in this regard, particularly in the case of Fr. Niall Molloy. However, he has gone cold on it at this stage as it simply does not suit him any more and consequently, these people must continue to suffer. I have a message for the Minister, Deputy Shatter. My colleagues and I will not give up and we will keep at this until finally we break through. The fact that this issue has been covered and dealt with in recent weeks gives us a glimmer of hope and we will keep at it until we win because otherwise, the children of this country will be obliged to work with a Garda Síochána that unfortunately they will be unable to trust, which would be really sad.

One issue I have brought up repeatedly in the Chamber over the past 18 months or so is that of Coillte and how people have approached me about alleged fraud against that company. When I brought it up initially, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, replied that he had not heard about it heretofore. He would have done, had he followed the question I had asked of the Minister, Deputy Shatter. However, when he did hear about it, his officials met the company that had approached me about the problem in the first place. The Minister himself could not meet us, as he was too busy. We met them again and again and they conducted what they called an investigation into the matter. We were not given a copy of or allowed to see the results of that investigation. Moreover, the Department could not get access to the information it sought from Coillte, because it was commercially sensitive. The Minister is Coillte's boss and if he wishes to carry out an investigation, through the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, into alleged fraud against a company the public owns, how can he hide behind the excuse that it is commercially sensitive? He could have got that information and then judged what was happening on the basis of that information. However, he refused to do so. The Government was correct to remind everyone numerous times about the money that was wasted on the e-voting machines, that is, of the €50 million or €60 million or whatever figure came to mind. The figure I am talking about in respect of the alleged fraud against Coillte, which is in public ownership, is in the region of €85 million. I will pretend to be Deputy Martin for a second and perhaps the media might listen. A total of €85 million is being robbed from us and nothing is being done. It is making the forestry industry less competitive and is in danger of putting many saw-millers on their knees and out of work. The Government should do something about it. It should try to do something right.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): I am pleased to have this opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Government's priorities for the year

ahead. In this short summary, I propose to outline my own priorities as Minister of State in the Department of Health with special responsibility for the primary care sector strategy. As Members are aware, legislation currently is being drafted to extend eligibility for general practitioner, GP, services without fees to all children under six as the first step in implementing universal access to GP care without fees and I will address this aspect of my work presently. I also have responsibility for the national drugs strategy and the Government's alcohol policy and I will address these also.

However, before so doing, I wish to take this opportunity to refer briefly to amendments I propose to make to the misuse of drugs regulations. Some of these amendments arise from serious concerns regarding the increased availability of benzodiazepines and so-called z-drugs. A wide-ranging consultation process in respect of proposed amendments to the misuse of drugs regulations was held in July 2012 with key stakeholders on the various aspects proposed regarding the amendments the Government had in mind. Draft regulations then were prepared and placed on the Department's website, inviting further comment by early September 2013. More than 90 submissions, some of which were very extensive and detailed, have been received from a wide range of organisations and individuals representing the medical, nursing and pharmacy sectors, as well as private and public hospitals, nursing homes, addiction clinics, drug treatment centres and others. The proposed amendments to the regulations include measures to place additional controls on benzodiazepines and z-drugs with regard to the licensing in respect of importation and export and to introduce an offence of unauthorised possession of benzodiazepines and z-drugs. In addition, stricter prescribing and dispensing rules also are contained in the proposed changes. It also is proposed to require all community pharmacists to notify all controlled drug prescriptions to the primary care reimbursement service, PCRS, and to expand the list of controlled drugs and the clinical settings in which these drugs may be prescribed by a nurse and midwife prescribers. I believe Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan recently tabled a parliamentary question in respect of Sativex and another proposal is to allow for the prescribing of the cannabis-based medicinal product, Sativex. Others are to exempt methadone and suboxone prescriptions from prescription handwriting requirements and to control new psychoactive substances.

As Members will gather from that lengthy list and the complexity of some of the proposed changes, it has taken a longer time to prepare and bring forward these regulations than the Government originally had hoped. In fact, the Department still is engaging in the process of collating and analysing the various submissions it has received. However, in order to avoid delaying any longer on those aspects of the changes that can be brought forward now without much further analysis or review, I now propose to progress this matter in two separate phases. I have approved the following three matters to be carried out immediately or in early course, namely, to expand the list of controlled drugs and the clinical settings in which they may be prescribed by nurse and midwife prescribers, to allow for the prescribing of the cannabis-based medicinal product Sativex and to exempt methadone and suboxone prescriptions from prescription handwriting requirements applicable to Schedule 2 controlled drugs. Just as soon as these matters are settled by drafting counsel, I can sign these regulations. There is no legislative requirement to go to Government, as no additional substances are to be subject to control. The remaining matters on the list I have just read out will be progressed and I will bring forward those amended regulations as soon as possible. However, Members will appreciate it is better to proceed now with the changes that can be made without any further delay and then take some further time to deal with those that require further analysis and consideration.

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In respect of the national drugs strategy, the Government remains fully committed to the implementation of a series of actions set out in the National Drugs Strategy 2009-2016. Towards the end of 2013, I completed a series of bilateral meetings with Ministers and participating agencies, as well as representatives of the community and voluntary sectors. These meetings dealt with the specific actions for which the various different bodies have specific responsibility, thus improving the overall level of co-operation and collaboration that is essential in this area. Following a review of the local and regional drugs task forces, a number of decisions were made to improve the operation and efficiency of the drug task forces.

These included the setting up of a national co-ordinating committee to guide the work of the drug and alcohol task forces, as they are now to be named and to ensure the ongoing implementation of the national drugs strategy, clearer terms of reference and corporate governance guidelines for drug and alcohol task forces, measures to encourage more public representative involvement in the work of drug and alcohol task forces and a review of the number and boundaries of drugs task forces, mainly in Dublin.

4 o'clock

As I indicated, it was decided to rename the drugs task forces as the drugs and alcohol task forces, reflecting their current role in tackling substance misuse, including alcohol.

In January I hosted a conference in Dublin Castle at which we took the opportunity to review the overall effectiveness of the national drugs strategy and, in particular, restate the Government's strong commitment to its cross-agency and cross-departmental dimension. There was wide participation at the conference from the community and voluntary sectors and all of the statutory agencies involved in the strategy and Departments. We took the opportunity to explore the potential to extend the work of the drugs task forces to the problem of alcohol misuse. A number of presentations were made and ideas canvassed which can be followed up by the new national co-ordinating committee. There is wide agreement that the success of the task forces in leading the community response to the drugs problem can be drawn on in a new focus on alcohol. I very much look forward to working on some innovative strategies for establishing community and cross-agency responses to the alcohol issue this year.

In regard to the Government's alcohol strategy, the House is aware that approval was given late last year for the drafting of the public health alcohol Bill. This legislation will include provisions in respect of minimum unit pricing for alcohol products, the regulation of advertising and marketing of alcohol, structural separation of alcohol products from other products in mixed trading outlets, the regulation of sports sponsorship and a working group to be chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach which will report later this year on the issue of alcohol sponsorship of sport and the health labelling of alcohol products. That work is continuing and the legislation is being drafted. I very much hope to be able to bring it to the House and also the Joint Committee on Health and Children for pre-legislative scrutiny because there is enormous interest in it and I would very much welcome the input of Members. I express my thanks to Members, in particular Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan who has been very supportive of some of the measures we have proposed in respect of alcohol. Other Members, including Deputies Michelle Mulherin, Joe O'Reilly and Pat Breen who are in the House, have expressed an interest in this important issue, which I appreciate.

Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan: It is not popular.

Deputy Alex White: It may not be, but we cannot just operate on the basis of what is popular. We have to press ahead all of the time. Sometimes what we have to do in politics is make small incremental changes and that is certainly what I am dedicated to doing.

I refer to my responsibility for primary care services. The House will appreciate that, in common with health systems throughout the world, the Government is addressing new serious challenges such as ageing populations and the creeping epidemic of chronic illness. Health care must become the concern of the whole society, not just those who are ill or those who care for them, important and all as that is. It must literally be about health, not just about illness. It must be about staying healthy, not becoming sick. Health policy must be about nutrition, fitness, exercise, addressing lifestyle factors such as smoking and the excessive consumption of alcohol, what we eat and how we live our lives, taking control of and managing our own health. It is in that context that the Government is bringing forward our policy of universal access to primary care, an absolutely essential component of what we are doing in the area of health. The budget announcement is being brought forward in the form of legislation to extend access to GP care to children under six years of age. I am happy to be able to indicate that I expect that legislation to be ready for introduction in the House within one month.

The Government is providing additional funding of €37 million to meet the cost of this measure. A draft contract for the provision of services for children aged under six years was opened up to public consultation last month. I am very keen to hear the views of general practitioners, in particular, and their representative bodies on the content and scope of this draft contract and have communicated this to them. I emphasise, as I have done in correspondence with the representative bodies, that the Department and the HSE are fully prepared to engage meaningfully with GP stakeholders. I am prepared to negotiate with the representatives bodies on all aspects of the scope and content of the proposed contract. While the ultimate setting of fees must remain a matter for the Minister for Health, there will be a real opportunity for GP input on this aspect and the fee structure which it is proposed will be addressed in a separate consultation process.

The extension of free GP care to all children under six years of age is the first phase in the introduction of free GP care to the entire population, as committed to in the programme for Government. A range of options for a universal GP service is under consideration with a view to bringing developed proposals by way of a memorandum to the Government within a short period.

The House will be aware that the Government has embarked on a major reform programme for the health system, the aim of which is to deliver a single tier health service supported by UHI where there is fair access to services based on need rather than ability to pay. This is a hugely important area of public policy in which all Members should involve themselves. I would like to see us agitating as much for improvements in primary care as some of us did in regard to hospitals or particular facilities in the past. Hospitals are important, whether in the community or at national level, but most important of all is primary care. To the extent that the politics of health care have just been about saving hospitals, I urge colleagues - I am not seeking to engage in an argument with any Member or on any issue in various parts of the country - to turn their faces towards genuine reform of the health service. This has a lot to do with enhancing and resourcing primary care services. We must fight for these resources. That is the objective of the Government; certainly it is my objective and preoccupation at this time. I look forward to engaging with the House again on the issue.

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Deputy Pat Breen: The country is a very different place today compared to three years ago when the Government took office. We are no longer beholden to the troika and have successfully exited the bailout. We are back borrowing on the markets again and the economy has been returned to growth. However, there is no doubt that we still face a huge challenge, but substantial progress has been made.

One of the biggest achievements has been the work done to fix the finances and restore our international reputation. The naming of Ireland as the best country in the world in which to do business by the US financial magazine, *Forbes*, is a ringing endorsement of the economic policies pursued by the Government. As a small island nation with a limited domestic market, openness to trade and investment is central to Ireland's economic strategy.

The programme for Government placed the focus very much on trade promotion in assigning the portfolio to the Department of Foreign Affairs but also in the leadership and commitment of the Taoiseach and various Ministers to the programme of trade missions. Linking with the global Irish network and taking a more focused approach to the activities which take place on St. Patrick's Day have allowed us to promote our message about Ireland and our interests abroad. Since coming into office, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste have been at pains to point to the meaningful contribution of the Diaspora to our economic recovery. It was very important for Ireland at one of the most challenging times ever faced that we had a network which would provide an effective mechanism to engage with Irish people abroad. Establishing the global Irish network was critical in getting the message out about the work we were doing to transform the economy. It was important in defending our 12.5% corporation tax rate and ensuring our position was understood internationally. It was also important in encouraging foreign direct investment and promoting The Gathering, one of the country's greatest tourism initiatives which delivered 250,000 people to the country last year.

Our network of embassies abroad has been critical in maximising our overseas trade potential. This is an issue I have pursued through the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade and I am pleased that the Government has responded by reopening the Vatican embassy and opening embassies and consulates in the emerging economies, including China, Hong Kong, Jakarta and Thailand, as well as expanding our network in South America and the United States, including Austin. The expansion of the embassy network will help the Government to continue to attract foreign direct investment and drive export-led economic recovery. I would like to see the Government continue to prioritise trade missions this year, as they are achieving significant returns. Irish food and drinks industry exports were valued at €10 billion last year and the value of our beef exports continues to grow. Agricultural exports are playing a huge role in our economic recovery due, in no small measure, to the reopening of markets, in particular Japan and Lebanon. Irish exporters are hopeful the US and Chinese markets will be opened in the near future.

While Ireland's economic outlook is a lot brighter than it was three years ago, we all know the impact of the recession is still being felt by many families and businesses as they continue to struggle. The main challenge is to ease the burden on these families and businesses and create jobs. When we took office, 7,000 private sector jobs a month were being lost, but we are now creating 5,000 jobs a month. While our unemployment rate has stabilised, the long-term unemployed are finding it very difficult to get work. Quite a number of new jobs are being advertised but most are located in the main urban centres such as Dublin and Cork. The fact that our economy was so reliant on the property bubble has resulted in the number of persons employed in the construction sector falling from a peak of 380,000 during the boom to 150,000 today.

Significant numbers of construction workers have emigrated and there is very little construction activity going on. In that context, I am pleased that the Taoiseach said recently that the Government would bring forward specific measures this year to support job creation in the construction industry. However, we must never go back to the level of reliance on the construction industry that we saw in the past. We must look at new ways of supporting job creation in this country.

I would like to see a renewed focus on delivering FDI projects for the mid-west region, which has a very positive business environment, given the presence of more than 100 overseas companies there. We have a well-educated workforce and top-class infrastructure, and this renewed focus would be important for job creation and providing people with the opportunity to live and work in the region. As I mentioned earlier, the success of our international promotion of The Gathering, the retention of the 9% VAT rate for the hospitality sector and the abolition of the air travel tax have all made a contribution to a revival of our tourism industry. Building on this, we have the Wild Atlantic Way, which has the potential to bring many more people to this country, and I commend the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Varadkar, and the Minister of State, Deputy Ring, on this initiative.

Small and medium-sized enterprises are the lifeblood of local communities as they have the capacity to create one, two or three jobs in local areas, which is very important. In many rural areas, particularly in my own county of Clare, small businesses are very reliant on tourism. However, the growth of such small businesses is hampered by the fact that many cannot get access to credit. This morning, three businesses in my own town of Ennis closed, including a long-established shoe shop and a very high-profile pub. I would like to see legislation fast-tracked to deal with below-cost selling, which would help to level the playing field for publicans. Significant progress has been made to date in supporting SMEs in the context of lending, including the seed and venture capital schemes and the credit guarantee scheme. I propose that the Government focuses on identifying more supports that could be put into place for small businesses.

Shannon Airport has played a very important role in the revival of the mid-west region. The turnaround at the airport has been dramatic. Last year was a very positive year for the airport, when it broke even for the first time in five years and its passenger figures grew. The fact that the airport is now standing on its own and is allowed to manage its own affairs is clearly paying off. There are expansion plans for the airport as we move forward. I recently launched the Aer Lingus daily service to Boston, and a daily service to New York is due to commence shortly. These services are extremely important for the region, particularly in the context of industrial development. The airlines have responded positively to the abolition of the travel tax, with Aer Lingus, Ryanair and United Airlines all expanding their services here. The Minister's decision to introduce an accelerated capital allowance for the construction of hangars at the airport is very welcome. Plans are under way to build a new hangar, and I suspect that this is just the beginning of the resurgence of aviation-related industry in the region, which is extremely important. I understand that the State airports Bill is due to come before the House shortly. That legislation is very important in the context of copperfastening what is happening at Shannon Airport, and I look forward to contributing to the debate on it.

The last three years have been important for the future development of our economy. Our unemployment rate has fallen from a high of 15.1% to just under 12% today. If that continues, we will be in a prime position by 2020 to have full employment, or 4% unemployment. There is no doubt that the last three years have been very difficult for people, but we have gone a long way towards restoring our finances. This year the focus is very much on job creation. We must

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work relentlessly to ensure we create more jobs in the SME sector. I urge the Opposition to contribute to this and to bring constructive proposals to the Government.

Deputy Joe O'Reilly: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today and I do so with considerable happiness, given the way we are performing. Since taking office in 2011, we have restored Ireland's international reputation and successfully exited the bailout, and our economy is experiencing growth for the third consecutive year. Approximately 61,000 new jobs were created in the last year, at a rate of approximately 1,200 per week, and the number of people on the live register has dropped for the twentieth consecutive month and now stands at 11.9% - a little below the European average - having reached a high of 15.1%. I am also very pleased to say that in Cavan, the numbers on the live register have dropped by 5% in the last 12 months. Our public finances are on course to reach a 3% debt-to-GDP ratio by 2015. While there were many doubting Thomases at the time, we also secured the almost-forgotten promissory note deal, which effectively meant a €3.1 billion per annum saving to the economy.

This year we will focus specifically on growth and jobs in the domestic economy, which is how it should be. The Government is mindful of the fact that many sacrifices were made by many people. It is important to acknowledge the awful sacrifices made by people but even more important to make sure those sacrifices were not made in vain. We must honour those sacrifices by getting results. The Taoiseach made reference to the fact that there is the potential to create 25,000 new jobs in the agrifood sector in the next seven years and I believe that is very achievable. The agrifood sector is very strong nationally and particularly so in Cavan, where twenty large food and drink employers in the county provide 1,860 people with jobs. We have 5,279 farms in Cavan with approximately 15,000 people employed directly from them, giving us an income from farming of €74 million a year. This is something that we should be very proud of and do everything we can to support, protect and encourage.

Several schemes under Pillar 2 of the CAP will provide a major new injection of funding into the rural economy and the small towns of rural Ireland. Young farmers will receive top-up payments of up to 25%, which equates to €3,000 per annum over five years. A new agri-environment scheme, GLAS, will give farmers a minimum payment of €5,000, with a potential for a further €2,500 in some instances for additional works. A new €52 million beef data and genomics programme will translate into approximately €80 per calf and the dairy sector will enjoy a number of targeted measures. All of that will result in additional money in the local economies of those parts of rural Ireland that do not readily attract inward investment. The measures outlined in the rural development programme are all designed to help our agricultural sector to grow in a sustainable and environmentally conscious way while at the same time meeting our Food Harvest 2020 objectives of smart, green growth, innovation and competitiveness.

I am happy to see that there is continued support for the vulnerable sectors of our farming community and further protection for the incomes of family farms. Late last year the EU Parliament approved proposals for a new round of structural funds which will see Ireland's share increase to just over €1 billion. These funds will be used to support a range of projects to promote jobs and growth. I was particularly pleased to hear the announcement by the Minister of State, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, that during our Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Council decided to include a special allocation of €150 million for a new PEACE programme, which has huge implications for Cavan and Monaghan. I was particularly happy to learn that there will be a special allocation of €100 million for the border, midland and western, BMW, region. The importance of adequate funding for this region, of which my constituency is part, cannot be overestimated. So far, more than €340 million was spent on cross-Border

PEACE and INTERREG projects and we have seen the development of several valuable cross-community projects as a result. The Castle Saunderson international scouting centre is one of many projects of which I am proud. For every job that is created resulting in someone leaving the live register, the Exchequer saves €20,000.

Investors are free to go where they want but inland areas do not have the same pull for job creation as the densely populated east coast centres do. I regularly discuss this at meetings with the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Bruton, to ensure Cavan and Monaghan are included on IDA itineraries. Cavan, Monaghan and the wider BMW region has the excellent College of Further Studies in Cavan, the M3 motorway to Dublin and the new education campus in Monaghan, as well as good industrial relations.

We transitioned from the old, failed economy based solely on property, banking and debt to a new, sustainable economy based on enterprise, exports and tourism. The Government can be trusted to do what is right, not what is popular. We have a moral duty to do that. While we can never return to the reliance on construction, I note the Government has a strategy to create between 40,000 and 60,000 jobs in the sector with many in it who want to get back to work, as well as a housing shortage in Dublin.

We are undaunted by this task and will continue to work to create 100,000 new jobs by 2016. We are stemming the tide of unemployment while we are all working hard to get the country and our constituencies back to work. All the strategies are designed to arrive at one outcome, that people can work in Ireland and that if someone emigrates, it is by choice only. We are en route to have full employment by 2020 if we maintain our strategies and keep our focus. I am proud that this year's priorities of the Government are so designed.

Deputy Michelle Mulherin: I thank Deputies Pat Breen and Joe O'Reilly for sharing time with me.

Without a shadow of a doubt, job creation and retention is at the heart of the priorities of this Government each and every day of its term of office. However, as I speak 700 jobs, 180 in County Mayo, are at risk owing to the sale of Elverys Sports by NAMA, the National Asset Management Agency. Unfortunately, by all accounts the way the matter is being handled by NAMA is putting these jobs in further jeopardy while leaving many questions to be answered. I have had numerous Elverys Sports employees in contact with my office who are very fearful for their jobs.

Will the Minister for Finance explain why the management buy-out of Elverys Sports from NAMA did not proceed? This would have been an acceptable solution. Why has NAMA not honoured a notice of decision it signed up to and issued to management confirming the buy-out was acceptable? Since NAMA did not go ahead, it has placed the staff in a precarious position and, arguably, plunged the company into free fall, putting its future as well as its ability to trade at further risk.

I am led to believe that at the last minute an outside bidder offering 25% more than the highest bidder came on the scene, scuppering the management buy-out. What sort of bid is that? Surely this is no way to bid. Why was Elverys Sports put into examinership? What is going on? Will the taxpayer end up having to carry the can paying redundancies? Are shops going to close? Are creditors going to be paid? Will there be 25% more staff, by some chance?

NAMA was set up to take bad loans out of banks and a crucial part of its remit is to protect

jobs. What has been done here to protect jobs? If jobs are a priority then why has the management buy-out not been allowed to proceed? This is a home-grown company with an online business that is growing every day which can rival any international sports retail company. The management and staff have built up the business. With its Mayo roots and it being the main sponsor of the Mayo senior football team, we are particularly proud of Elverys. We cannot give way to a situation where the company would be sold off to vultures who will asset-strip it and not give a damn about employees. Today, I am requesting action from the Government to protect these 700 jobs. It is crucial and NAMA has to be questioned on how it has handled it before it is too late.

Deputy Joan Collins: One hundred and sixty six elected representatives have spent a week on the so-called review of the programme for Government. To my mind, it is a waste of time and a pre-election stunt by the Government to put its wares out in the run-up to local and European elections on 23 May. It reminds me of a pantomime with one side shouting, "Oh yes we did" while the other shouts, "Oh no you did not." Meanwhile in the real world, people up and down the country are struggling with the effects of the crisis and have switched off this debate. If this week had been put aside to introduce legislation for the 13,266 IBRC mortgage holders, then people would be listening. If this week had been put aside to discuss the important issue of the housing crisis and 90,000 families - that is 170,000 individuals - on local authority housing lists, then people would be listening. If we were discussing introducing protection against job losses at Elverys, the people would be listening. They have switched off, along with every Member on this side of the House, however.

The Government's record is either a resounding success or a disaster depending on one's position in society. If one is a member of the wealthy elite, or part of the establishment like Wilbur Ross, the Government is a tremendous success which has stood over a massive transfer of wealth to the already wealthy while putting the burden of paying for the economic crisis on those who can least afford to take it. It has ensured the financial system is intact with business as usual with nothing changing for the wealthy elite. The tragedy is that nothing will change.

The responsibility of that rests with the Labour Party. It entered government pledging to protect working people and the poor. It was a worthless pledge as the poorest and most vulnerable in society have been deliberately targeted with Labour Ministers at the forefront of such attacks. The real betrayal by Labour is that once again for the establishment it has failed to provide an alternative. This is, unfortunately, within the tradition of the Labour Party. It stood aside in 1918 and has done so ever since. What sort of society goes from a property bubble where ten years ago more residential units were being built than in the whole of the UK to a few years later where it has the biggest housing crisis in its history? This is an even bigger scandal than the banks' bailout with the real danger that nothing will change. It is all down to the complete failure of Labour, supposed to protect the working people and the poor, to put forward an alternative vision of how society could be organised differently. Without a vision of an alternative society, what is the point of the Labour Party? Who needs a political party whose sole function is to alternate between supporting Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil in government and providing ministerial positions and pensions for its leading members? Working people and the poor need an alternative and it is clear that will not be provided by the Labour Party. It could and should have remained out of government in 2011 and committed itself to creating the basis for a left wing government in the future. This task has fallen to others and any political movement or party committed to change must begin with a basic commitment never to support Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil in government. On the contrary, its policy should be to destroy both these

parties as a dominant force in politics, otherwise we will be condemned to this endless, farcical pantomime of Tweedledum and Tweedledee politics.

The thousands of people who face losing the roof over their heads is the important issue that needs to be discussed now. This situation will worsen. As Focus Ireland has pointed out, the number of families on the streets has increased from eight to 16 per month while five children a week are going homeless. The Government has allowed this to happen over the past three years. Five years ago I tabled a motion before Dublin City Council calling for NAMA properties to be taken over by local authorities. We knew the crisis was beginning at the time and now we are witnessing the naked face of homelessness.

We will be condemned to Tweedledum and Tweedledee politics if there is no change and if people do not organise themselves to organise that change and get rid of the shenanigans we have seen in the House this week.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: I wish to share time with Deputies Maloney and Nolan.

I am proud to be a member of the Labour Party and of the sacrifices the party has been made in the history of the State by facilitating democracy and the birth of the nation. In 1918, the party stepped aside to allow a new nation to be born in Europe. I am about change and I do not put protest before people. I am very much about putting people first and not constantly moving from one protest to another and achieving little.

When this Government came to power, many people said what we set out to do could not be done. People openly spoke of how we would need a second bailout and laughed at the notion of 100,000 jobs being created. It has been a tough three years but major achievements have been secured: we have left the bailout, the troika has gone home, 60,000 jobs have been created over the past 18 months, and the live register has dropped below 400,000 but we need to do more. The action plan on jobs - often mocked - has worked each year, delivering slow and steady progress on a range of targets. This is paying dividends as the employment figures show but there is no big bang solution to unemployment. It is a step by step process as we claw back jobs into Ireland. We have stabilised the national debt and from next year it will begin to decrease as a percentage of GDP. The interest rate on our debt has fallen and the promissory notes are gone. We sorted out the Banks and are now in a position to make a profit on Bank of Ireland. The Government wound up Anglo Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide Building Society, which has cost our citizens dearly but we inherited a dysfunctional economy.

It is important that we mark three years in government because when the parties came to power, Ireland was face down in the ditch. Now we are back on our knees and in the next two years we will be back on our feet. I am dissatisfied with the structure of this debate, which has taken place over three days this week and which will continue next week. While it should have been opened by the Taoiseach, it should have been focused on Departments with Ministers and Ministers of State outlining what has happened in their Departments and what will happen, with responses from Opposition spokespeople and interested backbenchers. We should have had an opportunity to debate new ideas and policies rather than engage in navel gazing and sniping.

My priorities over the next two years are twofold: the creation of jobs and tackling the housing crisis in the same manner as we have stabilised the economy. These have to be our two priorities. Deputy Micheál Martin and Fianna Fáil left many problems behind for us. One of the worst relates to housing. The housing crisis was caused by that party, which failed to invest in

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social housing during the boom and permitted developers do as they pleased. The only criterion was that they had to show up in the tent. The speculative building boom, financed by reckless lending led to the wholesale collapse our economy while little or no activity in construction over the past six years has led to the current housing crisis. We need a sustainable construction industry. We need to examine new models to deliver private housing and social housing by working with builders and voluntary housing bodies. New investment in social housing was announced in the budget but an allocation of €100 million, while welcome, is but a drop in the ocean in the context of the crisis. The strategic investment fund and NAMA have a critical role to play in providing the finance needed to get building started. We need a fresh start for social housing and Part V has an important role to play in developing mixed communities.

I would not like a reduction in the use of Part V for social housing because it is important to have a mix of housing in our communities and to learn the lessons of the past. Fianna Fáil-led Governments built vast social housing estates in the suburbs or large flat complexes and we are dealing with the fallout now as social deprivation takes holds because there was little investment. I recently surveyed a flats complex in my constituency and the unemployment rate is 80%. Eight householders out of every ten is unemployed. They did not share in the boom because even during that period, the unemployment rate was 54%. As we get back on our feet, we must target how we spend scarce resources to make sure we build an inclusive society in order that when jobs are created and houses are provided, we can build sustainable communities. That did not happen in the past. People were pushed out of Dublin city to Clondalkin where there were no bus services, schools or community centres. It was as big a disaster as the financial crisis. In the 1980s I lived in Clondalkin. We celebrated when a new pub opened because there were no schools, churches or community centres. People were pushed out there first, mainly young families with young children, and they had to travel large distances to schools.

We have to concentrate on job creation over the next few months but we must also develop a mechanism to build much needed housing throughout the country. There is pent up demand in the Dublin region, according to the ESRI, of 80,000 units. If we began to build those units tomorrow, they would not be ready for two years following planning, building and delivery. We need to get a move on. We have come a long way in the context of the economy and job creation but we are still far behind in respect of social housing.

Message from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the County Enterprise Boards (Dissolution) Bill 2013, without amendment.

Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine has completed its consideration of the Forestry Bill 2013 and has made amendments thereto.

Dáil Éireann
Topical Issue Debate

Human Rights Issues

Deputy Seán Crowe: I appreciate this matter being taken. I suppose people around the world were horrified, and rightly so, and condemned this Bill when it was put before the Ugandan Parliament. There were indications that President Museveni might refuse to sign this private members' legislation into law but he appears to have caved in to whatever pressures were in the country. It was interesting that a week before, there was a delegation from Uganda comprising both government and opposition sides and they indicated that this would not be brought into law. I do not know what pressures the Ugandan Government and Parliament are under but there is a right-wing, church-dominated agenda coming from some churches.

Uganda is a partnership country for Irish Aid. Where does that leave our relationship with Uganda? Do we still see Uganda as a reliable partner after the passing of this Bill despite the assurance that it would not pass it and in light of the misappropriation of aid money in 2012? I do not want aid to Uganda to stop but I want to hear what we are going to do. What message is Ireland sending? Will we continue to support civic society in Uganda? The nightmare question for many people was, if this was passed, what would be the roll-out? One newspaper has published up to 200 names to allow people to be intimidated, attacked, etc. What is the next step? It would be interesting to hear the Minister's views on that.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing us to raise this and I thank Deputy Crowe. This is a very controversial piece of legislation. It does not respect the human rights of any person irrespective of their sexuality, particularly the LGBT community in Uganda. Putting aside Africa's views of homosexuality, its religion and ethos, we must examine the human rights perspective. If this Government is serious about the pursuit of human rights, the Bill must be taken up by the Government at whatever level it can be. We are criminalising people who are gay. To quote the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, it is "atrocious". It is driving people underground, further stigmatising gay people and increasing risk-taking behaviour. It is making Ugandan citizens vulnerable. It is inexplicable that a president can do this.

I heard Deputy Crowe. At the Committee of Public Accounts meeting today the Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Mr. David Cooney, said it would not be appropriate to cut Irish Aid to Uganda over its anti-gay laws. Part of me agrees with him because it would be penalising people, which we should not do, but this Bill needs to be taken up through us as a parliament with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, IPU, the EU or the UN. It is focusing on discrimination and is completely anti-human rights. Even allowing for the argument about aid, which I do not want to pursue, I hope our Government will pursue this at the highest level.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White): I am taking this Topical Issue matter on behalf of the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Eamon Gilmore. The passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill by the Ugandan Parliament and its subsequent signing into law by President Museveni last week is a very disappointing and unwelcome development. The Tánaiste has made it clear that the enactment of this draconian legislation will affect our valued relationship with Uganda.

The Minister of State, Deputy Joe Costello, in his speech this week to the UN Human

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Rights Council, highlighted our grave concerns at the enactment of regressive legislation in some countries, including Uganda, affecting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex, LGBTI, individuals. The Minister of State called on the Human Rights Council to be more vocal as the most basic rights of LGBTI people continue to be violated on a daily basis. This Government has consistently supported the promotion and protection of the human rights of all persons, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and is strongly committed to combating all human rights violations committed against individuals on such or any basis. Our commitments in this area are a fundamental feature of our foreign policy and our aid programme.

There is no doubt that this legislation is in clear conflict with Uganda's binding international obligations to uphold human rights. The legislation is in contravention of the principle of non-discrimination in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, both of which have been ratified by Uganda, as well as in the Ugandan Constitution. It is the responsibility of the Ugandan Government to uphold its international obligations to treat all citizens equally, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Ireland, together with our EU partners, has been actively engaged with the Ugandan Parliament and President Museveni in efforts to halt this regressive and discriminatory legislation. It is a threat to Uganda's gay community and an affront to all those who value tolerance, respect and dignity of all people. It will also undermine public health in a very practical way, including the efforts to combat the scourge of HIV-AIDS in Uganda. Ireland will continue to play a positive role in support of human rights and equality in Uganda. We will continue to express our support for all human rights activists in Uganda, in particular those working on LGBTI rights. We strongly urge the Ugandan authorities to protect all its citizens against violence, exclusion, discrimination and arbitrary punishment and to abolish all laws that contravene human rights obligations, including this new regressive law.

I would like to emphasise that none of our aid budget is provided by way of direct support to the Government of Uganda, with the exception of the Office of the Auditor General for its important work on fighting corruption. Our support to the poorest and most disadvantaged people in Uganda is provided through trusted non-government channels. In this way, we are directly targeting the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society, be it people living with HIV-AIDS, those experiencing chronic poverty in Karamoja, or those who are being subjected to gender based violence. A review of the future of our partnership with Uganda has been planned in the coming period, and this will provide us with the opportunity to consider what we have achieved so far and how we should work for the benefit of the people of Uganda in the future.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I listened to what the Minister said about this. It is about the health and well-being of the LGBT community in Uganda. A review was going on about the funding that went missing. Will this be part of that ongoing review? Many people are saying this is a game changer, that it changes the dynamic between this country and Uganda. Is that the Government's view? The Minister said the Government is actively engaged with the Ugandan authorities but is that going to make any changes? The *Red Pepper* published pictures and details of Uganda's "top 200 homosexuals." Is the Government concerned about what will happen to people and about other countries following through on similar legislation? That is always the danger with regressive legislation like this, as it is not only the impact it will have in the country in question but rather in other countries around the region.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. There is an obligation

on the Government to act and there is a similar obligation on us as parliamentarians to ask for a motion before the next meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, as we cannot allow discrimination to continue with regard to sexual orientation. We accept that people have and will be killed as a consequence of this legislation, and I hope the Government can act. I accept the options are limited with regard to aid, and the Minister of State's reply indicates that we cannot necessarily go after some of the programmes, but it is important that on a European Union, United Nations and parliamentary level we do not allow this to become part of a movement across certain continents, as Deputy Crowe indicated. Such a movement could have regressive legislation depriving people of their rights and entitlements.

Deputy Alex White: I agree with Deputies and repeat that this is regressive legislation that is clearly in contravention with Uganda's international obligations in the human rights area. The Bill was introduced to the parliament as a private members' Bill on 14 October 2009 and passed on 20 December 2013. I have indicated that our embassy in Kampala, along with our EU and other partners, have actively engaged with the Ugandan President and Ugandan Government, warning them that the enactment of this draconian legislation will not in any way help relations between Uganda and its international development partners. As I indicated earlier, the Tánaiste has made it clear that the enactment of this draconian legislation will affect our valued relationship with Uganda. We have participated actively in high level discussions within the EU and strong statements have been issued by High Representative Catherine Ashton. The Ugandan authorities have a responsibility to take all necessary action to ensure the principle of non-discrimination is upheld.

On the question of aid, Ireland intends to continue to provide support to the poorest and most vulnerable in Uganda. Our support, as I mentioned, is directed to projects and programmes operated through trusted non-governmental partners. We will continue to work with non-governmental organisation and civil society partners in support of human rights and equality in that country.

Undocumented Irish in the USA

Deputy Brendan Smith: I am glad to be given the opportunity to raise this very important issue at this time. In June 2013, the US Senate passed the most monumental overhaul of US immigration laws in a generation which would clear the way for millions of undocumented residents to have a chance at citizenship, attract workers from all over the world and devote unprecedented resources for security along the US-Mexico border. The vote was 68 to 32, which was a very sizeable margin of victory, with 14 Republicans crossing the aisle to vote with all Democrats in favour of the legislation. That vote puts the onus of immigration reform on the Republican-led House, where leaders have unfortunately been resistant to the Senate legislation.

House Speaker Boehner has refused to bring the Senate Bill to the floor or even go to conference with the Senate. He has stated that reform of the immigration laws will be a priority in 2014 for the House and indicated to *USA Today* in December 2013 that immigration is next on the agenda, once the Senate passes a bipartisan budget deal for the next two years. Unfortunately, the comments from House Speaker Boehner on 6 February express doubts about progress on this legislation.

The Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform, ILIR, is still fighting for the estimated 50,000

undocumented Irish in the immigration debate. The lobby was set up in December 2005 and it has since held several immigration rallies throughout the United States, along with high profile lobby days in Congress to advocate for our undocumented Irish workers. Irish-Americans from across the US will be out in force in the American capital next Wednesday, 12 March, lobbying for immigration reform during a rally organised by the ILIR. This is specifically aimed at Republican members of the House not in favour of reforming US immigration laws.

It is interesting to note that prior to 1965, the Irish could immigrate to the US freely, with approximately 17,000 doing so on an annual basis. As the House knows, the St. Patrick's Day celebrations are important in celebrating and consolidating links with the United States, and we have been offered that opportunity over many decades. It is also an opportunity to raise the issue of the undocumented Irish at the highest levels of influence in Washington DC. I am glad I have been given the opportunity to raise this issue to establish what progress has been made on advancing the cause of the undocumented Irish in the US. I would like the Minister of State to reassure us this evening that every ministerial visit to the United States would have this on the agenda with different interest groups, members of the US Administration and members in Congress. We must advocate the need to progress the Border Security, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Modernization Bill, as it is critical for so many individuals. There are probably more than 50,000 people and their families affected.

Deputy Alex White: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, which I am taking on behalf of my colleague, the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Gilmore. Immigration reform in the US is an issue to which the Government accords very high priority. We are very conscious of the difficulties experienced by Irish citizens who are undocumented in the United States, and the Tánaiste has met and spoken to many of them during his working visits there, and also with the various groups who lobby on their behalf.

The Tánaiste has maintained contact, both directly and through our embassy in Washington DC, with many key players in Congress who are influential in steering the process of US immigration reform. Over the past six months, both he and embassy officials have had direct contact with some 70 members of the House of Representatives and their staff. These have included Republican Congressman Paul Ryan, chair of the House Budgetary Committee and former vice presidential nominee, Republican Congressman Bob Goodlatte, chair of the House Judiciary Committee and several other leading Republican members of that committee, including immigration sub-committee chairman, Trey Gowdy, Minority House Leader, Nancy Pelosi, chair of the Congressional Friends of Ireland, Pete King, House Speaker John Boehner, and House Majority Whip, Kevin McCarthy, and their staffs. The Tánaiste has also maintained contact with key figures in the US Administration and with Irish-American community representatives. Throughout all these contacts the Tánaiste has reiterated the Government's interest in all aspects of immigration reform and in particular our interest in seeing an overall agreement reached which provides relief for currently undocumented Irish migrants and a facility for future flows of legal migration between Ireland and the US.

I wish to confirm that the issue is one which will again be raised as a priority by the Taoiseach during his forthcoming St Patrick's Day visit to the US and his meetings with President Obama, Vice President Biden and key members of Congress. Other members of Government visiting the US will also raise the issue as appropriate during their contacts. This is particularly important in light of the most recent developments, which indicate that the prospects for passage of immigration reform legislation by Congress this year are not good. The Deputy will be aware that following passage last June of the US Senate Bill - the Border Security, Economic

Opportunity and Immigration Modernization Bill - the issue has been under consideration in the Republican controlled House of Representatives.

Public comments and private conversations which the Taoiseach, Tánaiste, members of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and our embassy officials in Washington DC had with leaders of the House Republican caucus had given rise to expectations that the House would take up consideration of a series of immigration reform bills last autumn. Unfortunately that did not come to pass, as Deputy Smith indicated. Earlier this year, further public comments from House Speaker John Boehner, Majority Leader, Eric Cantor, and Chief Whip, Kevin McCarthy, again raised hopes that the Republican leadership in the House saw the need to proceed with immigration reform. To that end, the leadership prepared a set of draft principles that would guide action on immigration in the House and presented them to the members of their caucus for consideration at a meeting on 30 January. Informed by that discussion, House Speaker Boehner gave a press conference on 6 February in which he expressed doubts that the House would pass immigration reform legislation this year. He did reassert that immigration reform is something that needs to get done and that he would continue to consult his members.

Given that expectations had again been raised, these and other comments are disappointing. However, it is important we keep our focus on the end game. The Government, through our ambassador in Washington DC and her team, is continuing an extensive outreach and engagement with members of Congress and with the Irish groups and organisations lobbying for immigration reform. We are monitoring the ongoing discussions within the Republican Party and continuing to press the case for addressing the concerns of our undocumented and to provide for a future legal flow for Irish immigrants to the United States. As I noted earlier, the forthcoming St. Patrick's Day visits to the United States will provide a further important opportunity to engage with US leaders in support of our immigration objectives and assess the prospects for the weeks and months ahead.

5 o'clock

The Government remains fully committed to the effort to achieve an outcome that addresses the needs of our undocumented and creates a legal path for the future.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I am glad that the Minister of State has given us a firm assurance that the Taoiseach and other members of the Government who will be in the United States will take every opportunity to raise at political and official level the need to have this immigration reform passed by the House of Representatives. We must try to ensure this is the year of immigration reform. We all encounter families who have family members in the United States whose position has not been regularised. We need to reassure the undocumented and their family members at home that every effort will be made to find a satisfactory solution. It is not only the emigrants who want their position to be regularised but many employer organisations have spoken out strongly in favour of the proposed legislation. If the Bill was passed, it would provide a path to permanent residency for more than 50,000 Irish people. The proposed E3 visa would provide for future flows of legal migrants between Ireland and the United States. We all know of individuals who have been unable to travel from the United States for family events, celebratory or sad. My constituency has suffered from heavy emigration for many decades. Many speak to me about their concern about a family member whose position has not been regularised in the United States. It is extremely difficult to see elderly parents come to one's clinic concerned that their son or daughter may not be able to visit when the parents are not

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able, through infirmity or ill health, to travel to the United States. The Minister of State's visit to Philadelphia last year was very successful. I spoke to some of the people he met who told him about the real situation in the United States and the need to advance this important measure.

Deputy Alex White: I thank the Deputy for his insights and input into this important issue. Everything he has said about its importance is correct. In addition to the various contacts the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach, other Ministers and the embassy have had, the Government keeps a close eye on developments and makes its own assessment of the prospects for developments. While the exact shape and form of any movement remains to be seen, House contacts have spoken about a possible "convoy" of Bills on a range of issues such as US border security; individuals brought illegally to the United States as children; visas for agricultural and other temporary workers and, crucially, from Ireland's perspective, the legalisation of undocumented migrants in a manner that would enable them to work in and travel to and from America. The timing and sequencing of such a "convoy" of Bills would be crucial if any overall deal was to be reached. In addition, their handling *vis-à-vis* upcoming Republican primary contests and/or the November Congressional elections will also be important and could yet determine the ultimate outcome. Congressional contacts have referred to the period from late May onwards as the likely time in which Bills could be taken on the floor of the House.

Treatment Abroad Scheme

Deputy Gerald Nash: I thank the Minister of State for being in the Chamber to respond to this issue.

Alice Turner, Drogheda; Clodagh Daly, County Laois; Robin Smith, Dublin; Merryn Lacy, Bray; and Donal Parsons, Sligo, are infants affected by neuroblastoma. The first time most Irish people heard about this dreadful illness was when Lily-Mae Morrison, the "tiny dancer" from Galway, and her family captured their hearts last year and the year before when raising awareness of the condition and funds for her treatment in the USA. She is doing well. Thanks to the tenacity and determination of her family, friends and supporters across the country, she received the kind of treatment that at least six but possibly ten or 11 Irish children with the same condition need. The families affected by this often extremely aggressive childhood cancer are very grateful for the expert care they have received from, and the commitment shown by, medical staff here. The treatment and support provided are excellent.

A seriously sick child is every family's worst nightmare. Our hearts sink when we hear about a child diagnosed with any life-threatening condition. A diagnosis of neuroblastoma presents a whole new set of challenges for the family affected. It is the natural order for parents to do anything in their power to give their children a shot at life. In the case of neuroblastoma, this can mean having to raise up to \$200,000 to meet the cost of getting onto a treatment programme in the United States that has a proven success rate and minimises the often catastrophic risk of relapse. Relapse rates are extremely high; they can be 70% to 80% in cases where the aggressive form of the condition is present. There are strong reports from the United States on the efficacy of this programme and treatment.

I do not have the answers to all of these challenges for families living with this waking nightmare. I do not expect the Minister of State to have the answers, but I appeal to him to find a better, more humane and supportive way for the State to assist these families in spending as much of the precious time they have available with their families, not going from cake sale

to coffee morning, from fund-raising gig to table quiz, to ensure their children get the chance every child deserves.

Deputy Alex White: I welcome the opportunity to speak about the condition of neuroblastoma.

Neuroblastoma is a disease in which malignant cancer cells form in nerve tissue such as adrenal gland, the neck, chest or spinal cord. It most often begins during early childhood, usually in children younger than five years of age. Proven treatment regimens for children with neuroblastoma are provided at Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children in Crumlin, the centre for paediatric oncology services. Treatment for neuroblastoma involves a number of diagnostic and treatment approaches which include surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

Under the treatment abroad scheme, the Health Service Executive, HSE, provides the cost of approved treatments in another EU or EEA member state or Switzerland. The application to refer a patient abroad must have been assessed and a determination given before the patient travels abroad. To qualify for the treatment abroad scheme, the treatment must be medically necessary and meet the patient's needs. In addition, it must be a proven form of medical treatment that is not experimental.

Ireland has focused on improving the quality of cancer services through reorganisation and expansion. The overall approach is set out in the strategy for cancer control. Great improvements have been made in cancer diagnosis and treatment. We have moved from a fragmented system of care to one that consolidates cancer treatment, with multidisciplinary care and decision-making. Survival rates for all cancers are rising. The five year survival rate has increased to 56.4% for people diagnosed between 2003 and 2007. It was 49.6% for those diagnosed between 1998 and 2002. The full impact of the reforms in cancer care should, in time, further improve survival rates.

I acknowledge that parents of children who have been diagnosed with neuroblastoma, or any other serious illness, will be concerned that their children receive the best care and treatment. I am informed by the HSE that Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children in Crumlin provides proven treatment regimens for children with neuroblastoma which are of a world class standard. Children are treated there according to the European neuroblastoma protocol, which incorporates all available therapies. There is no other recognised proven treatment anywhere in the world. In the last year, a new phase two trial has been opened in Our Lady's hospital and staff and experts operate proactively in this field in a structured and ethical way. The ongoing developments in this field are clearly welcome and we will do all we can to support the parents and families of young children with neuroblastoma.

Deputy Gerald Nash: The reason I raised this issue is because I have seen the direct impact on two families in Drogheda and Galway whom I know very well. The way in which the community in Drogheda has responded has, like other communities across the country, been phenomenal in terms of fund raising and the staff who provide the treatment regimen in Crumlin are a credit to the health service.

However, I raise the issue because I get the sense that diagnoses of this condition are on the rise. It is legitimate to inquire into how the State intends to manage neuroblastoma if it is becoming more prevalent. Funding will be particularly challenging in the absence of a comprehensive strategy on the part of the HSE to provide new or evolving treatments. The Minister of

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State will be aware of the types of treatment currently available in the United States. Many of these treatments are still under trial but their efficacy has been well proven. It has been drawn to my attention that a number of treatments have success rates of 100% in dealing with recurrence or relapse. It is imperative that the Department of Health and the HSE develop strategies and support mechanisms for families who are currently compelled to raise significant funds to give their children the best chance at life.

Deputy Alex White: Deputy Nash is correct in regard to the improvements that have been made in diagnosis and survival rates. We are focusing on improving the quality of cancer services through reorganisation and expansion. Previously we had a fragmented system but we have consolidated cancer treatment in eight designated cancer centres, not including Crumlin, with multidisciplinary care and decision making. Given the time required to achieve full national roll out and rapid access clinics in designated centres, the full impact of the establishment of the national cancer control programme and the introduction of cancer screening programmes will not be realised until we evaluate five year mortality rates for patients diagnosed from 2012 onwards. There are enormous opportunities in this area but they bring with them the kinds of challenges that Deputy Nash outlined. We will do all we can to assist families and provide cancer diagnosis and treatment at the highest international standards.

School Enrolments

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Eoghan Murphy has tabled the next matter to discuss with the Minister for Education and Skills the increase in demand for primary school places in September 2014 in Dublin South East.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I understand it is in order for me to request that the matter be deferred until the Minister for Education and Skills is available to take it. I am not trying to be difficult or infer that the Minister of State, Deputy White, is not capable of replying but I understand the Minister wants to discuss the issue and it pertains to his constituency.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's request is covered by Standing Order 27A(2), which states:

Provided further that where, in exceptional circumstances, the member of the Government or Minister of State officially responsible for the matter is not available on the day, the available member of Government or Minister of State shall so inform the member who has given notice immediately prior to the taking of the matter. The available Minister shall also inform the member who has given notice of the date on which the officially responsible member of the Government or Minister of State will be available. The member who has given notice shall then be given the option to—

- (a) defer consideration of the matter to the day on which the officially responsible member of the Government or Minister of State will be available, when it will be the first matter to be taken, or
- (b) proceed with the matter on the day with the participation of the available member of the Government or Minister of State;

I ask the Minister of State, Deputy White, to specify the day on which the Minister will be

available.

Deputy Alex White: The Minister, Deputy Quinn, will be available to take the matter next Tuesday, subject to it being selected by the Ceann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: The matter will be taken next Tuesday as the first item.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.15 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Friday, 6 March 2014.