



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 13 Márta 2014

Thursday, 13 March 2014

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 09.30 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Youth Unemployment Measures

1. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the way in which he will address the falling level of employment in the 15 to 34 age bracket shown in the recent quarterly national household survey report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12292/14]

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá a fhios agam gur inniu Lá na Gaeilge agus beimid ag baint úsáide as an nGaeilge agus as an mBéarla. We welcome the improvement in the employment figures, but when one looks at the breakdown and the population figures, there were 13,500 fewer people aged between 15 and 34 employed compared with 12 months previously. The number of 15 to 24 year olds in the workforce fell by 11,900 and there is a further drop of 24,700 in the number of people aged 25 to 34. We raised the issue recently with the Minister in the Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. We have a problem in the population cohort I indicated. At the time the Minister attributed it to demographic changes but the reality is that emigration is a key issue and I look forward to discussing his proposals in the area.

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): I recognise that people in the 15 to 34 age group have been seriously affected by job losses in recent years. The latest quarterly national household survey shows that in spite of the creation of an additional 61,000 jobs in the economy in the year to the end of 2013, employment among 15 to 34 year olds decreased by 13,800 year on year. We clearly have a long way to go but in the past year

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employment increased by 3.3% and it was the first year where every region demonstrated employment growth. There has been an increase of more than 1,200 jobs per week in the private sector compared with more than 1,600 per week being lost in that earlier period. Clearly, the best way to address the needs of this age group is to continue our efforts to support job creation and help those who are unemployed to get back to work. The Government continues to work on those twin objectives through the combined efforts of Action Plan for Jobs and Pathways to Work.

A number of actions in both strategies are targeted at, or amenable to, younger people. These include the JobBridge programme, the youth guarantee, MOMENTUM and Springboard training courses, and the ICT Action Plan. These initiatives are collectively delivered by the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Education and Skills. The Government is taking steps to increase the number of places and make other enhancements to those schemes for younger people, where possible. For instance, Action Plan for Jobs includes a commitment to ring-fence 2,000 places on the MOMENTUM programme for those under 25 years of age.

For my Department's part, we are putting a particular focus this year on supporting entrepreneurship and will increase the range of supports available to entrepreneurs, including young entrepreneurs. We know that start-up businesses create two thirds of all new jobs and we need to support people with good ideas who can create those jobs. Action Plan for Jobs 2014 also places a focus on supporting the recovery of the domestic economy in areas such as construction, retail and tourism where there is potential for significant jobs growth as the economy recovers.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

As a Government, we recognise that too many people, including younger people, have yet to see evidence of economic recovery in their own lives. That is why we have designated 2014 to be the year for jobs. All of the actions we are taking are aimed at supporting people to enter or re-enter employment, and at providing alternatives for those who might be considering emigration.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Employment rose by 3.3% but average weekly earnings are down by 0.6%. The income tax figures for the first two months of the year are flat compared with the same period in 2013. If we have the kind of employment growth the Minister is trumpeting constantly, there should be a similar growth in income tax receipts. This shows the jobs being created are paying less and that is still driving many people out of the country.

Almost half the additional jobs are self-employed. I welcome that people are taking that step but we will not be able to make a call on their long-term sustainability for a number of years in terms of income and job creation potential.

In the past three years 105,000 people left the country. We have a higher rate of emigration in this country than in the EU 15. That seems to be the response to this cohort. We need a specific, targeted initiative involving entrepreneurship but also involving employment creation because not everybody wants to be an entrepreneur. There must be a form of employment creation programme focused on this generation - the golden generation - that will lead the recovery if young people are given the chance to stay.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I do not accept the thesis the Deputy has put forward that people who set up their own businesses are in some way inferior in terms of job creation. We want to

encourage entrepreneurship. It is a welcome indication that there is a high level of start-up and people setting up as self employed. High levels of company formation are clearly also evident in the figures.

I fully admit that migration is far too high. The net migration of 35,000 last year is too high. It has been at that level for a number of years. The only sustainable response to migration is employment creation. The Deputy must acknowledge, despite his perusing of income tax figures to try find something negative, the truth that in the private sector we created 66,500 jobs in the past 12 months. That is a really significant achievement by enterprise in Ireland. We need to build on that but we also need to ensure young people get a fair crack of the whip because inevitably the doors were closed to younger people and that is why JobBridge, Jobs Plus and other such schemes are aimed at trying to reskill and get people, in particular in those younger age groups, into opportunities.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am not making any thesis that anyone who sets up their own business are inferior. What the Minister read into my argument in his response was that half of those jobs he claimed he created were in fact created by people who have the courage and the ability to set up their own company. If one takes those figures out of it, then 33,000 jobs were created. The fact is that the jobs are lower paid and incomes are not rising. We have to offer some sort of alternative. The Minister needs to put a focused strategy in place involving the State agencies and local enterprise offices to give this age cohort the support it needs and the encouragement that there is a future for it on this island.

Deputy Richard Bruton: That is exactly what we are doing. This year we will put a focus on entrepreneurship, particularly youth entrepreneurship. Last year, we focused on women starting up their own businesses and we got a strong response to that. One cannot discount people who set up their own business and pretend these are not jobs. These are people working in the economy, creating wealth and opportunity. They have to be nurtured in the same way as people in paid employment taken on by established enterprises. They are both equally important and we try to develop them together.

Deputy Dara Calleary: It should not be abused by the Minister so as to massage the figures, however.

Grant Payments

2. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the level of investment that has been made into small to medium-sized Irish manufacturers and internationally traded firms by his Department for each of the past five years; and the way this compares to the total investment into foreign direct investment in the State over each of the past five years. [12290/14]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Oireachtas Library Service carried out important research which showed that at the end of the third quarter in 2013, 3% - 60,000 people - of the employment figures were actually on activation schemes. There is not a focus on small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs, as there should be. Foreign direct investment is still the golden child of the Government while SMEs are left behind.

(Deputy Richard Bruton): In the past five years, Enterprise Ireland paid out almost €520

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million to its client companies: €134.02 million in 2009; €167.28 million in 2010; €80.21 million in 2011; €69.57 million in 2012 and €68.84 million in 2013. It has also invested €115 million through the seed and venture capital schemes, development capital scheme and the innovation fund Ireland between 2009 and 2013. This breaks down as €16 million in 2009; €16 million in 2010; €20 million in 2011; €30 million in 2012 and €33.5 million in 2013. These funds leverage an additional multiple amount from private sources in Irish enterprises. The county and city enterprise boards paid out €154.8 million in the past five years to small and micro Irish businesses. IDA Ireland paid just over €472 million in grant aid to its client companies: €80.87 million in 2009; €120.44 million in 2010; €96.76 million in 2011 €89.27 million in 2012 and €84.95 million in 2013. Grants figures for the agencies in respect of 2009 and 2010 include payments made under the temporary employment subsidy scheme, as well as significant payment by IDA Ireland towards the National Institute for Bioprocessing Research and Training, NIBRT, project.

In overall terms, the total expenditure supporting Irish-owned business is clearly considerably greater than that spent on foreign-owned companies. Generally, the range of supports available to Irish-owned companies is far wider, spanning start-up, innovation, process improvement, management development, export support graduate placement, etc, many of which are not appropriate to overseas investors. Spending on all companies is subject to state-aid rules and to careful evaluation by the respective agency to ensure value is obtained for taxpayers' investment in jobs, exports and enterprise development.

I am satisfied that moneys invested are spent well and have promoted the recovery in employment in export-oriented sectors with a good balance between Irish and overseas enterprise.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am afraid there is not a good balance between the investment in indigenous and overseas business. Almost 70% of the people employed in the State are employed by SMEs. Despite this, the major focus of this Government and the previous Government has been on foreign direct investment. I accept this sector is important as it makes up 90% of our exports. However, there is vulnerability inherent in it. By its very nature, foreign direct investment is mobile while indigenous SMEs are not, making the latter more sustainable in the long term. Strategically, logically and even patriotically, this Government needs to do more for SMEs. They have carried out major sacrifices over the past several years. When a foreign direct investment company closes or sheds jobs, it is in the headlines but it is not the same for SMEs. Those which have survived have not been given the necessary supports yet by the Government.

Deputy Richard Bruton: One can see from the figures that overall State agency spending on Irish-owned companies is approximately €770 million versus €470 million for foreign-owned companies. The Government is spending substantially more on indigenous companies. These figures are for my Department and do not take into account State spending on fisheries, etc.

The policy of many Governments over the years has been that grant support is confined to export-oriented companies. We do not provide grant supports to companies trading in the domestic economy. Employment in the two sectors is roughly equal. Despite this, we are clearly spending more on Irish-owned companies, which is how it should be.

I agree with the Deputy that we need to develop a strong indigenous engine of growth. That is why we are looking at new ways in manufacturing and entrepreneurship.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The ratio of State investment into indigenous versus foreign direct investment is not equivalent to the ratio of employment. In the indigenous sector it is far higher than its proportionate level of investment by the Government. The Minister mentioned the efforts the Government makes towards export-oriented companies. However, export performance is still poor among SMEs. Exports from this sector to Germany, the Benelux, Italy and Spain, an area four times the size of Britain, only come to 40% of the total exported to Britain. Outside of the British market, SMEs are still very weak. The non-exporting sector, which accounts for 60% of the aggregate investment in indigenous companies in this State, is not being leveraged to help these businesses. The majority of investment, trade and business among indigenous businesses is nowhere near exports. This is where the Government needs to focus its efforts.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Irish-owned companies are doing very well in export markets. The previous Government set a target to increase Irish-owned exports by 33% by 2015. We actually achieved that last year and we need to build on it. One has to distinguish between the fact that we support with grants through Enterprise Ireland companies which are export-oriented but do not do the same for domestic retail operations for the good reason that they are largely in competition with others. It is not a fair comparison that the Deputy seeks to make. One of the new mandates of the local enterprise offices will be to look at that wider domestic economy, to give non-grant supports like mentoring so as to encourage an enterprise culture. I recognise the Deputy's point that we need to exploit more the potential of the domestic economy.

Trade Agreements

3. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation his position on whether an investor-State dispute settlement mechanism should be included in the transatlantic trade and investment partnership currently being negotiated between the EU and the US; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12330/14]

Deputy Mick Wallace: Most commentators agree the transatlantic trade and investment partnership will see the erosion of social protection, a process that has been in full swing since the advent of neoliberalism in the early 1970s. It would appear that the interests of private business, the markets and finance are being put before the interests of the people, the environment and our democracy.

Deputy Richard Bruton: To be honest, I do not think fair commentators would conclude that. All member states in the European Union agreed to open negotiations with the US for a trade agreement in the interests of promoting growth and employment in their economies. They also made it very clear that they are determined to maintain their social protection standards, and these are copper-fastened into the mandate that has been issued. The Deputy's question on the Order Paper was slightly different, so perhaps I will give him the answer to that as well.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I am interested.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The EU Council of Ministers gave a mandate to the EU Commission to negotiate the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. The scope of that mandate is wide ranging and allows the EU Commission to enter into negotiations with the US on many issues, including investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms, which was the subject of the Deputy's written question.

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A few weeks ago, the EU Commissioner for trade, Mr. Karel De Gucht, announced his decision to consult the public on the investment provisions of a future Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. I understand that the formal consultation period is expected to be launched this month, will run for three months, and will include draft text on investment protection and investor-state dispute settlement. I am conscious of the issues arising in respect of investor-state dispute settlement. It is clear that member states must retain the right to regulate in key public policy areas, such as public health, environmental and social protection, and this must continue to be the case. I therefore welcome the Commissioner's decision on public consultation, and I look forward to the outcome of the consultation process, which should inform the EU approach to negotiations with the US in this matter.

Investor protection agreements are important because they help to ensure against unfair and discriminatory treatment faced by our companies abroad. These are principles that underpin the rule of law in the EU and are the benchmarks that we would like to see well established in countries where our companies trade and invest. It is for this reason that bilateral investment protection agreements are very common not only in the EU where over 1,400 such agreements are in place, but also around the world where over 2,800 such agreements are in place among both developed and developing countries alike.

While convinced of their usefulness in an international context, I recognise that as part of the wider public consultation process being undertaken by the Commission, we have to ensure that the right to claim against unfair treatment is demonstrably balanced by procedures that prevent abuse and claims that are frivolous or without merit.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The European Commission's own report argues that the trade deal will entrench European inequality between regions, and has conceded that there are legitimate concerns that those workers who lose their jobs as a result of TTIP will find it difficult to secure other employment. The growth in employment figures provided by the European Commission and by the Government has been shown by numerous scholars to be highly unrealistic.

I would like to read an extract of a letter sent to the British Secretary of State, Vince Cable, a few weeks ago that was signed by trade union leaders and NGOs, highlighting the most destructive aspects of the trade deal:

The proposed investor state dispute settlement would allow corporations additional legal power over government policy... Negotiations on investment rights in public services and procurement would limit a future government's ability to oversee and regulate vital services like health and education. Harmonisation talks – the very centre of the negotiation – are being used to lower standards on a range of areas from environmental protection to health and safety. This has been pushed by corporate lobbyists.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The issue of whether any trade agreement can have an impact on some regions more than others is undoubtedly true. The reason countries seek to get involved in open trade is that on balance, they make gains. There is a possibility that some regions might be adversely affected. For example, if freer trade is opened up in motor cars and a country has a strong motor car industry, there is the possibility that such an industry will be affected if it has had high protection. Equally, that is balanced by the opportunities opened up for other businesses.

Free trade has winners and losers, but it has always been the reality that free trade opens up

more opportunities and enhances wealth and job opportunities over time.

Deputy Mick Wallace: There is little doubt that people are worried about reduction in the Government's say in these matters, if this deal were to go through. I would like to draw the Minister's attention to three points raised by George Monbiot in *The Guardian* this week, which are things that he would recommend.

First, all negotiating positions, on both sides, would be released to the public as soon as they are tabled. Then, instead of being treated like patronised morons, we could debate these positions and consider their impacts. Secondly, every chapter of the agreement would be subject to a separate vote in the European parliament. At present the parliament will be invited only to adopt or reject the whole package... Thirdly, TTIP would contain a sunset clause. After five years it would be reconsidered. If it has failed to live up to its promise of enhanced economic performance, or if it reduces public safety or public welfare, it could then be scrapped.

What does the Minister think of those three proposals?

Deputy Richard Bruton: To go back to the earlier question on why there is investment protection, the truth is that some countries which enter into trade agreements could introduce discriminatory rules aimed at a particular company because it was a non-national company. In some cases, we have had outright expropriation of companies that invested in a country. The idea of these investment protection treaties is to give some certainty to a company which decides to invest in a particular regime, where perhaps the domestic law is weak or not well enforced. The treaties are absolutely not designed to undermine the capacity of countries to provide public policy protections in different areas, and that is very explicit.

A worry arose after the Australian Government brought in plain packaging for cigarettes. Some tobacco companies have chosen to use some of these agreements as a way of trying to undermine that. Those cases have not yet been heard, and they are choosing to use the WTO and other vehicles of international agreements to try to overturn the Australian Government's decision. However, we have been very clear. We are not going to enter into an investment treaty agreement that could be exposed to that kind of risk, and the EU is taking action to try to improve the way that arbitration works to give better assurance to the public on that front.

Deputy Mick Wallace: What does the Minister think of voting separately on these issue in the European Parliament?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have to move on.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Deputy should have put that into the original question and if we had more time, I would have answered that.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I will send the questions to the Minister.

Construction Sector Strategy

4. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the progress that has been made in implementing the recommendations of the Forfás strategy for the construction sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12293/14]

Deputy Dara Calleary: This year's version of the jobs action plan acknowledges that the construction sector has, by international comparison, overcorrected and is now operating below its long-term sustainable level. What is the Minister's plans for employment creation in this area?

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Forfás report on Ireland's construction sector was published last July and presents an outlook for the sector to 2015, based on known and anticipated demands. The report includes a number of proposed actions aimed at generating more certainty in the domestic market, removing constraints and obstacles, and ensuring that the sector is equipped and capable of delivering innovative solutions in both domestic and overseas markets. Based on European comparisons and long-term trends for Ireland over the past 30 years, the Forfás report considers that it is plausible that Ireland could sustain a construction sector equivalent to approximately 12% of GNP, compared to 6.4% of GNP in 2013.

The Action Plan for Jobs also includes a suite of measures aimed at ensuring proper planning and sustainable development, supporting the expansion of construction firms into international markets, and strengthening public confidence in the sector. Among the measures that have been implemented are measures in the 2014 budget for home renovations and living cities; implementation of public private partnerships; the roll-out of the stimulus package, for example, the funding of the new children's hospital; the decision of the IDA to construct buildings in 2014 in Waterford, Athlone and Letterkenny; the continuing work of NAMA to support recovery in the sector; and the active support of Enterprise Ireland for construction sector firms to improve technology and export capability. The Government is also making progress with 70 major school projects in 2014 and expanding the energy efficiency retrofit programme.

The Action Plan for Jobs outlines additional actions for the construction and property sector. In addition, the Government has committed to a new strategy for the construction sector, which will be published shortly. A more detailed set of proposals will be available to the Deputy shortly.

10 o'clock

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Action Plan for Jobs 2013 referred a great deal to the construction sector but when we put a question to the Minister at the end of January to ascertain employment creation in that sector in 2013, he was unable to provide a figure because it was not being monitored. Last July the Forfás strategy stated that a consultation and co-ordination group should be established under the auspices of the Department of the Taoiseach but that has yet to be established.

The Minister mentioned the State building programme but the procurement rules which apply to that building programme are putting construction firms out of business. I know it is not the Minister's area but the procurement rules are a serious impediment to job creation and are costing jobs. Yesterday we had the statements on the local authority housing sector on which there has been no progress, even though there is huge opportunity and huge need. There is much rhetoric and spin but a lot of things are happening in spite of the Government's strategy. When will we see focused job creation ensuring that the capital programme of every Department is fully spent and not underspent as was the case last year?

Deputy Richard Bruton: On the employment front, construction during 2013 increased for the first time in six years, although it was a small increase. The last quarter was weak,

with the previous one being stronger. Part of that may be attributable to poor weather during that quarter. There seems to be opportunity emerging. The Taoiseach has been central to co-ordinating the new strategy, which will be published. That strategy has been co-ordinated in the Taoiseach's office and will be published within weeks. The Taoiseach has sought a response from all Departments to support opportunities in this sector.

I agree with the Deputy that procurement is an important area but public procurement has been constrained by the financial difficulties the country has faced. Some of the innovative approach has been to try to fund procurement, partly off balance sheet, through the likes of the sale of the lottery franchise to fund the national children's hospital and the use of public private partnerships. Innovative approaches are being developed to fund public projects and we will see more of that in the construction plan.

Deputy Dara Calleary: To pick up on the last point, the procurement difficulties have nothing to do with the financial problems we have. They relate to contracts being awarded. The procurement laws and rules are driving a lot of companies out of business. Many companies, in particular regionally-based companies which have employment potential, are not in a position to bid. I do not know if the Minister has advanced knowledge of the strategy but is there an area about opening up procurement rules to allow smaller companies, which have job creation potential and which employ people in the same way as other companies, to get a share of those contracts? Unless the procurement rules are changed there will be very little employment value in the new contracts coming down the line.

Deputy Richard Bruton: There are a number of things which are already in the Action Plan for Jobs, such as the new director of public procurement reviewing the contract letters issued in terms of public procurement. A fresh look is being taken at whether smaller businesses, SMEs, are getting a fair crack. Equally, the Deputy will see that in the water contract, there was an unbundling of the contract to try to give more contractors an opportunity. Social clauses are being examined to see if there is the possibility to include requirements in respect of recruitment off the live register. A number of areas are trying to open up public procurement to give more opportunities to individuals and to SMEs.

Job Creation

5. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the number of jobs that have been created in each county in the State by IDA Ireland companies that were new to Ireland in 2013. [12291/14]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Delivery of the Government's enterprise policy is seriously uneven, with the development of a very clear two-tier economy. People in the Border area, the midlands and the west are far more likely to be in poverty, to be unemployed and to have someone in their family emigrate. The last census saw a population increase but these areas saw a population decrease. The National Youth Council of Ireland reckoned that 51% of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 would consider emigration but Irish Rural Link said that nine out of ten of the people to whom it spoke were considering emigration.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The question asked does not relate to that specific issue. It asked about the counties to which new first-time investments by IDA Ireland were attracted.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is all the one. It is Government policy.

Deputy Richard Bruton: New investment in respect of the IDA Ireland probably represents perhaps 0.25% of employment in the whole country, so focusing on a tiny proportion does not address the whole issue of regional development, something to which we can return.

The Forfás annual employment survey reports on the numbers of jobs gained and lost in the enterprise development agencies' client companies. During 2013, there were 13,367 gross new jobs - 7,071 net new jobs - created in IDA Ireland client companies. This is the fourth consecutive year of jobs growth in IDA Ireland client companies.

Details of the number of jobs created in IDA Ireland client companies during 2013 on a county-by-county basis are set out in the tabular statement. Information is aggregated on a county basis but because information is provided by client companies on a confidential basis for statistical purposes only, it is not possible for reasons of client confidentiality to provide a breakdown in respect of individual companies to identify those that were new to Ireland in 2013.

During 2013, Ireland won 164 foreign direct investment projects, 78 of which were companies investing in Ireland for the first time, representing a rise of 18% on the previous year. First time investments were secured from corporations across the portfolio, including from Qualcomm, Airbnb, Tripadvisor, Regeneron, Huawei, FireEye, Grifols, Alexion and Acorn Direct Marketing. There was also a strong presence of emerging fast growth companies in the investment wins in 2013, including Squarespace, 10gen, Culture Translate, AdRoll, Storage Craft, Qualtrics, Zendesk, Quantcast and Etsy.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

During 2013, of the 78 new name investments won only some of which were announced, by far the greatest number of investments were for Dublin with 55 investments. The spread around the rest of the country was eight for Cork, five for Limerick, two for Waterford and one each for Cavan, Louth, Wexford, Galway, Kerry, Westmeath, Laois and Sligo. The 78 new name investments won by IDA Ireland in 2013 have potential to create approximately 3,500 jobs over a three-year to five-year period. The actual job delivery from these projects will be measured in the Forfás annual employment surveys over that same period.

In order to complement IDA Ireland's efforts to attract more fast-growing emerging companies to Ireland and to focus on generating projects from small and medium sized enterprises, the Government announced the Succeed in Ireland initiative in the 2012 Action Plan for Jobs. Many of the projects delivered so far by the initiative will be located in regional towns which would not ordinarily be considered by large companies of the type usually attracted by IDA Ireland and the same is true of many of the projects currently in the pipeline. To date, 14 projects have been approved under the scheme with the potential to create 341 jobs.

Table showing number of new jobs created in IDA Ireland client companies in 2013.

County	New Jobs Created (Gross Gains 2013)
Carlow	91
Cavan	15
Clare	15

County	New Jobs Created (Gross Gains 2013)
Cork	2,143
Donegal	177
Dublin	6,862
Galway	1,098
Kerry	101
Kildare	276
Kilkenny	80
Laois	0
Leitrim	31
Limerick	560
Longford	25
Louth	595
Mayo	242
Meath	68
Monaghan	29
Offaly	21
Roscommon	28
Sligo	184
Tipperary North	21
Tipperary South	180
Waterford	172
Westmeath	132
Wexford	149
Wicklow	72
Total	13,367

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The new way questions are formulated makes it very difficult for a Minister to give an answer and for a Deputy to ask a question. Everybody is rushing to get his or her words out and it is not conducive to proper debate.

The Minister said the question I asked is different from the written one. They are one and the same because, as the Minister said, FDI only produces a small proportion of the actual jobs in society. That is a given and an argument we have been making. New companies make up a smaller proportion. Most of the FDI jobs are come from existing companies which are expanding. If we do not get new companies into certain areas, they will not have the ability to create new jobs in the future.

Some 68 jobs were created in County Meath last year while approximately 550 were created in County Kildare, 240 in County Mayo and 200-odd in County Louth. County Kildare now has ten times the number of IDA Ireland jobs compared to County Meath. There is a yawning gap across the State between certain sections of society in regard to where the jobs are going.

The original objective in the Action Plan for Jobs was that 50% of jobs would be outside Cork and Dublin but we saw how this collapsed to 23% in 2012. Granted there was a small increase last year but this is not-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I will come back to you.

Deputy Richard Bruton: If we want to have a debate about regional development, we have to focus on the competitive advantage of a region. Having the debate about how we develop a regional strategy in the way the Deputy seeks to focus, which is on new emerging companies which, as he knows, are predominantly in the digital space, the expectation is that they will get a regional spread and that there will be one in different towns and villages but that is not a realistic expectation. To develop an enterprise strategy for a region, one must look at where the strengths are. One of the reasons we are doing very well regionally this year is that we have developed food, tourism and strong sectors with a traditional connection to regional areas.

The Deputy's question wants to look at the 78 new name companies but, as I indicated, they are predominantly in the very high-tech sector. The spread is 55 in Dublin, eight in Cork, five in Limerick, two in Waterford and one each in Cavan, Louth, Wexford, Galway, Kerry, Westmeath, Laois and Sligo. These are very welcome additions and we seek to achieve a spread based upon them, but a regional strategy must be built on much more than that and must include developing entrepreneurship within that region in areas where that region can build a long-term sustainable capability. That is the debate on which we need to focus as well as the important strategic nature of foreign direct investment.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I appreciate any jobs that come into the country in these straitened times but a business typically wants a skilled workforce, an infrastructure and an ability to make a profit. In most parts of the country that exists. What we need in the areas that do not have those is Government attention focused on providing those into the future. Government direction is also needed. Up until now certain Governments gave direction to the IDA to provide jobs in certain areas. The Government's Action Plan for Jobs contained a direction for a 50% target for foreign direct investment outside those areas. Has the Minister given up on that? He is saying it is impossible to give direction, that foreign direct investment will go where it will go, but on another level he is saying he is going to give direction. Which is it?

Irish financial services went to locate in the docks area because the Government directed them down there, and the clustering that has happened in the medi-tech sector in the west and in the pharmaceuticals sector in the south took place because those clusters were initiated by Government policy. We need an even distribution of these jobs.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. We must make progress.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The target for foreign direct investment is 50% outside Dublin and Cork. It is not a specific regional target of so much investment here, there and yonder because that is not realistic. It has not been possible to achieve this target but this year we improved on last year so we are heading in the right direction.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Therefore, the Minister agrees with me that there is the ability to provide these targets and such direction.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Regional aid is one of the tools we use to try to achieve a greater spread. We give greater grant support to an overseas investor in certain parts of the country than to those in others, and that has been a conscious policy to try to spread the investment more widely. We also introduced the Connect Ireland initiative, which is an adjunct to the traditional way the IDA does business, and it builds on community connections within regions. We believe that has potential and it is yielding 14 projects with the potential to create-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: That was a private sector initiative. It had nothing to do with the Minister.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Yes, but it is supported by State money. There is State allocation of funds to any successful connector. That is the way it works.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The idea came from a private individual and fair dues to him, but the Minister should not be taking the credit for it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Calleary, this is Deputy Tóibín's question.

Deputy Richard Bruton: We are supporting with public money a scheme developed by a private individual and there is nothing wrong with that. I will take ideas from anyone. I will take them from the Deputy.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Minister takes the credit for everything.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The issue of clusters is very valid. We seek to build clusters around particular sectors, be it in the food sector or in the medical devices sector, and the latter sector is a good example. It is regionally spread. Deputy Naughten will know that because he lives within an area where the medical devices sector is very strong. We seek to build clusters in regions as well.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister. We must move on to the next question. It is in the name of Deputy Naughten and the same time limits will apply.

Other Questions

Job Protection

6. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the steps he is taking to secure jobs at the MBNA site in Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12226/14]

Deputy Denis Naughten: While the sale of the Irish credit card business in Carrick-on-Shannon to AvantCard (Apollo) has secured more than 200 jobs in the town, the failure to have a long-term strategy on the UK credit card business is leading to a shedding of jobs in Carrick-on-Shannon. Two years ago, some 400 people were employed in managing the UK credit card business but that number has decreased to approximately 200 people. I want to know from the Minister what is happening to secure those jobs and to secure additional investment in Carrick-on-Shannon.

(Deputy Richard Bruton): The position regarding the potential developments at the two operations which formerly formed part of the original MBNA-Bank of America facility in Carrick-on-Shannon is essentially unchanged over recent months. The former MBNA credit card processing facility in Carrick-on-Shannon now comprises two operations. First, a new operation called AvantCard was established following the purchase of part of Bank of America's

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credit card portfolio by Apollo Global Management. This operation employs approximately 250 staff who manage the Irish card customers. These staff transferred from Bank of America to AvantCard (Apollo) under the EU transfer of undertakings regulations on 13 March 2013. This was a very positive development and provided more certainty regarding this part of the business. The second operation remains in the ownership of Bank of America and employs approximately 200 people who manage the credit card customers located in the UK. The process regarding the possible sale of this UK credit card business remains ongoing. Bank of America continues to look for a buyer for this unit.

On another positive note, Apollo has acquired the entire building in the town and has leased office space back to Bank of America. We welcome this investment in Carrick-on-Shannon by Apollo.

My priority is that any decision taken by Bank of America will have minimal impact on employees at the Carrick-on-Shannon operation and will ensure jobs are maintained at the facility. I emphasised this when I met senior executives of Bank of America in their headquarters in Charlotte, North Carolina. The IDA is in regular contact with Bank of America management in Dublin and with the parent company in the US to monitor developments. The IDA met senior executives of Apollo in London in September last where the transfer of the Carrick-on-Shannon facility and staff to Apollo and further investment opportunities for the group in Ireland were discussed. The IDA also keeps in touch with Apollo in Carrick-on-Shannon and held discussions just last month with the new manager of the AvantCard operation there. The IDA will remain in contact with the companies and will continue to highlight the strengths of the Carrick-on-Shannon operation to a broad range of potential investors.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The MBNA Bank of America-Apollo operation in Carrick-on-Shannon is not only a local employer but a significant regional employer. As the Minister said, he continues to highlight that to potential investors. In the past two years, however, there has been only one visit to County Leitrim supported by the IDA and four visits to County Roscommon. Is it not more important at present to try to hold on to what we have? In that context, originally Bank of America said it was moving out of its international credit card business because its intention was to focus on its core business. It pulled back from that in regard to the UK credit card business and has expressed its intention to dispose of it, but this limbo that has been created, from the initial announcement to the current situation, has led to significant job losses in terms of the operation of the UK loan book in the interim.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Clearly, any decision by Bank of Ireland in America of this business is one that it takes. We take every opportunity to seek to ensure we protect the employment there. I met senior executives of Bank of America only a few months ago to again take the opportunity to stress that. We make every effort to promote the employment package in Carrick-on-Shannon and to try to protect those jobs but ultimately it is the company that will decide the timing of sales and that decision.

In respect of the wider IDA regional development, we recognise that generally the midlands and that area has been a difficult one and one of the decisions taken this year, as I indicated, was to build in Athlone. That is the first time in many years the IDA has started to build facilities. It is based on our belief that there is a competitive edge in the region and that we can build there.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I thank the Minister for his response. It is great to see the development in Athlone but the development there is in a completely different sector. It is a long

way from Carrick-on-Shannon. That is not of much reassurance to the communities in the west and the north west, or to the community around Carrick-on-Shannon or to the employees. Can the Minister provide some assurance to the employees and businesses in Carrick-on-Shannon regarding the long-term job prospects for that UK business? Can he clarify if it is still the intention of Bank of America to dispose of that particular operation as an ongoing concern? Perhaps he could throw some light on company's intention? Is it trying to sell the loan book or sell the business in Carrick-on-Shannon as an ongoing operation?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will take a final response from the Minister.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Clearly, I would have to say that from our discussions with the senior executives of Bank of America, they have been very positive, very well disposed towards the workforce and very pleased with the quality of work that is done there. They want to retain that. The Deputy will note that during recent years, although having announced their intention to sell, they have stuck with the business and continue to operate successfully. Clearly, that signals their commitment to Carrick-on-Shannon but they are in a commercial world in which they make decisions and they continue to look to sell the loan book. Our determination is to ensure no stone is left unturned in making sure that whatever decision is taken, the town is part of the decision. That is what we seek to guarantee. We have worked with Bank of America staff on this and their intentions have been positive towards the people of the town. They know the relationship that has been built there and they have a great level of commitment but we continue to work with them. I cannot give guarantees.

The only reason I mentioned Athlone was the Deputy raised the wider issue of the IDA Ireland role in respect of the region.

Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan: It is only about 70 miles away.

Question No. 7 replied to with Written Answers.

Regional Development

8. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the research his Department, or bodies under the aegis of his Department, have carried out into enterprise and employment in regional towns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12213/14]

11. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the strategies and policies in place to encourage enterprise and employment in regional towns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12212/14]

Deputy David Stanton: The questions relate to regional towns around the country such as Youghal, Middleton, Cobh and Fermoy in my area. They historically were the economic hubs of enterprise, business and employment but that has changed dramatically and they have become dormitory towns. Has the Department carried out research into the employment and enterprise provision and potential of these towns?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 and 11 together.

My Department tracks the agency supported enterprises in regional towns and their hin-

terlands. Our agencies have regional offices who seek to promote the assets of the region and develop their enterprises. Forfás has conducted research on the regional strengths and weaknesses' from an enterprise perspective. However, most of our policy tools are enterprise focused and sector focused rather than taking regional towns as their starting point.

In 2014, we are seeking to enhance local enterprise support by the roll-out of the local enterprise offices, LEOs. They will deliver a first-stop shop point of access and specific support to the development of regional towns. They also include the local enterprise support services of the local authorities and will publish a local enterprise plan.

The aim of Action Plan for Jobs is to support enterprises to create employment throughout the country and in all regions. Regions that support strong and dynamic enterprises are crucial to Ireland's return to overall economic growth. The action plan contains a number of actions to strengthen enterprise development at the regional level. Action 177 mandates my Department and its agencies to develop a framework for a regional enterprise strategy to better integrate and develop new ways of working, further collaborations and enhance the efforts and activities of the enterprise agencies and the other regional stakeholders in building enterprise based on sustainable competitive advantage of the region. Regional towns as the drivers of regional economies will obviously be central to the development of these strategies to further enhance the activities of the agencies and the soon to be established LEO network across the regions.

With regard to research and data analysis, this work will draw among others on the Forfás suite of studies on the Regional Competitiveness Agenda, published in 2009, updated by the regional strategies of Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. What are the timescales for these actions? Has he set deadlines for results? He acknowledged that these towns are the drivers of the regional and local economies. Has a list of these towns been compiled and an analysis carried out of what has happened in them? Business and enterprise has collapsed to such an extent in some of them that they have become dormitory towns. Does the Minister agree that people leave them in the morning to work elsewhere and do their shopping elsewhere, which means that even retail outlets in them are beginning to be impacted? It is important to know the timescales for the positive actions that have been outlined.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The timelines are published but I do not have them with me. It is either the third or fourth quarter this year. This is the first time there has been an attempt to develop a strategy with a number of county LEOs. We will also have the IDA and Enterprise Ireland strategies and we will seek to have a genuine forum in which other stakeholders such as local authorities can engage with us on the development of that strategy. We collate the SWOT analyses for an IDA region and what are the strengths and weaknesses of the region and how we can build them out. That is one part of it but we also examine the enterprise infrastructure, including the network of enterprise centres, LEOs offices and incubators in regional institutes of education, and the assets of the region and seek to build them out.

We do not focus on towns *per se*; we focus on enterprises and the infrastructure and assets around them. However, as I said in reply to Deputy Tóibín, the LEOs have a broader remit now and they will examine mentoring and other entrepreneurship supports for domestic businesses as well as export-oriented businesses. It is region-focused rather than town-focused.

Deputy David Stanton: Is there a risk that some towns could be left out of the loop if the

strategy is regionally based? Some regions, and some areas within a region, may have more potential and may be stronger than others. How big will the regions be? Will they comprise a single county or multiple counties? The Minister said towns are the drivers of regional economies. Will he narrow the focus to towns because many of them have enterprise centres, chambers of commerce and so on, which are anxious to work with and engage with State agencies, but they could be lost in a big region? Will he examine this again?

Deputy Richard Bruton: This is our first iteration of this and we have to be realistic. We must build on what we know about, which is enterprise start-up, attracting foreign direct investment, mentoring and running enterprise centres. The question will be how we do a better job of driving enterprise growth in the region. Regions will be based on the traditional IDA model. We recognise towns and the LEOs will seek to build networks with chambers of commerce or other players. Local authorities are experimenting with 700 initiatives aimed at supporting enterprises. Much of the work will involve seeking to mainstream some of them and drawing best practice from some others. Cork has been exemplary in engaging in innovative initiatives as have Tipperary and other counties.

This is part of a learning process and I am not setting out that my Department and I can draw up a big strategy for every town in the country. I am not capable of doing that but I would like to draw up a meaningful enterprise strategy that towns, villages and stakeholders can engage with and around which we can build a genuine dialogue.

Deputy Denis Naughten: There has been too much focus on attracting FDI rather than trying to support our indigenous sector. I propose three initiatives. First, will he focus on towns, as Deputy Stanton has suggested, and get the agencies to assist them to examine their assets and build an enterprise strategy based on that? It has been done successfully by Louth County council and that could be replicated throughout the country.

Second, will the Minister ensure the same incentives available to attract FDI are made available for our own people who want to create a job or develop a business?

Third, many businesses face problems with energy costs. A successful carbon loan scheme operates in Northern Ireland and Wales under which a company receives a loan of £1,000 for every 1.5 tonnes of carbon saved. Could the Minister examine these three initiatives to support local employment, towns and businesses?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I do not accept that there has been too much focus on FDI. We had to have an export-led recovery. The domestic economy has been on the floor for the past four years and this has not been easy to correct because of the State finances and finances of individuals and so on. Our focus on Irish companies exporting abroad and attracting new investment continues to be absolutely vital. I agree with the Deputy that by putting the local enterprises offices into the local authorities, which has been criticised, it does give us an opportunity to engage differently with local communities. We hope that over time it will be exactly like that - seeing more bottom-up initiatives from local authorities engaging with stakeholders in their areas.

It is not true that the IDA gets more generous support. As we have been discussing, a lot of those go to Dublin and Cork where there is zero per cent regional aid available. It is a myth that the IDA receives a whole lot of supports. The truth is that we have supports for indigenous companies across the whole range, including start-up, innovation, technology support, manage-

ment development, graduate placements and export supports. We have a big range of supports for export-oriented Irish companies, which is much wider than we offer elsewhere.

Deputy David Stanton: One needs to get off the ground before one can start the courses.

Action Plan for Jobs

9. **Deputy Seán Kyne** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the steps that have been taken to ensure the numerous positive measures from the 2012 and 2013 Action Plans for Jobs, many of which have proven their effectiveness with the recent positive employment figures, are continuing to be implemented; the evaluation process which monitors the progress of the action plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12114/14]

Deputy Seán Kyne: I wish to ask the Minister what steps have been taken to ensure that as many positive measures from the 2012 and 2013 Action Plans for Jobs continue to be implemented. In addition, what steps are being taken to monitor the actions listed?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Since the first Action Plan for Jobs was introduced in 2012, the Government has implemented over 500 actions to support job creation across all Government Departments and a significant number of State agencies. The aim of the action plan is to create a supportive operating environment for businesses in order to allow employment to grow across all sectors.

The 2012 action plan contained 270 actions and 92% of these were delivered by the end of that year. The 2013 plan contained 333 actions and had a 90% implementation rate. Those commitments which were not implemented on schedule in 2012 and 2013 were carried forward to the subsequent year's action plan or replaced with more targeted measures.

A key strength of the action plan process is its cumulative impact. Each year's plan builds on measures which have been initiated in the previous year. The 2014 plan was launched on 27 February and continues to build on many of the actions contained in the 2012 and 2013 plans. Successful initiatives are mainstreamed or extended where their performance is positive. It contains 385 actions for delivery across all Departments and 46 agencies, including measures to continue developing six of the disruptive reforms and many of the sectoral initiatives launched in 2012 and 2013.

Deputy Seán Kyne: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. I acknowledge the success of the action plan, whose format is an innovative inter-departmental and inter-agency initiative. This novel approach is working despite some detractors. Some 270 actions were initiated in 2012 and it is important for the Department to continuously monitor them to ensure they are followed through to the fullest extent. It is important to move away from the culture of the past, although we must acknowledge that this new approach can take time to be implemented and become fully embedded. The Department should continue to monitor the performance of the action plans. Is the Minister planning to review the 2012 action plan to ensure that all those actions are still being implemented to the fullest extent?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I fully agree with the Deputy that monitoring is vital, although it is not done by my Department but by a monitoring committee, including the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste. It is a whole-of-Government approach to monitoring. As they say in the United

States, biting with the president's teeth is very important in delivering performance across all the silos.

This year we have had discussions with the OECD to see how we can better develop this process and ensure that not only are we delivering it, but are also getting good outcomes. As we discussed at the Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, we will be examining a wider range of outcome indicators as well as the headlines one of jobs and rankings in terms of a good place to do business. We are seeking to develop that so that across the sub-sectors and various elements of the plan we are seen to be making progress. That becomes a feedback loop to inform better decisions.

If anything was missed in 2012 because we could not achieve it, we sought to discover why. We thus changed the target. Not everything achieves all that is hoped for. If it did we would be living in a strange world. We therefore modify targets based on experience, but we always seek to stretch the targets.

Deputy Seán Kyne: It is important to acknowledge the fact that the OECD has cited the jobs action plan as a positive model for other countries.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I apologise for interrupting the Fine Gael Parliamentary Party meeting here, but one of the commitments in the jobs action plan was about small and medium enterprise finance. We have had this discussion already. Last year, the pillar banks, AIB and Bank of Ireland, were supposed to loan €2 billion each to SMEs - that is, a total of €4 billion. Yet the Central Bank report, which has been published since the Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation last met, shows that only €1.9 billion of new lending was done by all banks to the SME sector. In addition, the ISME survey showed that 50% of companies have been turned down for loans.

In the context of monitoring the jobs action plan, has the Minister made any inquiries as to the difference between the €4 billion of new lending that was supposed to go into SMEs and the €1.9 billion of new lending noted by the Central Bank? We continue to have a major problem concerning finance for SMEs.

Deputy Richard Bruton: This continues to be a central concern for me, as it does also for the Deputy. I monitor the new lending figures by sector as well as the refusal rates which thankfully have shown some signs of improvement. I also monitor the decisions of the Companies Registration Office and the picture remains one whereby the banks have not properly adjusted to their role in supporting SMEs. They still have a long way to go in this area. We continue to press them and I meet with them regularly. We seek to drive up the use of alternative funding mechanisms, as well as seeing them build up sectoral expertise so they can have a genuine relationship with management sectors in a growth phase. I agree with the Deputy that we need to do better in this area and we will continue to press for that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 10 is in the name of Deputy Derek Nolan but he is not present in the Chamber, so we will go on to Question No. 12.

Question No. 10 replied to with Written Answers.

Question No. 11 answered with Question No. 8.

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Regional Development

12. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the steps his Department has taken to implement the south-east economic development strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12164/14]

Deputy Dara Calleary: This question continues today's theme of regional development. One of the regions that is not performing is the south east where the unemployment rate is 15.5% versus 12.2% nationally. The Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation appointed Senator David Cullinane as a rapporteur to produce a cross-party report including a series of actions on how the problem can be addressed. I would like the Minister to explain the current status of that report.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I am conscious of the challenges facing the south-east and that is why I commissioned Forfás to undertake the south-east regional employment action plan. I initiated the south-east forum which bring together the agencies and stakeholders involved. Work is going on to implement that plan and significant progress has been made. Since 2011, there have been 79 IDA-sponsored site visits by potential investors to the region which is almost double the number which took place in the 2008 to 2010 period.

An additional 15,000 jobs have been created in the region, resulting in the unemployment rate having dropped from 18.8% to 15.5% in 2013. There have been significant gains for the region, including a major investment by Glanbia in Belview which will provide 1,600 direct and indirect jobs, as well as an additional 450 jobs during the construction phase. In 2013, Sanofi announced plans to invest €44 million in Genzyme's biotechnology campus in Waterford. Also last year, Nypro Healthcare announced plans to establish an additional state-of-the-art medical device facility in Waterford, which will result in the creation of over 200 high quality jobs. Eishtec, the call centre operator, has in the region of 750 staff between its Waterford and Wexford sites. The company aims to bring that total to approximately 900 by this summer.

The local enterprise offices have been busy, as well. We are committed to the construction of a 2,348 sq. m facility in the IDA technology park on the Cork Road in Waterford. We are proceeding across the spectrum of initiatives that were outlined in the plan. We have a long way to go but clearly the improvement in employment is encouraging.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The difficulty is that there is a long-term problem there, although I accept that a lot of progress has been made. Has the Minister pursued the appointment of an IDA regional manager for the south east and the establishment of a regional operation so that the IDA would be based in the community?

Can the Minister explain why Waterford was excluded from a series of "better business" seminars around the country? They are getting a huge response and I gather there was a very successful one in Limerick. If we are taking seriously Waterford, its potential for jobs creation and business development and its status as a regional capital, why was it excluded from the roll-out of these seminars? Local businesses in Waterford might want to access some of the opportunities the Minister outlined. They could have come and engaged with the Department's agencies.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Waterford certainly has not been excluded. I have held two Action Plan for Jobs meetings there and intend to have more. In the first phase of the support for

business pilot initiative, just one meeting is being held in Dublin. We will look at Waterford in the next phase. I see the merit of that. There is no region I have visited more often in an effort to understand the needs of enterprise and to respond to them than the south east. It is certainly not being overlooked by me. The IDA's approach was raised. I am convinced by the effort we have made to increase the focus on the region, which has resulted in a significant increase in site visits. I am satisfied with the pipeline that is building up, which will deliver additional investment in the region. I am satisfied with the IDA's response. Its deployment of resources is delivering improved performance, which is what I seek.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I accept and welcome that progress has been made in the south east, but there is a long way to go. The Minister's remarks contrast with his earlier response on regional policy to the effect that he cannot corral and force the IDA. A political decision has been taken to prioritise the south east, which has resulted in increased activity. I hope the Minister will take that political decision for other regions.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The point I was making to Deputy Tóibín was that we cannot look to the capacity of the IDA to provide for every town and village. The IDA cannot fill that gap and never will. A large region like the south east with a significant educational asset in the Waterford Institute of Technology and its established company base in food, pharmaceuticals and other sectors is a cluster we must build out. That is why we are building in Waterford where there is a cluster that will attract investment. This is an additional strengthening of that cluster. There is no contradiction.

Employment Rights Issues

13. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation if he will consider banning zero-hour contracts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12175/14]

Deputy Mick Wallace: The problem with zero-hour contracts is that they do not provide a set number of hours in the week. A person might get 20, 30 or 35 hours one week and nothing the next. It is very hard to plan a life under those conditions. I understand that the Minister does his best to make it as easy as possible for people to create work, but there must be a balance. We must also consider workers' rights as well.

(Deputy Richard Bruton): Zero-hour contracts are covered by contract law and must be entered into freely by the employer and the employee. They cannot be forced upon an employee. Zero-hour contracts are normally found in sectors such as retail, health care and hospitality. I am very conscious that in certain circumstances they may be of great benefit to both employers and employees. They allow greater flexibility for both by reducing the employer's pay costs and allowing workers to decide when and if they want to work. Such contracts may be preferred by employees who require flexibility to facilitate educational or other personal necessities. Banning such contracts could do a disservice to these workers. However, it is a matter I will keep under review.

Section 18 of the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 contains a specific protection for employees who are employed on zero-hour contracts. The zero-hour protection applies to all employees whose contracts operate to require them to be available regardless of whether they work on a casual basis. It covers situations where, for example, an employee is sent home if things are quiet or is requested to be available for work and is not asked to work on the day.

Where an employee suffers a loss by not working hours he or she was requested to work or to be available to work, the zero-hour provisions of the Act ensure he or she is compensated for 25% of the time during which he or she is required to be available, or 15 hours, whichever is the lesser. The level of compensation may be impacted if the employee gets some work. Claims of breaches of section 18 may be referred to a rights commissioner.

An expectation of work does not, however, entitle an employee to compensation. The zero-hour provision does not apply to lay-offs, short time, emergency or exceptional circumstances, employee illness, employee on-call situations or where the employee is paid wages for making him or herself available for work. Section 17 sets out the requirements regarding notification to the employee of the times at which he or she will be required to work during the week. Generally, an employee is entitled to 24 hours' notice of his or her roster.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Research carried out by Mandate in 2013 found that 17% of people living below the poverty line worked in precarious jobs with zero-hour contracts. While the Minister has responsibility for jobs, not social protection, it is relevant to note that where employees have good working conditions, it works even better for the employer in the long run. It is to adopt a very short-term vision to think otherwise. It is not in an employer's interests to be able to treat a worker poorly. Zero-hour contracts are not good for Ireland. They are certainly not good for the employee or, in the long run, for the employer. The Government should move on them. They are not fair.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I add my voice to that of Deputy Wallace. There has been an increase in underemployment under the Government, including in the last set of figures. There are thousands of workers who work to seven day, zero-hour contracts with no guarantee of work, which is exploitative. It disproportionately affects those who are on very low incomes, in particular women. We must value care work in our society, which this type of contract does not do. Many of those on zero-hour contracts are carers who work for people with disabilities and the elderly. If we do not value their work, we are doing a disservice to their livelihoods, ability to survive and to the people for whom they care.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Clearly, part-time work does not provide a full-time income support, which will always be the case. There has been a pattern in the recovery whereby there was an initial growth in part-time work whereas now 90% of increased employment relates to full-time positions, which is encouraging. Part-time workers are protected by employment law and must get the same terms and conditions as full-time workers. There is a protection in statute whereby zero-hour workers who are required to be on call must be compensated to the tune of 25%. They also have rights in relation to annual holidays.

I will keep the area under review. One must strike a balance. Such contracts suit certain people and banning them will close out opportunities for people to supplement income in ways they find beneficial. I will bear in mind the points the Deputies have made.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dinny McGinley): Mar Aire Stáit na Gaeltachta, fáiltím roimh an deis seo labhairt leis an Dáil faoi chur i bhfeidhm na Straitéise 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge. San aitheasc seo, tá sé i gceist agam léargas a thabhairt ar an obair atá ar bun ag an Rialtas chun leas na Gaeilge a chur chun cinn tríd an Straitéis a chur i bhfeidhm.

Agus an díospóireacht seo ar siúl mar chuid de Sheachtain na Gaeilge, ní miste dom a rá gur dóigh liom go bhfuil an Ghaeilge ar cheann de na hacmhainní is nádúrtha agus is luachmhaire atá againn. Creideann an Rialtas go bhfuil tábhacht ag baint le pobal labhartha láidir Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta a chothú chun saibhreas oidhreachta na teanga a choinneáil beo agus a thabhairt slán don chéad ghlúin eile. Cé go bhfuil an Rialtas tiomanta gach a dhéanamh laistigh dá chumhacht chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn, tá todhchaí na teanga ag brath go príomha ar an phobal. Tá a fhios againn go bhfuil dearcadh dearfach ag tromlach an phobail i leith na teanga. Tá orainn timpeallacht a chothú ina mbraitheann daoine muiníneach a gcuid Gaeilge a úsáid, cuma cén leibhéal cumais atá acu inti. Tá sé riachtanach go leanfar ag baint leas as an teanga mar theanga pobail agus teaghlaigh sa Ghaeltacht agus go gcuirfear an teanga chun cinn ar bhonn níos forleithne taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Ar ndóigh, tá an Taoiseach agus an Tánaiste, gan trácht ar cheannairí na bpáirtithe polaitiúla eile, ag tabhairt dea-shampla dúinn uile ó thaobh úsáid na Gaeilge sna Tithe seo. Is cinnte gur féidir linn uile féachaint ar an dóigh gur féidir linn féin níos mó úsáide a bhaint as ár gcuid Gaeilge le linn ár gcuid oibre laethúil sa Dáil agus sa Seanad.

Mar a luaigh mé sa Seanad inné, ní miste a mheabhrú dúinn féin go bhfuil iomaí dul chun cinn déanta le roinnt blianta anuas ó thaobh na teanga de, lena n-áirítear bunú RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta, bunú TG4, achtú Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla agus Acht na Gaeltachta, bunú Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga, Fhoras na Gaeilge agus Údarás na Gaeltachta, an t-aitheantas don Ghaeilge faoi Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta i dTuaisceart Éireann agus an t-aitheantas don Ghaeilge mar theanga oifigiúil agus mar theanga oibre san Aontas Eorpach.

Ba mhaith liom anois díriú ar an Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge. Foilsíodh an straitéis i mí na Nollag 2010 tar éis tacaíocht traspháirtí a fháil i dTithe an Oireachtais agus próiseas comhairliúcháin agus taighde. Cuireann an straitéis cur chuige iomlánaíoch, comhtháite i ndáil leis an Ghaeilge chun cinn, cur chuige a luíonn le dea-chleachtas idirnáisiúnta. Is straitéis uailmhianach agus dúshlánach í a chuimsíonn 9 réimse gnímh ar leith.

Faoi na príomhspríocanna sa straitéis, atá le baint amach thar thréimhse scór bliain, tá sé i gceist go mbeidh eolas ag 2 mhilliún duine ar an Ghaeilge agus go mbeidh ardú ar líon na gcainteoirí laethúla Gaeilge go dtí 250,000 duine. Má smaoinítear ar thorthaí Dhaonáireamh 2011 ina raibh 1.77 milliún duine in aois a 3 bliana nó níos sine in ann Gaeilge a labhairt, i gcomórtas le 1.66 milliún in 2006, is léir go bhfuiltear ag déanamh dul chun cinn maidir leis na spríocanna dúshlánacha atá leagtha síos sa straitéis a bhaint amach.

Ba mhaith liomsa tiomantas agus dáiríreacht an Rialtais i leith chur i bhfeidhm na straitéise a threisiú anseo inniu. Tá sé ráite i gClár an Rialtais go dtacóidh an Rialtas leis an straitéis agus go ndéanfar na spríocanna indéanta atá molta inti a sheachadadh. Mar is eol don Teach, is ar mo Roinnse atá an fhreagracht uileghabhálach an straitéis a chomhordú agus a chur i bhfeidhm i gcomhar le réimse mór páirtithe leasmhara. Aithnítear sa straitéis féin go bhfuil gá le cur chuige céimneach chun bearta éagsúla na straitéise a chur i gcrích. I gcomhréir leis an gcur

chuiqe seo, 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 atá ar fáil.

Tá an dul chun cinn foriomlán atá déanta maidir le feidhmiú na straitéise le linn na tréimhse ó 2010 go 2013 le feiceáil go soiléir sa tuarascáil a d'fhoilsigh mé i mí Iúil 2013. Ina theannta sin, d'fhoilsigh na Ranna Rialtais ábhartha, aon cheann déag acu san iomlán, a gcuid pleananna forfheidhmithe faoin straitéis ag an am céanna. Dá bhrí sin, is léir domsa go bhfuil cur chuige soiléir ann maidir le cur i bhfeidhm na straitéise agus go bhfuil dul chun cinn á dhéanamh go staidéarach agus go stuama laistigh de na hacmhainní atá ar fáil.

Aithníonn muid ar ndóigh go bhfuil go leor le déanamh faoin straitéis, ach is trua liomsa, a Cheann Comhairle, go ndéantar beag is fiú den obair fhiúntach agus dháiríre atá ar siúl ar fud an Státchórais in go leor den tráchtairacht atá déanta faoi chur i bhfeidhm na straitéise le tamall anuas. Leagtar síos faoin straitéis an chreatlach pholasaí do na páirtithe leasmhara éagsúla, idir an Stát agus an phobal, chun obair as lámha a chéile ar bhonn comhpháirtíochta chun aidhmeanna fiúntacha a bhaint amach ar bhonn céimnitheach. Sa chomhthéacs seo, tá súil agamsa gur féidir le baill Thithe an Oireachtais treisiú a dhéanamh ar an gcomhoibriú ar bhonn traspháirtí chun treoir agus dea-shampla a thabhairt maidir leis an cheist thábhachtach seo.

Ar ndóigh, ní miste na srianta ar acmhainní a bhaineann le feidhmiú na Straitéise a thógáil san áireamh. Is fíor gan amhras go bhfuil laghdú suntasach tagtha ar an méid atáthar ag caitheamh ar an Ghaeilge, ach an oiread le haon réimse eile caiteachais, ón uair gur foilsíodh an straitéis in 2010. D'ainneoin go raibh tionchar aige seo ar fheidhmiú na straitéise, is díol suntas é mar sin féin an méid atá bainte amach chun bearta áirithe den straitéis a chur i bhfeidhm. In ainneoin an bhrú atá ar an Státchiste le linn ré seo na déine, is cúis sásaimh dom é an t-allúntas ar leith de €0.5 milliún a cuireadh ar fáil do mo Roinn i gCáinainéis 2014 le caitheamh ar an straitéis. Is léiriú follasach é an t-allúntas seo ar thiomantas an Rialtais i leith na Gaeilge. Cuirfidh an maoiniú seo ar chumas mo Roinne tabhairt faoi ghníomhaíochtaí éagsúla, lena n-áirítear gníomhaíochtaí a thacóidh leis an phróiseas pleanála teanga ar an talamh. Áirítear anseo tacaíocht d'eagraíochtaí pobail chun cabhrú leo tabhairt faoi phleananna teanga a ullmhú agus a fheidhmiú faoi Acht na Gaeltachta 2012.

Cuireann Acht na Gaeltachta 2012 an chreatlach reachtúil ar fáil chun tabhairt faoin phróiseas 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 tacú leis an 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 pobail agus teaghlaigh i gceantair Ghaeltachta agus i gceantair eile taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht.

Is i gcomhar le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta agus le Foras na Gaeilge atá an próiseas pleanála teanga á chur i bhfeidhm ag mo Roinn. Táthar ag tabhairt tús áite sa chur i bhfeidhm don 26 Limistéar Pleanála Teanga Gaeltachta 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 10 bhfógra eile foilsithe i mbliana agus go ndéanfar na fógraí maidir leis an 10 gcinn deireanach ina dhiaidh sin. Ar ndóigh, tá Údarás na Gaeltachta freagrach faoin Acht as tacaíocht a thabhairt d'eagraíochtaí maidir le hullmhú agus feidhmiú pleananna teanga sna Limistéir Pleanála Teanga Ghaeltachta.

Maidir leis na Bailte Seirbhíse Gaeltachta, tá sé i gceist ag mo Roinn próiseas comhair-

liúcháin a reáchtáil i mbliana 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.

Déanann mo Roinn raon leathan scéimeanna, tionscnaimh agus bearta a reáchtáil ar bhonn leanúnach atá dírithe ar chúnamh reatha agus caipitil a chur ar fáil do thograí teangalárnaithe taobh istigh agus taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Is faoi scáth Chlár Tacaíochta Teaghlaigh mo Roinne, a sheol mé i mí Aibreáin 2012, a mbíonn cuid mhaith de na scéimeanna seo á n-eagrú agus iad dírithe go sonrach ar theaghlaigh, ach go háirithe teaghlaigh Ghaeltachta atá ag tógáil a bpáistí le Gaeilge nó ar mhaith leo a bpáistí a thógáil le Gaeilge.

I measc na mbeartas faoi leith atá ar siúl ag mo Roinn faoin Chlár Tacaíochta Teaghlaigh tá pacáiste tacaíochta teanga seolta chuig breis agus 2,000 teaghlach chun cabhair phraiticiúil a chur ar fáil dóibh ina gcuid iarrachtaí a bpáistí a thógáil le Gaeilge; tá breis airgid curtha ar fáil chun forbairtí a dhéanamh ar Scéim na gCúntóirí Teanga i mbunscoileanna Gaeltachta; tá leasuithe déanta ar Scéim na gCampáí Samhraidh le cur lena héifeachtacht sa Ghaeltacht; agus tá bearta faoi leith atá dírithe go sonrach ar aos óg na Gaeltachta maoinithe ag mo Roinnse.

Ós rud é gurb iad na blianta tosaigh i saol an pháiste na blianta is tábhachtaí ó thaobh sealbhaithe agus saibhríthe teanga de, is fiú go mór treisiú a dhéanamh ar an obair fhóna atá ar bun sa réimse seo sa Ghaeltacht le go mbeidh cúnaimh breise ar fáil do theaghlaigh Ghaeltachta atá ag tógáil a bpáistí le Gaeilge. Tar éis do mo Roinn breathnú ar an mbealach is tairbhí agus is éifeachtaí chun freastal níos fearr a dhéanamh ar na teaghlaigh seo, bheartaigh mé gur chóir scéim nua a thionscnamh faoin Chlár Tacaíochta Teaghlaigh chun tacú le cur i bhfeidhm na straitéise agus leis an phróiseas pleanála teanga.

11 o'clock

B'údar áthais dom dá réir scéim nua dar teideal an Scéim Seirbhíse Réamhscoile agus Iarscoile a fhógairt agus mé ag labhairt sa Seanad inné. Is í aidhm na scéime úire seo tacú le teaghlaigh Ghaeltachta chun a bpáistí a thógáil le Gaeilge. Is ón allúntas ar leith atá ag mo Roinn don straitéis a thiochfaidh maoiniú don scéim atá measta ag €120,000 i mbliana. Faoin scéim, cuirfear cúnaimh reatha, gur fiú suas le €15,000 in aghaidh na bliana, ar fáil d'ionaid tacaíochta teaghlaigh agus d'ionaid chúraim leanaí atá lonnaithe sa Ghaeltacht chun cabhrú leo gníomhaíochtaí breise faoi leith a reáchtáil a mbeidh mar aidhm acu tacú le deiseanna breise sealbhaithe agus saibhríthe teanga a chur ar fáil do theaghlaigh Ghaeltachta.

Cabhróidh an Scéim Seirbhíse Réamhscoile agus Iarscoile go mór le dul i ngleic leis an dúshlán a bhaineann lena chinntiú go dtéann an Ghaeilge ar aghaidh go bisiúil mar theanga bheo ó ghlúin go glúin sa Ghaeltacht. Luíonn an scéim go nádúrtha leis an obair fhóna atá ar bun i réimse na réamhscolaíochta ag leithéidí Chomhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta. Ba mhaith liom go deimhin an deis seo a thapú chun an obair faoi leith sin atá ar bun ag Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta a aithint go poiblí.

Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá anois maidir leis na héilimh atá tagtha chun cinn ar na mal-laibh maidir le cearta lucht labhartha na Gaeilge. Ba mhaith liom a athdhearbhú anseo inniu go bhfuil mé breá sásta plé a dhéanamh ar na héilimh éagsúla sa tréimhse atá amach romhainn. Mar chéad chéim sa phróiseas plé seo, d'fhógair mé le déanaí go bhfuil coiste comhairleach á bhunú ag mo Roinn, i gcomhar le hÚdáras na Gaeltachta agus le Foras na Gaeilge, ar a mbeidh ionadaíocht ag eagraíochtaí ábhartha Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta. Is í an phríomhaidhm atá leis

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an choiste comhairleach eolas a roinnt maidir le cur i bhfeidhm na Straitéise agus an phróisis pleanála teanga faoi Acht na Gaeltachta 2012 chun comhoibriú agus comhthuisceant níos fearr a chothú idir na páirtithe éagsúla i dtaca leis an réimse oibre sin. Tá súil agam go gcuideoidh bunú an choiste seo go mór le haidhmeanna na straitéise a chur i gcrích ar bhonn comhpháirtíochta. Tionólfar an chéad chruinniú den choiste comhairleach ar an 2 Aibreán.

Ar cheann de na héilimh atá déanta ag lucht léirsithe le déanaí ná gur chóir go mbeadh seirbhísí trí Ghaeilge ar fáil ón Státchóras, ach go háirithe sa Ghaeltacht. Is aidhm lárnach pholasaí de chuid an Rialtais é úsáid na Gaeilge a threisiú agus tá sé ina ghné thábhachtach den pholasaí sin go mbeidh baill foirne atá inniúil sa Ghaeilge ar fáil sa Státchóras. Ar ndóig, tá an cheist maidir le cumas comhlachtaí poiblí seirbhísí a sholáthar trí Ghaeilge agus ceist na hearcaíochta don Státchóras fite fuaite lena chéile.

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 Rialtais agus ar Oifigí Rialtais sainaithe a dhéanamh ar phoist agus ar réimsí oibre ina dteastaíonn oifigigh le Gaeilge mar chuid den phróiseas pleanála don fhórsa oibre. Táthar ag iarraidh ar Ranna aird 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 sin ina dteastaíonn oifigigh le Gaeilge i scéimeanna teanga faoi Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 amach anseo. Mar chéad chéim sa phróiseas seo, cuirfear na socrúithe nua i bhfeidhm don chomórtas earcaíochta d'oifigigh feidhmiúcháin. Tá sé beartaithe fophainéal de dhaoine atá inniúil sa Ghaeilge a chruthú ar a mbeidh 6% de líon an phainéil iomláin air.

Chomh maith leis na beartais seo, tá comhaontú seirbhíse sínithe ag mo Roinnse leis an Roinn Caiteachais Phoiblí agus Athchóirithe chun oiliúint sa Ghaeilge agus tástáil inniúlachta a sholáthar don Státseirbhís agus d'eagraíochtaí seirbhíse poiblí ar leith. Is comhartha dóchais é go bhfuil, ó mhí na Samhna 2011 i leith, os cionn 300 seirbhíseach poiblí tar éis páirt a ghlacadh i gcúrsaí oiliúna atá eagraithe ag an chomhlacht oiliúna Gaelchultúr, a bhfuil Conradh acu le Foras na Gaeilge chun cúrsaí oiliúna a sholáthar don tseirbhís poiblí.

Ba mhaith liom an deis seo a ghlacadh le tréaslú leis an Uasal Rónán Ó Domhnaill a fuair a shéala ón Uachtarán inné agus atá ceaptha anois mar Choimisinéir Teanga. Ba mhaith liom fosta gach rath a ghuí air agus é ag tabhairt aghaidh ar a chuid cúraimí a chur i gcrích faoi Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003.

Tá athbhreithniú ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 beagnach críochnaithe agus go bhfuil sé i gceist na dréacht-Chinn den Bhille chun an tAcht a leasú a chur faoi bhráid an Rialtais go luath agus foilsíodh é go luath ina dhiaidh sin.

Mar fhocal scoir, is breá liom go bhfuil deis againn aitheantas chuí á thabhairt don ár dteanga féin le linn seachtain mhór na Gaeilge agus seachtain mhór na hÉireann.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit agus roimh an díospóireacht. Is maith an rud é go bhfuilimid ag plé Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge.

Mar gheall ar an straitéis, tá sé an-tábhachtach plé a dhéanamh ar líon na gclann sa tír a

bhaineann úsáid as an nGaeilge a mhéadú. Sin ceann de na haidhmeanna sa straitéis. Is fiú tacaíocht a thabhairt don phobal a úsáideann an Ghaeilge, agus go mbeadh an rogha acu an Ghaeilge a úsáid agus go mbeadh níos mó daoine ag déanamh a ngnó trí Ghaeilge sa tsochaí.

Tá sé mar aidhm freisin an Ghaeilge a bheith mar theanga labhartha agus í á húsáid sa litríocht agus do na comharthaí bóithre.

An cuspóir atá sa straitéis ná méadú ar líon na ndaoine a labhraíonn an Ghaeilge go dtí 250,000 agus méadú 25% ar líon na ndaoine a labhraíonn an Ghaeilge sna Gaeltachtaí. Tá sé mar chuspóir freisin líon na ndaoine a labhraíonn Gaeilge sa Státchóras agus a bhíonn ag plé le raidió, teilifís agus na nuachtáin Ghaeilge a mhéadú.

Bhí mé ag smaoineamh ar na rudaí seo go léir nuair a chonaic mé alt san *Connacht Tribune* a scríobh Bernie Ní Fhlatharta an tseachtain seo caite. Bhí sí ag caint mar gheall ar chearta sibhialta Chonamara. Daichead bhliain ó shin bhí feachtas mór ann mar gheall ar stádas na Gaeilge agus an cultúr. Dúirt sí san alt, nuair a bhíonn cúlú eacnamaíochta, mar a bhí 40 bliain ó shin agus mar atá ann anois, bíonn mothúcháin láidre i measc na ndaoine nuair a cheapann siad go bhfuil cearta daonna faoi ionsaí. Bhí sí ag caint maidir le hionsaí ar an nGaeilge agus ar an nGaeltacht. Nuair a cuireadh an feachtas ar bun, bhí siad ag plé le cearta daonna agus cearta teanga, go háirithe maidir le stáisiúin raidió i nGaeilge. Bunaíodh Raidió na Gaeltachta. Ansin, phléigh siad bunú stáisiúin teilifíse i nGaeilge. Tháinig TG4 ina dhiaidh sin. Thosaigh lucht an fheachtais nuachtán Gaeilge, *Amárach*. Bhí siad ag caint mar gheall ar fhorbairt na Gaeltachta agus poist a chruthú sa Ghaeltacht. Ar ndóigh, tháinig Údarás na Gaeltachta ón bhfeachtas sin. Bhí bord an údaráis ag plé le forbairt thionsclaíoch. Bhí baill thofa ón nGaeltacht ar an mbord. Is mór an trua é nach bhfuil an bord daonlathach a thuilleadh. Níl seans ag muintir na Gaeltachta baill an bhoird a thoghadh. Is mór an trua é nach bhfuil an daonlathas ann a thuilleadh. Mar a dúirt Bernie Ní Fhlatharta san alt a luaigh mé, beidh na toghcháin áitiúla agus na toghcháin do Pharlaimint na hEorpa ar siúl ar fud na tíre i mí Bhealtaine na bliana seo.

Ní aon ionadh é go bhfuil guth láidir ag muintir na Gaeltachta, ní hamháin i gConamara ach sna Gaeltachtaí ar fud na tíre. Leagann Bernie Ní Fhlatharta amach san alt gurb é sin an fáth go bhfuil daoine ag máirseáil. Bhí máirseáil i mBaile Átha Cliath an mhí seo caite ó Chearnóg Parnell go dtí an Dáil. Bhí máirseáil eile i gCois Fharráige chun buíochas a ghabháil leis an iar-Choimisinéir Teanga, Seán Ó Cuirreáin. Ba mhaith liom freisin buíochas a chur in iúl dó. Chuir Bernie Ní Fhlatharta i gcuid d'ádh san alt go raibh “dearg le fearg” mar théama ag na máirseálacha sin. Bhí an teachtaireacht sin soiléir ar na bratacha. Labhair daoine ag na hócáidí sin mar gheall ar chothrom na féinne a fháil agus iad ag iarraidh a gcuid gnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge. Chuir mé fáilte roimh na máirseálacha. Dúirt an tAire Stáit ag an gcomhchoiste go bhfáiltíonn sé roimh dhaoine a bheith ag gearán faoi sheirbhísí trí Ghaeilge a sholáthar. Is dócha go n-aontaíonn sé liom go bhfuil spiorad na ndaoine soiléir nuair a bhíonn siad ag máirseáil agus ag déanamh gearáin.

Ba mhaith liom focal nó dhó a rá mar gheall ar leibhéal suime an phobail sa Ghaeilge. Dúirt an t-iar-Choimisinéir Teanga go bhfuil méadú tagtha ar mhéid na ndaoine a deireann go bhfuil Gaeilge acu. Déanann daoine gearáin nuair a cheapann siad go bhfuil ionsaí á dhéanamh ar an teanga. Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a ghabháil arís leis an gcoimisinéir nua, Rónán Ó Domhnaill, a bhí ar an raidió ar maidin ag caint mar gheall ar an dúshlán atá os a chomhair agus os comhair chuile dhuine. Is dóigh liom go raibh an ceart aige nuair a dúirt sé go bhfuil suim ag daoine sa teanga, cé go bhfuil siad ag gearán agus ag máirseáil. Mar shampla, labhair sé mar gheall ar an méadú atá tagtha ar líon na ndaoine atá ag staidéar sna gaelscoileanna. Dúirt sé go

bhfuil 40,000 scoláire ag freastal orthu anois. Bhí mé sásta a chloisteáil go bhfuil sé dóchasach go bhfuil rudaí ag tarlú agus go mbeidh daoine in ann gearáin a dhéanamh agus smaointe a chur in iúl dá oifig. Ar ndóigh, cheap Uachtarán na hÉireann é mar Choimisinéir Teanga inné.

Labhair Teachtaí agus Seanadóirí leis an Aire Stáit inné mar gheall ar na daoine ó na Stáit Aontaithe a tháinig anseo le déanaí leis an scéim Fulbright. Thug cuid mhaith dóibh cuairt ar an gCeathrú Rua i gContae na Gaillimhe. Chuaigh siad go dtí an Ghaeltacht chun staidéar a dhéanamh ar an nGaeilge agus í á foghlaim acu. Tá sé soiléir go bhfuil suim ag a lán daoine sa Ghaeilge. Mar a dúirt an tAire Stáit inné, ba cheart go mbeadh níos mó suime i measc an phobail. Ba cheart go n-úsáidfeadh cainteoirí sa Ghaeltacht an Ghaeilge. Bheadh díomá ar a lán daoine dá mbeadh daoine óga na Gaeltachta ag caint i mBéarla. Ceapann gach duine go bhfuil an Ghaeilge slán sa Ghaeltacht, ach tá brú uirthi i ngach áit sa lá atá inniu ann. Ba cheart dúinn bheith dearfach faoi sin.

Bhí go leor cruinnithe againn leis an gcoimisinéir agus leis an Aire Stáit le déanaí. Rinne an Joint Committee on Public Oversight and Petitions scrúdú ar cúpla rud atá á ndéanamh ag an Rialtas. Fuairamar roinnt freagraí, ach ní dóigh liom go bhfuair muid na freagraí go léir. Mar aon le go leor comhaltaí eile den choiste, d'iarr mé cén fáth go bhfuil sé ar intinn ag an Aire Stáit agus an Rialtas Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga a chónascadh le hOifig an Ombudsman. Tuigim go mbeidh sé sin leagtha síos sa reachtaíocht a tógfaidh an tAire Stáit isteach. D'fhreastail mé ar dhá chruinniú ag ar labhair an t-iar-Choimisinéir Teanga, Seán Ó Cuirreáin. Dúirt sé ag cruinniú amháin gur cheap sé nach raibh na moltaí a bhí á ndéanamh aige á gcur i gcrích ag an Rialtas. I mo thuairim, beidh na fadhbanna céanna ag an gcoimisinéir nua muna n-athraíonn an Rialtas na polasaithe atá acu. Thuig Seán Ó Cuirreáin gur bheag eile a d'fhéadfadh sé a bhaint amach go pearsanta i dtaca le cearta teanga pobal na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta sa dá bhliain a bhí fágtha aige sa phost. Ar ndóigh, bhí díomá air gur cheap sé go mbeadh sé níos fearr gan an dá bhliain sin a chaitheamh sa phost. Níl sé soiléir i m'aigne cén fáth an bhfuil an Rialtas tar éis cinneadh a dhéanamh an dá oifig a chónascadh. Tá Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga lonnaithe i gContae na Gaillimhe agus tá súil agam go mbeidh sé fós ann ar feadh píosa fada. Ag deireadh na díospóireachta seo, b'fhéidir go mbeidh an tAire Stáit in ann níos mó eolais a thabhairt dúinn faoi Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga. Cé mhéid daoine atá ann? Cén ról a bheidh acu má théann an Rialtas ar aghaidh leis an gcinneadh seo? Ar ndóigh, rinneadh an cinneadh seo i ngan fhios don iar-Choimisinéir Teanga agus i ngan fhios don Ombudsman.

Bhí mé ag caint leis an Aire Stáit mar gheall ar Lá Mór na Gaeilge, a eagraíodh i mBaile Átha Cliath le déanaí. Cuireadh béim san fheachtas ar an ngá atá ann Státseirbhísigh le Gaeilge a bheith ar fáil. Dúirt cailín amháin ar an raidió, ar an teilifís agus sna nuachtáin gur sheol sí e-mail chuig an HSE i nGaeilge, ach fuair sí freagra i mBéarla. Tá an tAire Stáit ar an eolas i dtaobh na fadhbanna seo. Tá sé ráite aige go mbeidh sé in ann níos mó státseirbhísigh le Gaeilge a fháil do na Ranna éagsúla. I dtuarascáil an choimisinéara, rinne sé trácht ar dhaoine a raibh fadhbanna acu, ar nós daoine i nDún na nGall a raibh fadhbanna acu le gardaí, daoine i nGaillimh a raibh fadhbanna leis an gcomhairle contae agus daoine eile a raibh fadhbanna acu le comhairlí contae, go háirithe i gCill Dara. Tá liosta agam anseo, ach ní léifidh mé amach an liosta ar fad. Dúirt an tAire Stáit go mb'fhéidir go mbeidh sé in ann níos mó daoine le Gaeilge a fháil agus nach mbeidh an costas rómhór má tá daoine nua ag teacht isteach sa seirbhís phoiblí. Caithfidh go mbeidh muid in ann daoine a fháil le gnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge do dhaoine ón Ghaeltacht nó do dhaoine a bhfuil an ceart acu rogha a dhéanamh gnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge.

Tá an t-am istigh, ach is breá an rud é go bhfuil seans againn cúpla rud a rá faoin straitéis. Tá coimisinéir nua, Rónán Ó Domhnaill, in áit Sheáin Uí Chuirreáin. Chuala mé an coimisinéir

nua ar an raidió ar maidin agus is breá liom an méid a dúirt sé. Tá súil agam go mbeidh seirbhísí ar fáil agus go mbeidh an coimisinéir in ann níos mó a dhéanamh do dhaoine ar mhaith leo Gaeilge a úsáid.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Ar dtús báire, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil as an deis labhairt ar an gceist thábhachtach seo. Gach uile bhliain, impím ar an Rialtas imeachtaí a eagrú mar chuid de Sheachtain na Gaeilge nó mar chuid de choicís na Gaeilge mar atá ann anois. Arís i mbliana, rinne mé an t-éileamh céanna agus dúradh liom gur inniu an lá dó sin. Is ceart agus cóir go mbeadh an lá seo againn.

Ach, ní chóir go mbeadh orainn a bheith ag brath ar lá amháin sa bhliain le plé agus caint a bheith againn ar ní hamháin straitéis na Gaeilge ach ar gach uile ghné den saol trí Ghaeilge. Sin an moladh a rinne mise. Ní faoin Aire Stáit a rinne mé an moladh seo ar dtús. Táim ag déanamh an mholta seo le breis agus deich mbliana anseo sa Teach, moladh go ndéanfaimis iarracht a léiriú don domhan gur féidir linn ár ngnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge ar ghach uile réimse den saol. Ba mhaith liom go mbeadh gach uile choiste ar an lá sin ag déileáil le gnéithe den Ghaeilge dó den Ghaeltacht.

Ní gá go mbeadh an díospóireacht go huile agus go hiomlán trí Ghaeilge, ach an fáth go dteastaíonn lá mar seo uainn ná, in ainneoin go bhfuil breis agus 1.7 milliún duine a úsáideann an Ghaeilge go laethúil, an chuid is mó acu sa chóras oideachais, tá tuairim ann go n-úsáideann daoine Gaeilge ar scoil, ach nach féidir gnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge leis an Stát agus nach bhfuil ról nua-aimseartha ag an Ghaeilge. Measaim gur féidir liomsa agus le daoine eile sa Teach seo i bhfad Éireann níos mó a dhéanamh chun a léiriú don domhan gur féidir linn ár ngnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge.

Go minic, cuirtear constaicí romhainn agus iarracht á dhéanamh againn an Ghaeilge a labhairt agus a chur chun cinn. Don phobal i gcoitinne, ceann de na constaicí is mó atá rompu ná nach féidir leo a ngnó leis an státchóras a dhéanamh go héasca, agus tiocfaidh mé ar ais chuige sin ar ball. Seachas sin, go minic ní féidir leo a ngnó lena gcairde a dhéanamh go héasca toisc go bhfuil leibhéil dhifriúla Gaeilge ann, ach ní cóir go gcuirfeadh sin as dóibh. Ba chóir go mbeidís bródúil go bhfuil siad in ann Gaeilge a úsáid agus go mbeadh meas ag a gcairde orthu go bhfuil siad in ann Gaeilge a úsáid ina measc. Sin an fáth gur bunaíodh Seachtain na Gaeilge - chun spreagadh a thabhairt don phobal an méid Gaeilge, beag nó mór, atá acu a húsáid le linn na seachtaine sin.

Diaidh ar ndiaidh, tá ag éirí le Seachtain na Gaeilge. Cloisimis sin ar an raidió agus buíochas dóibh siúd atá taobh thiar de Sheachtain na Gaeilge. Is iad siúd atá gníomhach agus fuinniúil maidir leis an teanga sa tréimhse sin. Bhí m'ínion agus a scoil, Gaelscoil Inse Chór, agus an Model School in Inchicore, gafa le Rith 2014 ar an Luan agus rith siad ciliméadar amháin. Seo éacht eile atá déanta faoi scáth Chonradh na Gaeilge agus eagrais eile. Téann daoine timpeall na tíre ag rith, ó Bhaile Átha Cliath agus áiteanna eile. Críochnóidh an rith i mBéal Feirste ag an deireadh seachtaine. Is féidir urraíocht a dhéanamh ar gach ciliméadar.

Ardaíonn Rith 2014 airgead chun costais na scéime a íoc, ach an príomh bua atá aige ná go gcothaíonn sí an Ghaeilge agus úsáid na Gaeilge timpeall na tíre i ngach baile. Tá níos mó daoine anois ag díriú isteach ar seo agus feictear dóibh gur féidir ócáidí a chothú timpeall orthu. Bhí breis agus 200 dalta bunscoile ag rith síos Bóthar Cunningham i lár na cathrach - an áit a raibh mise ag tacú le m'ínion - agus ag rith in áiteanna eile timpeall na tíre. Bhí spiorad iontach ann agus spóirt mór ag na gasúir.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: An í an Mhodscoil nó an Gaelscoil atá i gceist ag an Teachta?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Táim ag caint faoin nGaelscoil, ach ba scoil Bhéarla í an dara scoil a bhí ann. Tá scoileanna gafa le seo agus is féidir le scoil ar bith páirt a ghlacadh ann agus tarlaíonn sin timpeall na tíre. I mBaile Fhormaid, ghlac Scoil Naomh Dominic, scoil nach bhfuil an Ghaeilge mar chéad teanga ag na páistí, páirt ann. Tá beocht i measc na múinteoirí Gaeilge ann agus mhol siad do na páistí páirt a ghlacadh sa rith sin. Mar sin, i rith an lae chuaigh siad amach agus rith siad ciliméadar nó dhá chiliméadar den turas mór fada atá ag Rith 2014. Tarlaíonn an rith seo gach dara bhliain agus seo an tríú huair atá sé ar siúl. Is cuid de Sheachtain na Gaeilge é an rith agus cuidíonn sé le múscailt a thabhairt don Ghaeilge agus í a dhéanamh feiceálach. Is maith seo, seachas díriú ar Lá le Pádraig nó ócáid amháin.

Tá fadhbanna againn agus tá constaicí romhainn. San Oireachtas, ceann de na constaicí atá ardaithe agamsa, ó thoghadh mé i 2002, ná nach gcuirtear reachtaíocht as Gaeilge os mo chomhair riamh. Sa 12 bliain atáim anseo, ní raibh ach píosa reachtaíochta amháin nó dhó i nGaeilge - reachtaíocht maidir le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta agus Acht na Gaeilge. Seachas sin, is i mBéarla amháin a gcuirtear reachtaíocht faoinár mbráid, in ainneoin go ndúirt an tAire Coimirce Sóisialaí linn, breis agus dhá bhliain ó shin go mbeadh na meamraim mhíniúcháin curtha ar fáil dúinn as Gaeilge le cuidiú linn, agus go mbeadh an fhocláíocht agus an téarmaíocht atá ag gabháil le reachtaíocht ar fáil as Gaeilge. Níor tharla sé sin ó shin. Chabhródh rud simplí mar théarmaíocht pholaitiúil liomsa go háirithe, ach chabhródh sé freisin le gach Teachta eile atá ag iarraidh na Gaeilge a úsáid. Chabhródh sé liom freisin dá mbeadh meamram as Gaeilge ag tabhairt míniúcháin ar an mBille. Ar a laghad, teastaíonn sin. Ní thabharfadh sin mo chearta iomlán dom mo ghnó a dhéanamh ina iomláine sa Dáil trí Ghaeilge, mar ní bheadh an reachtaíocht ann, ach ar a laghad, ba chéim chun tosaigh a bheadh ann. Ach níor tharla sé fós.

Tá a lán fadhbanna eile ann chomh maith. Nuair a bhí an Coimisinéir Teanga os comhair ceann de choistí an Oireachtais, bhí mise sa chathaoir agus bhí náire orm nuair a theip ar an gcóras aistriúcháin. Ba mhasla é sin don choimisinéir. Ní raibh leath den choiste in ann déileáil leis an ábhar. Ní raibh siad in ann suí isteach mar níl an Ghaeilge chomh maith acu agus atá agamsa. Aithním gur fadhb theicniúil a bhí ansin agus dúradh sin ar an lá. Ach is ait an rud é nár chuireadar córas aistriúcháin isteach ar dtús sna seomraí coiste nuair a tógadh an foirgneamh sin ar dtús. Is léiriú é seo ar an easpa smaoinimh a dhéantar i leith na Gaeilge. Is afterthought atá ann i gcónaí. I ndiaidh na mbearta a thógáil, smaoinítear ar an nGaeilge agus go gcaithfidh siad rud éigin a dhéanamh fúithi. Ní cóir go mbeadh orm ceist a chur ar an Whip gach uile bhliain agus a rá gur fiú rud a dhéanamh i rith Sheachtain na Gaeilge. Ba chóir go mbeadh an Whip ag cur ceiste orainn cad ba chóir a dhéanamh san Oireachtas i gcóir Sheachtain na Gaeilge.

Tá fadhbanna ann. Glacaim leis go gcreideann an Rialtas go bhfuil sé tábhachtach pobal labhartha na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachtaí a chothú. Creidim go bhfuil an tAire sásta cur chuige éigean a dhéanamh. Ach, sa deireadh thiar thall, níl slánú na Gaeilge mar theanga labhartha an Stáit mar thosaíocht ag an Rialtas seo agus ní raibh ag aon Rialtas roimhe seo. Tá sé ráite gur tosaíocht é, ach níl sé soiléir gur sin an scéal ó bunaíodh an Stát, seachas nuair a bhí Aire Gaeilge ann.

Le 30 bliain anuas, ní raibh Aire ann mar just Aire Gaeilge nó mar Aire Gaeltachta leis na hacmhainní chun a chinntiú go dtiocfadh borradh ar an nGaeilge agus ar na Gaeltachtaí. Ba chóir dúinn bogadh sa treo sin. Beidh reshuffle i lár an tsamhraidh, agus b'fhéidir go dtabharfar cead a cinn don Aire Stáit nó duine eile le Gaeilge. Bhí sé maslach go raibh Airí ann roimhe gan Ghaeilge, agus níl Gaeilge ag an Aire, an Teachta Deenihan. Níl an locht air, ach ní ceart go

mbeadh duine i bpost le cinnireacht maidir leis an nGaeilge agus na Gaeltachtaí gan an teanga a bheith aige nó aici, nó ar a laghad iad i mbun iarrachta an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim nó snas a chur ar an chuid atá acu. Fiú i mo chás féin, is féidir snas níos fearr a bheith ar mo chuid Gaeilge. Níl mo chuid gramadací den scoth, ach déanaim iarracht tabhairt faoi anois is arís.

Le déanaí d'fhógair Foras na Gaeilge go raibh ré nua ann maidir leis an nGaeilge agus chur siad maoiniú ar fáil do sé eagrais. Bhí 25 ann roimhe seo. Feicimid an ré nua atá ann. Muna bhfuil breis acmhainní ann ag an Státchóras agus ag na heagrais, beidh dúshlán mór rompu agus beidh dainséar ann i gcónaí. Bíonn dainséar ann i gcónaí nuair a bhíonn eagrais spleách ar an Státchóras agus iad ag braith go huile is go hiomlán ó thaobh maoinithe agus acmhainní ar an Stát. Ba cheart go mbeadh a fhios ag na heagrais atá mar cheannródaithe maidir leis an teanga go bhfuil an dainséar sin ann.

Tá an straitéis leagtha amach. An fhadhb is mó atá agam ná nach bhfuil aon tionchar mór feicthe agam ná acu siúd atá ag treabhadh leo i ngort na Gaeilge go bhfuil aon borradh ann. Tá an straitéis bunaithe ar dhaonáireamh 2002 agus tuairisc ó 2007. Dúradh nach raibh ach idir 15 agus 20 bliain fágtha don teanga mar phríomhtheanga na Gaeltachtaí muna ndéantar gníomh áirithe. Táimid leathbhealach tríd an ré áirithe agus ní fheicim an borradh. Tá sé léirithe ag roinnt saineolaithe, Seosamh Mac Donnchadha ina measc, nach ionann cáipéis agus straitéis. Dúirt sé go bhfuil an straitéis ina cháipéis atá marbh. Tugann an mhéid a dúirt an Dr. John Walsh dúshlán don Aire a léiriú nach bhfuil an ceart aige. Níl an gníomh feicthe againn. Níl fuadar faoin Stát ná an Státchóras, an áit a bhfuil rudaí níos measa ná in aon earnáil eile.

Tá an tAire tar éis a rá go bhfuil sé chun cur chuige a dhéanamh maidir leis an Státchóras. Tá mé ag impí ar an Aire maidir leis an Státchóras. Gan daoine le Gaeilge a earcú, ní fiú tráith-nín an beagán bídeach atá ag tarlú. Ba chóir díriú ar earcaíocht agus béim a chur ar an nGaeilge líofa, mar a ndéanadh sa PSNI nuair a bhí siad ag iarraidh chéatadán na gcaitliceach sa PSNI a mhéadú. Is céim bheag shimplí í, ach dhéanfadh sé difear an-mhór. Tá sé mar cheart ag daoine déileáil leis an Státchóras trí mheán na Gaeilge. Ní cóir go mbeadh deacrachtaí maidir leis seo ag Gaeilgeoir. Is dúshlán é sin dúinn go léir.

Tacaím leo siúd a bhfuil dearg le fearg maidir leis an straitéis agus an chéad choimisinéir teanga. Tá dúshlán mór roimh an gcoimisinéir nua agus tá súil agam go n-éireoidh leis sa phost agus nach dtarlóidh leis mar ar tharla leis an gcéad coimisinéir.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Tá an Teachta Joe Higgins ag roinnt a chuid ama leis an Teachta O'Sullivan.

Deputy Joe Higgins: Nuair a chailltear class áirithe d'ainmhí, d'éan nó de phlanda, mar shampla trí thruailliú na timpeallachta nó gearradh siar na bhforaoiseacha san Amasóin, is cúis díomá é agus is cúis mhór bhróin atá ann. Tá sé tragóideach. Tógann sé milliún bliain de aon species nó aon rud beo chun teacht chun cinn trí éabhlóid. Tríd an chóras caipitleachas, cuirtear deireadh le species áirithe d'ainmhithe nó de phlandaí nó d'éanlaithe atá caillte go síoraí don phláinéad agus don phobal. Is é an scéal céanna maidir le teanga. Tógann sé na mílte bliain chun teanga a fhorbairt agus a dul chun cinn. Tá saol agus stair an phobail fite fuaite i dteanga. Ar fud an domhain tá mionteangacha, mar a ghlaitear orthu, ag fáil bháis. Is cailliúint thragóideach é sin ní hamháin do na pobail gur leo na teangacha éagsúla, ach freisin don phobal domhanda i gcoitinne. Níl aon difríocht i gcás an méid atá ar siúl anois ó thaobh na Gaeilge de. Bhí foláireamh láidir sa scrúdú teangeolaíoch ar úsáid na Gaeilge, a fhoilsíodh sa bhliain 2007, maidir le cad a bheidh i gceist muna n-athraítear cúrsaí. Is scread dainséar maidir le todhchaí

na Gaeilge atá sa scrúdú sin. Is fiú cuimhneamh go ndeireann an scrúdú gan athrú ar phatrún úsáide na teanga, ní bheidh an Ghaeilge mar phríomhtheanga phobail fiú amháin i gceartlár na nGaeltachtaí. Bheadh sé sin tubaisteach don teanga mar chuid thábhachtach de phobal na tíre seo san am atá le teacht. Más rud é nach mbeidh an Ghaeilge mar phríomhtheanga na Gaeltachtaí, ní bheidh ann ach tús deiridh na teanga.

I mo thuairim, ní bheidh an Ghaeilge riamh mar phríomhtheanga na tíre seo. Tháinig sé sin ón stair agus tagann sé anois, níos láidre fós, ó phróisís gheilleagair agus eacnamaíochta, srl. An mbeidh an Ghaeilge mar theanga thábhachtach i saol na sochaí seo san am atá le teacht? An mbeidh sí le cloisteáil sna Gaeltachtaí? An mbeidh an dátheangachas tábhachtach ar fud na tíre sa todhchaí? An mbeidh daoine a úsáideann an Béarla don chuid is mó ina ngnáthshaoilta ach a bhfuil an Ghaeilge ar eolas acu agus atá in ann an Ghaeilge a labhairt go laethúil, go seachtainiúil nó go minic ar aon nós? Is í sin an cheist. Tá dianbhrú ar an nGaeilge mar theanga i láthair na huair. Dá bhrí sin, caithfidimid smaoiniamh inniu ar cad ba cheart do Rialtas na tíre a dhéanamh chun a chinntiú gur féidir leis an teanga fanacht beo. Ba cheart go mbeadh sé mar sprioc againn ní hamháin go mbeidh an Ghaeilge fós beo i gceann 100 bliain, ach freisin go mbeidh sí fós mar chuid thábhachtach de shaol an phobail sa tír seo

Nuair atá plé á dhéanamh againn ar an straitéis 20 bliain, ba cheart tosú le scrúdú a dhéanamh ar na mothúcháin atá ag muintir na Gaeltachta agus lucht labhartha na Gaeltachta ar fud na tíre agus iad ag iarraidh a saoil laethúla a mhaireachtáil, go mórmhór sa Ghaeltacht, le Gaeilge mar ghnáth-theanga. Ar an Domhnach, 23 Feabhra, seo caite, shiúil grúpa as Gaeltacht Chonamara ón Spidéal go dtí ceanncheathrú Roinn na Gaeltachta sa cheantar chun litir sínithe ag Donncha Ó hÉallaithe thar ceann an phobail a chur isteach chuig Aire na Gaeltachta. Tá éilimh thábhachtacha déanta sa litir sin, ina measc “go gcuirfí polasaí soiléir i bhfeidhm tríd an státchóras a chinnteoidh, go mbeifear in ann seirbhísí trí mheán na Gaeilge a sholáthar do phobal labhartha na Gaeilge sa nGaeltacht ‘gan cheist gan choinníoll’, taobh istigh de dhá bhliain”. An bhfuil an Rialtas chun é sin a chur i gcrích? Is náireach an rud é nach mbíonn éinne sa Státseirbhís - i Ranna Rialtais áirithe - ar fáil chun labhairt le daoine ón nGaeltacht nó aon áit eile sa tír go dteastaíonn uathu a gcuid gnó a dhéanamh inár dteanga náisiúnta. Caithfear an ceart bunúsach seo a comhlíonadh. Tá súil agam go dtabharfaidh an Rialtas aird mhór ar na héilimh thábhachtacha eile atá leagtha amach sa litir a luaigh mé agus go ndéanfaidh siad gníomh dá réir.

Ba mhaith liom focal nó dhó a rá mar gheall ar pholasaithe eacnamaíochta an Rialtais, go mórmhór an déine agus na ciorruithe, sula gcríochnóidh mé. Tá na polasaithe seo ag déanamh scriosta ar phobal na Gaeltachta. Is tubaiste é go bhfuil daoine óga ag imeacht - tá siad caite amach as an tír - ós rud é nach bhfuil poist nó faic acu. Caithfear an polasaí sin a athrú go mear. Tá cúis dóchais againn. Tá leanaí ar fud na tíre ag foghlaim na Gaeilge sna gaelscoileanna, srl. Tá orainn brú a chur ar an Rialtas ní hamháin na cearta teanga atá luaite agam a chomhlíonadh, ach freisin polasaithe eacnamaíochta a athrú agus deireadh a chur leis an déine. Ba cheart go mbeadh daoine óga in ann fanacht sa bhaile sna Gaeltachtaí. Muna bhfuil pobal againn, ní bheidh teanga againn.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: Caithfidh mé a admháil - is dócha go mbeidh sé soiléir i gceann tamaill - nach bhfuil mo chuid Gaeilge chomh líofa agus chomh flúirseach leis an nGaeilge atá ag na Teachtaí eile a labhair go dtí seo. Tá grá agam don teanga. Déanaim agus déanfaidh mé mo dhícheall an Ghaeilge a labhairt. Tá sé oiriúnach agus tábhachtach go bhfuil an díospóireacht seo ar siúl inniu, i rith Seachtain na Gaeilge agus go háirithe roimh cheiliúradh Lá Fhéile Pádraig. Is cinnte gur rud dearfach é go bhfuil Seachtain na Gaeilge againn. Is mór

an trua é nach bhfuil ach lá Gaeilge amháin - nó maidin amháin, b'fhéidir - againn sa Teach seo. Is dóigh liom go mbeadh sé i bhfad níos fearr dá mbeimid in ann an Ghaeilge agus an Béarla a úsáid i rith na bliana sa Dáil. Ceapaim gurb é sin an tslí is fearr atá romhainn iarracht a dhéanamh chun a bheith dátheangach. Nuair a bhíos in dhá scoil an tseachtain seo caite - ní gaelscoileanna a bhí iontu - bhí sé soiléir dom go raibh iarrachtaí á ndéanamh ag na daltaí scoile an Ghaeilge a labhairt ag am lóin nó am sosa. This week I visited schools which were not Gaelscoileanna but it is obvious that schools are placing a lot of emphasis on making an effort to speak Irish. Beidh mé ag caint as Béarla agus as Gaeilge i rith an cúpla nóiméad atá fágtha agam.

It is a terrible indictment of our education system that having been in primary school and second-level school for 14 years, some young Irish people leave school unable to carry on a conversation in Irish. There is something wrong with that system if this is the result and it needs to be dealt with. I refer to a presentation in the AV room yesterday about a programme involving Ireland and universities in America. American students come to Ireland and following a total immersion programme in Irish they are able to carry on a conversation at a much better standard than would be the case for some Irish school students. The most glaring failure of successive Governments from the foundation of the State has been the neglect of our language. We have failed to make inroads into making Irish the spoken language of choice for Irish people. Ceapaim go bhfuil gach páirtí polaitíochta ciontach maidir leis an teanga. I think Irish will survive but it will not be as a result of Government action. There is no doubting the Minister of State's commitment but Irish will survive if the people wish it. Time does not allow me to speak about the policies since the foundation of the State but a common denominator is that they have all been ineffective.

I ask where is the will to address this issue. Article 8.1 of the Constitution states:

The Irish language as the national language is the first official language.

We pay mere lip-service to that article. Article 8.3 states:

Provision may, however, be made by law for the exclusive use of either of the said languages for any one or more official purposes, either throughout the State or in any part thereof.

While we pay lip-service to the first language, the second language has been used to the detriment of Irish as a spoken language. There is a need for native speakers, including the people in the Chamber, to be more accommodating and receptive of those for whom Irish is not their first language but who are making great efforts to speak it.

We must accept that while the Gaeltacht areas have a valuable role to play in safeguarding and promoting the language, so too do other areas.

Bhí an t-ádh liom nuair a bhí mé ar scoil, an bhunscoil agus an mheánscoil agus go háirithe an mheánscoil, Cnoc Carmel, i Sráid Hallaí an Rí, go raibh múinteoirí sármhaith agam. Bhí grá acu don Ghaeilge, bhí suim acu sa Ghaeilge, ach go háirithe, bhí suim acu an grá sin a spreagadh ionainn. D'éirigh leo an chuid is mó den am. Bhí a fhios againn gur teanga bheo í an Ghaeilge agus gur teanga í le labhairt. An chéad rud gur cóir a dhéanamh anois ná féachaint ar an tslí ina bhfuil Gaeilge á múineadh ag múinteoirí.

We also have to consider the entry requirements for the teacher training colleges. A C3 in

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honours Irish in the leaving certificate is a good achievement, but it does not indicate an interest in or an ability to promote Irish. I know people who got an A1 in honours Irish because they were able to approach the examination in a certain way, but they cannot conduct a conversation in the language. The oral examination now accounts for 40% of the total marks for the Irish examination, but not all schools will take that up because of the extra workload on teachers. It is another issue that needs to be examined. We must ensure that people going into the training colleges come out with a love of Irish, because they are the first port of call for most children when it comes to learning Irish.

In the past, students in the training colleges received a grant to spend a few weeks in the Gaeltacht. That total immersion approach had a very positive impact. In the case of teachers who are not successful in getting into the training colleges here and instead go to the United Kingdom to obtain a teaching qualification, I understand the Irish examination they have to take in order to be fully qualified to teach at primary level in this country is of a higher standard in terms of the spoken language. That is something the Department should examine.

Ní féidir liom a thuiscint cén fáth, ó thús an Stáit agus i rith na mblianta nach raibh gach scoil ina Gaelscoil, fiú amháin go dtí rang a haon nó a dó. Nuair a théann leanaí chuig Gaelscoil ag ceithre nó cúig bliana d'aois, bíonn Gaeilge ag cuid acu, ach ní bhíonn Gaeilge ag an gcuid eile. Ach tar éis bliana nó dhó, tá siad ábalta labhairt as Gaeilge. Tá leanaí cosúil le spúinse. Is dócha go mbeidís ábalta teanga ar bith a fhoghlaim, ar nós Fraincis, Spáinnis nó Gearmáinis. The child whose first language is Irish will still speak English very well, but the child whose first language is English will not have the same standard of Irish as the former. Tá rud éigin mícheart there.

The Fine Gael Party's election manifesto included an undertaking to remove Irish as a core subject for the leaving certificate. We saw the reception that proposal met, and I was glad to see it. Chun críochnú, tá ár dteanga tábhachtach, cosúil lenár gcultúr agus ár n-oidhreacht. Gan dabht, tá sí i mbaol. Mar sin, caithfidh muid greim a bhreith ar an fhadhb i dtreo agus go mbeidh an Ghaeilge á labhairt ag daoine agus na generations atá ag teacht. Is féidir linn rud éigin a dhéanamh, cosúil leis an rud a rinne Ceanada, an Bheilg agus an Bhreatain Bheag, ionas go mbeidh muid go léir dátheangach.

Deputy Joe O'Reilly: Ar dtús báire, ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil teanga álainn againn sa tír seo. Tá oidhreacht agus cultúr faoi leith againn agus ba chóir dúinn iad a cheiliúradh agus a choimeád. Tá dualgas ar gach uile dhuine, go háirithe daoine sa Teach seo, an-iarracht a dhéanamh an Ghaeilge a choimeád beo agus an teanga a úsáid. Mar sin, déanfaidh mise iarracht an chuid is mó de mo ráiteas a thabhairt as Gaeilge, cé nach bhfuil mé chomh líofa agus ba chóir go mbeinn, ach tá sé iontach tábhachtach go ndéanfaidh gach uile dhuine sa Teach iarracht a dhéanamh an Ghaeilge a labhairt anseo.

An chéad aidhm atá ag an straitéis 20 bliain ná an líon daoine a úsáideann an Ghaeilge gach lá a mhéadú. Faoi láthair, tá 83,000 duine a labhraíonn Gaeilge go rialta gach lá. Táimid ag iarraidh é sin a mhéadú go 250,000 agus go mbeadh eolas ar an teanga ag thart faoi 2 milliún duine. An dara haidhm atá ag an straitéis ná tacaíocht a thabhairt don Gaeltacht. An tríú haidhm ná go mbeadh seans ag daoine a ngnó a dhéanamh go hoifigiúil trí Ghaeilge, le Ranna Stáit agus a leithéid. An cheathrú haidhm ná go mbeadh Gaeilge le feiceáil i bhfógraí agus a leithéid thart timpeall na tíre.

Foilsíodh an straitéis tar éis taighde cuimsitheach agus tugadh tacaíocht ó gach páirtí sa

Teach di. Tá an straitéis dhúshlánach ach ag an am seo tá níos mó measa ar an teanga ná mar a bhí. Thart ar 30 bliain ó shin, bhí cineál náire ar dhaoine a n-oidhreacht a cheiliúradh nó Gaeilge a labhairt. Cheapamar nach raibh sé nua-aoiseach go leor. Ach tá athrú ar seo anois agus tá daoine sásta Gaeilge a labhairt. Táimid níos bródúla anois as ár dteanga agus ár gcultúr. Tá sin cabhrach agus tabharfaidh sé deis níos fearr don Rialtas an jab seo maidir leis an straitéis a dhéanamh.

Sa daonáireamh, dúirt beagnach 2 milliún duine go bhfuil Gaeilge acu. Mar sin, tá daoine ag maíomh anois go bhfuil siad ábalta Gaeilge a labhairt. Is cabhair mhór í seo. Tá an Rialtas lán dáiríre faoin straitéis agus faoi í a chur i bhfeidhm agus tá €500,000 curtha ar fáil sa bhuiséad an bhliain seo don straitéis. Cuireann Acht na Gaeltachta 2012 an próiseas pleanála teanga ar bun. Anois, tá béim agus meas ar na bailte Gaelacha taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Sa chomhthéacs seo, tréaslaím le Foras na Gaeilge maidir leis an obair fhiúntach atá ar siúl aige. Tréaslaím freisin leis an bpríomhfheidhmeannach ansin, Éamonn Ó hArgáin agus a fhoireann.

Tá an Roinn ag iarraidh chabhrach a thabhairt do theallaigh lán-Ghaelacha. Beidh Ranna Stáit ag scrúdú na riachtanas atá ann maidir le poist sa Stát Sheirbhís agus tá sé i gceist, sa chéad chomórtas eile d'oifigigh fheidhmeannacha, 6% de na folúntais a chur ar fáil do dhaoine atá ábalta gnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge. Cuirfidh sé sin feabhas ar an scéal. Chomh maith le seo, tá athbhreithniú ar siúl ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla.

Cé go bhfuil géarchéim airgeadais sa tír, táimid ag déanamh infheistíochta sa teanga, go háirithe sa Ghaeltacht, ach freisin i ngnéithe oidhreacht agus cultúrtha an teanga. Táimid ag tabhairt tacaíochta do TG4, do Raidió na Gaeltachta agus d'Údarás na Gaeltachta mar ba chóir go ndéanfaimis, in ainneoin go bhfuil géarchéim airgid sa tír. Táimid ag cabhrú go praiticiúil le sár obair Chomhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann agus molaim go láidir an obair a dhéanann an comhaltas agus an t-ard stiúrthóir ansin, an Seanadóir Labhrás Ó Murchú, ar son na hoidhreacht, na teanga agus an cheoil.

12 o'clock

Caitheann 24,000 mac léinn tréimhse sa Ghaeltacht gach bliain. Tréaslaím leis an Aire Stáit as go raibh sé in ann deontas na mná tí a choimeád. Cé go bhfuil géarchéim ann, choimeád an tAire Stáit an deontas ag an leibhéal céanna agus a bhí sé agus is cabhair mhór í sin. Táim lán sásta go bhfuil sé ag cosaint an mhéid airgid a fhaigheann na mná tí.

Tá na scoileanna lán-Ghaelacha tábhachtach agus tá an Rialtas ag cabhrú leo. Beidh ceithre scoil lán-Ghaelach i measc na 20 bunscoil a chruthófar i mbliana. Freisin, beidh trí scoil lán-Ghaelach i measc na 17 meánscoil a thógfáir i mbliana.

Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 27A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy John O'Mahony — the need for community welfare services in the east Mayo area; (2) Deputy Peadar Tóibín — the need to provide a housing solution for people forced into homelessness; (3) Deputies Catherine Murphy and Marcella Corcoran Kennedy — the

provision of rehabilitation consultants for neurological disorders here; (4) Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin — the continuation of HSE funding for Rape Crisis Network Ireland; (5) Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick — the development of the coastal walkway to prevent flooding in Dundalk and Blackrock, County Louth; (6) Deputy Dara Calleary — the need for reform of the inquest process; (7) Deputy Dessie Ellis — the need to include representation for the deferred members of the Irish aviation superannuation scheme on the expert panel; (8) Deputy Clare Daly — the details of the contract with a company regarding on-street parking; (9) Deputy Mick Wallace — the report of the Garda Inspectorate; (10) Deputy Brendan Smith — the discussions with British transport Ministers and at the North–South Ministerial Council on the serious difficulties facing the Irish haulage industry; and (11) Deputy Joe Higgins — concern over the injunction preventing tomorrow’s planned industrial action by airport workers to defend pension rights.

The matters raised by Deputy Dara Calleary, Deputies Catherine Murphy and Marcella Corcoran Kennedy, Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, and Deputy John O’Mahony have been selected for discussion.

Leaders’ Questions

Deputy Dara Calleary: Inné foilsíodh tuairisc Cigireacht an Gharda Síochána faoin gconspóid pointí pionóis. Tá sé soiléir ón dtuarascáil sin go raibh fadhbanna móra ann sa chóras pointí pionóis.

Yesterday the report from the independent Garda Inspectorate clarified a number of matters concerning the penalty points issue. It is clear from the report that there is no evidence of corruption, which we all welcome, but there is evidence of severe sloppiness, to say the least. The one point that is clear is that without the persistence of whistleblowers, this issue would not have been exposed and the work that is under way today would not be happening. The overhaul of the current system is happening as a direct result of their input and work. This is why the refusal of the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Alan Shatter, to acknowledge their role is beyond belief. Chief Inspector Olson acknowledged the role of Sergeant Maurice McCabe, in particular. He stated he found the interview with Garda McCabe informative and that he found him credible. Senior gardaí who were interviewed have said the same. Despite this, the Minister for Justice and Equality is still stubbornly and defiantly refusing point blank to apologise to Sergeant McCabe for the comments he made in this House about his co-operation.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: He does not do sorry.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Minister abused the privileges of this House to seek to sully and destroy the reputation of a serving garda, but I suppose we should not be surprised because he also abused the privileges of his Ministry to try to damage the reputation of a Member of this House.

The Taoiseach stated yesterday, “In so far as apologies are concerned, I have already said that the Minister for Justice and Equality had one interpretation while Sergeant McCabe had a different interpretation.” This is an unbelievably weak defence. To say the least, it is lily-livered that the Minister clearly abused the privilege of this House to try to destroy the reputation of Sergeant McCabe, a reputation that has come through in yesterday’s report.

Does the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, believe the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Alan Shatter, should apologise to Sergeant McCabe? Is it credible that a Government would allow a Minister to abuse the privileges of his office to sully the good name of a citizen of the State?

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): Níl Gaeilge sách maith agam chun ceisteanna a fhreagairt as Gaeilge. Mar sin, tá orm caint as Béarla. I would not like to mislead the House by answering the questions inaccurately in any way.

I share Deputy Calleary's welcoming of the report. As he indicated, it reveals very severe weaknesses in the process that existed. This has been the subject of reports over many years. The Government's intention has always been to restore confidence in the system. Immediately on receipt of the report, the Minister for Justice and Equality presented it to the Government. We have decided to implement its 37 recommendations. This afternoon, the joint implementation group will sit for the first time.

It is not the case that the Minister for Justice and Equality refused to acknowledge the role played by whistleblowers. He openly acknowledged, as I do, that the whistleblowers and their persistence have been crucial in getting to this point. We are now in a position to fix a system that has been clearly not working for many years. I acknowledge the role of whistleblowers, as has the Minister for Justice and Equality. Moreover, the Government is determined to ensure whistleblowers receive better protection. We are introducing legislation to do that. Specifically, we are introducing an amendment to ensure Garda whistleblowers will no longer have to go through the confidential recipient.

I do not want to politicise this. There is a danger, in circumstances in which the Dáil is rightly taking more interest in holding public officials to account, of seeking to politicise every objective for short-term political purposes. We need a Legislature that is able to conduct business in the way it should be done, that is, objectively. Members will have seen that the Minister for Justice and Equality did absolutely the right thing in every case as soon as he heard the allegations.

Deputy Mick Wallace: He absolutely did not.

Deputy Richard Bruton: He has delivered a report to the Dáil and acted on it, and we are fixing a system that clearly has been malfunctioning over a long period.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Will he say "Sorry"?

Deputy Dara Calleary: We agree absolutely agree that there should be a Legislature that can conduct business in a way that is seen to be objective. We do not want one in which a Minister can use his privileges to abuse the reputation of a servant of the State. That is what has happened here and what we want an apology for. We are not politicising this. The Minister for Justice and Equality clearly abused the privileges of his office to try to sully the reputation of the man whose intervention has led to all the work the Minister Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation has just laid out. Why does he not say "Sorry"? Is it not in his dictionary? He has committed a serious wrong, and it has been proven by the Garda Inspectorate that the evidence of Garda McCabe is credible.

The Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, sees himself as a champion of trying to change the culture in the health service and encouraging staff to say sorry. Why is the Taoiseach not forc-

ing a Minister who abuses his office in this House and on the national airwaves to apologise? The army of spin doctors around the Taoiseach is portraying him as a mighty mouse this week because of Mr. Frank Flannery's stepping aside, but it seems he is a church mouse in the case of the Minister for Justice and Equality. Surely the latter owes an apology to Sergeant McCabe for trying to destroy his reputation using the privilege of this House.

Deputy Richard Bruton: It is simply not true that the Minister for Justice and Equality committed any serious wrong; that is not the case. He acted absolutely correctly in respect of the handling of complaints that came this way. Deputy Calleary's party had an opportunity last week to debate this. We spent all day debating precisely this issue. The Minister for Justice and Equality set out his position and allowed questions and answers. He has been fully accountable. What he has been seeking to achieve, and what we are now on our way to achieving, is a restoration of confidence in this system. The Minister has acknowledged very openly that we would not be at this point were it not for whistleblowers.

Deputy Dara Calleary: He tried to destroy them

Deputy Richard Bruton: He has acknowledged that value.

Deputy Finian McGrath: He tried to take them out.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The only issue on which the Deputy's party in my belief for largely political reasons seeks to focus is the question as to whether-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: He tried to destroy them in this House.

Deputy Richard Bruton: No, that is not the case. The only issue, on which the Deputy's party seeks to focus, was a discussion as to whether there was co-operation between the O'Mahoney investigation and the whistleblowers. We know as a matter of fact that there was no such co-operation; there was not any interaction between the two bodies.

Deputy Dara Calleary: That is considerably disputed.

Deputy Richard Bruton: As the Taoiseach said yesterday, different opinions can be formed as to what went wrong in that case. Clearly it did not happen on either side the way one would want such an investigation to be conducted. As far as the Minister for Justice and Equality is concerned-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: So the Minister, Deputy Bruton, is also afraid of the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Shatter.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Fianna Fáil needs to look to its own record given that much of this happened under its watch. There were reports going back over many years which called for the codification of the process of cancellation of points-----

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Richard Bruton: ----- and Fianna Fáil did not act on those recommendations. Fianna Fáil Members need to acknowledge that we are proceeding immediately to fix this system

that has been broken for well-nigh ten years. They cannot pretend they are not party to that failure.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: What about the report of Mr. Connolly saying, “Shatter will destroy you”?

Deputy Mick Wallace: At every turn he has failed to do the right thing.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: An aontaíonn an tAire nach mbeadh an tAire Dlí agus Cirt agus Comhionannais, nó fiú Coimisinéir an Gharda Síochána, sa tsáinn ina bhfuil siad inniu más rud é gur rinne siad gníomhartha tar éis tuairisc an Ard-Reachtair Cuntas agus Ciste a fhoilsiú i mí Mheán Fómhair seo caite? Tá a fhios againn go raibh duine as cúigear ag éalú as pointí pionóis agus nach raibh toghairm seirbheáilte ar dhaoine. I roinnt ceantair, bhí ráta cealaithe breis is 50% ann i gcomparáid le ceantair eile. An aontaíonn an tAire nach raibh aon mhilleán ar Sergeant Maurice McCabe agus an t-iar Gharda John Wilson i gcomhthéacs na tuairisce sin ó Mheán Fómhair 2012, go raibh an ceart acu an cheist seo a ardú ón tús, agus ba chóir go mbeadh leithscéal gafa ag an Aire ag an am agus ag an gCoimisinéir don bheirt? Níor tharla sin, agus cuireadh leis an ionsaí ar charachtair na beirte ó shin – an tAire agus an Coimisinéir a rinne an t-ionsaí.

Tá cuntas cáinteach eile os ár gcomhair ó Chigireacht an Gharda Síochána. Ní bheadh na sonraí sa tuairisc sin againn gan an bheirt agus an seasamh cróga a ghlac siad.

An bhfuil sé chomh deacair sin don Aire, an Teachta Shatter, seasamh suas agus a rá go bhfuil brón air agus glacadh leis go raibh sé mícheart nuair a rinne sé ionsaí ar an mbeirt seo, agus go raibh an ceart ag an mbeirt? Más rud é nach bhfuil sé fearúil go leor é sin a rá, an bhfuil sé in am don Aire éirí as a phost?

Ar iarr an tAire, an Teachta Bruton, ar an Aire, an Teachta Shatter, leithscéal a ghabháil don bheirt sin, a bhí cróga, don Oireachtas agus do gach duine eile atá thíos le seo le breis is bliain ón uair a chuireadh an chéad mhórtuairisc os ár gcomhair a léirigh an chaimiléireacht agus an droch-chleachtadh maidir leis na pointí pionóis?

Deputy Richard Bruton: As I have already acknowledged, the whistleblowers have had a vital role in getting us to this point. As the Deputy said, the report exposes many very serious failings. With so-called “send-backs”, 65% were not returned. As the Deputy has acknowledged, there was huge variation in the treatment in different districts with some refusing every application for cancellation and others accepting every application for cancellation. Some 52% of summonses went unserved. In the case of 60% of the convictions, no driving licence number was recorded after the cases and 30% of fines went unpaid. Clearly this has exposed very serious failings in this system.

The role of the inspectorate is not to look at whether any of these decisions were made corruptly, but to expose a system that was riddled with shortcomings and that is what it has done. It has made 37 recommendations and the Government yesterday made a decision to implement all of them. As of today we are starting on the process of the implementation.

As I said to Deputy Calleary, I do not accept that the Minister for Justice and Equality has failed in any respect. Clearly when allegations were brought to his attention, as they have been, he has acted properly in all cases. We have seen, as a consequence of his action, this inspection report. The Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission is investigating whether any activity

that occurred under the fixed-notice cancellation has issues in respect of the responsibility of individual gardaí, and that is being dealt with. As I said to Deputy Calleary, the Minister for Justice and Equality has acted properly in this respect.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Has he acted honourably?

Deputy Richard Bruton: There is an attempt to seek to politicise this by going back repeatedly to this issue, which the Minister dealt with at great length, as to whether there was co-operation between the O'Mahoney investigation and the whistleblowers. We know as a point of fact that there was not engagement between them. That is very clear and it has been acknowledged that different people have different interpretations as to why that happened.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Ní thuigim cén fáth nach féidir leis an Aire glacadh leis gur chóir don Aire Dlí agus Cirt agus Comhionannais, nó fiú Coimisinéir an Gharda Síochána leithscéal a ghabháil don bheirt sin a bhí cróga. Ní leor glacadh leis go raibh an ceart acu an cheist a ardú. Cad é tuairim an Aire faoin ráiteas a rinne Coimisinéir an Gharda Síochána aréir? An leor é? Níl mórán daoine fágtha, seachas an tAire Shatter agus an Coimisinéir, a chreideann go raibh gníomhartha an Sergeant Maurice McCabe agus an t-iar Gharda John Wilson gránna. An ndéanfaidh an tAire Bruton iallach a chur ar an gCoimisinéir, Martin Callinan, leithscéal a ghabháil don bheirt, don Dáil agus don phobal i gcoitinne, ní hamháin as an masla a thug siad don bheirt ach as an gceannasaíocht ar an gcóras pointí pionóis ó bunaíodh é, agus an chaimiléireacht agus an droch-chleachtas atá léirithe sa tuairisc is déanaí? Muna bhfuil an Coimisinéir sásta leithscéal a ghabháil agus a phort a athrú, an bhfuil an tAire sásta impí air éirí as a phost?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I understand the Commissioner yesterday clarified the context in which he used the word “disgusting” in respect of the incidents that occurred. I will not repeat his clarification. He made that clarification over the context in which he made that remark.

On the question as to whether the Commissioner has failed, it is very clear the Commissioner introduced new measures and procedures as a result of the earlier assessments of this process. The latest report, the report of the inspectorate, has clearly stated that the procedures need further improvement and has set out a different approach, including, for example, a central audit arrangement so that there would not be multiple sources of potential audit occurring and having a single centre authorising the decisions to reduce penalty points.

Clearly the new recommendations go far beyond what was introduced in the past, but that was what this inspectorate was asked to do. It was asked by the Minister for Justice and Equality to look at the various reports that had been assembled, the O'Mahoney report, the PSU report and the past reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General and make recommendations for a robust system in which the public can have confidence in the future. That is what they have done. I freely acknowledge they go well beyond what the gardaí had done before, but that is why we asked them to do it and it cannot be seen as a reflection that we now have an agenda that will fix this which is being implemented. We cannot use it as a reflection on the past but, of course, we have to learn from the shortcomings. However, the actions the Commissioner took, which were in good faith, were not sufficient and now we are going a good deal further.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: His actions were in good faith?

Deputy Seamus Healy: Tá a fhios againn go léir go bhfuil 121,000 morgáiste in iarmharach. Tá 60,000 dóibh sin in iarmharach ar feadh bliain agus tá 33,500 in iarmharach ar feadh níos mó ná dhá bhliain. Tá 30,000 clann ar a laghad i mbaol a bheith curtha amach ach as a

dtithe cónaithe. Tá inní orm gur tugadh 1,500 cás nua chun tithe teaghlaigh a athsheilbhiú san cheathrú dheireanach de 2013 de réir ráiteas ó FLAC, an t-ionad chúnaimh dlíthiúil. Dar le *The Irish Times*, 14 Eanáir 2014, “banks are sitting on 1,500 repossessed properties.”

An samhradh seo caite, bhí sé ráite ag na saineolaithe go dtagann borradh ar athshlánú gach uile lá. Roimh an Nollaig, d’iarr mé ar an Aire, an Teachta Quinn, an nglacann sé leis go bhfuil fadhb dháiríre ag baint leis na mílte teaghlach atá ag maireachtáil ar ioncam an-íseal, faoi leibhéal na costais maireachtála agus nach féidir leo leas a bhaint as an bpróiseas insolvency, agus atá i mbaol an teach teaghlaigh a chailliúint. Tá dhá rud déanta ag an Rialtas ba chúis leis an ardú seo. I mí Iúil chuaigh an leasú ar reachtaíocht i bhfeidhm chun é a dhéanamh níos éasca do na bainc teach a athsheilbhiú. Roimhe sin, i mí an Mheithimh, thug an Rialtas cead don Bhanc Ceannais na treoirlínte a athrú chun teach a athsheilbhiú tar éis dhá mhí seachas dhá mhí dhéag.

An dtabharfaidh an Rialtas isteach reachtaíocht a chiallaíonn go gcaithfidh na bainc bun-airgead na morgáistí a laghdú go dtí luach reatha an tí do gach éinne? Will the Government bring in legislation to ensure that mortgages will be reduced to the current market value of homes? An gcuirfidh an Rialtas cíos in ionad morgáiste ar fáil mar cheart dlíthiúil? Will the Government make available the mortgage to rent scheme as a matter of law do gach a bhfuil ag maireachtáil faoi bhun na costais maireachtála agus nach bhfuil in ann leas a bhaint as an insolvency process?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I thank Deputy Healy for raising this issue. Certainly, this is one of the biggest challenges we face in terms of getting over the legacy of the banking crisis, and there are many families trying to cope with this. What is encouraging is that, for the first time, there is a sign that the numbers in mortgage difficulty are beginning to decline. As the Deputy knows, under the guidance of the Central Bank, very strict targets have been provided for the banks and mortgage companies. There is solid progress and engagement between consumers and lenders has already led to 51,000 permanent mortgage restructures, an increase of 6,000 accounts in the last quarter of 2013. There has also been a significant rise in the number of split mortgages from 2,500 when this data series began to 6,200. In addition, the number of mortgage accounts in arrears for greater than 90 days has fallen from 81,000 in the third quarter to 79,000 at the end of December. Therefore, some progress is being made although, clearly, it continues to be a very challenging and difficult area.

The Deputy asked whether it is possible for the Government to introduce new legislation that would allow the write-down of all mortgages to their current value. Very clearly, that would not be possible.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Of course it is possible.

Deputy Richard Bruton: In order to write down the value of mortgages on that scale, as these are losses that are not provided for, someone would have to provide capital for the banks to do that. This could run to many billions and, indeed, probably €40 billion or €50 billion would have to be provided in additional capital to do that. The taxpayer has already put €64 billion into the banks and is not in a position to provide additional capital to achieve the sort of write-down the Deputy desires.

Clearly, each case has to be dealt with in a sensitive way and the Government has provided a framework within which that can be dealt with. It has also provided the personal insolvency arrangement whereby people can have a work-out over six years to deal with the problem and

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come away after the six years with an affordable mortgage while remaining in their home.

On the issue of mortgage to rent, the Government has introduced the option of mortgage to rent in certain social housing cases. There is some take-up on that and I know applications are continuing under that scheme

Deputy Seamus Healy: Tá 30,000 clann ar a laghad i mbaol a bheith díbeartha as a teach cónaithe. Tá sé soiléir go bhfuil feall mór á imirt ag an Rialtas ar mhuintir na tíre agus go bhfuil an Rialtas chun dul ar aghaidh leis sin gan stad gan staonadh. Thug an tAire Shatter tuarascáil an ghrúpa saineolaithe os comhair an Cabinet ag moladh gur chóir an próiseas athsheilbhithe a dhéanamh níos éifeachtaí, in other words to make it easier to repossess family homes, trí chead a thabhairt chun execution orders a eisiúint ag an am céanna le hordaithe athsheilbithe. Tá sé seo an-tábhachtach, mar laghdaíonn sé an próiseas do sé mhí eile. This reduces the repossession process by over six months and helps the banks. An ghlacfaidh an Rialtas leis an moladh sin? An bhfuil an moladh sin i bhfeidhm?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Of course, I acknowledge there have been changes to deal with a number of areas of the legislation in regard to people in difficulties. There has been a suite of legislation, as I said, which includes the introduction of new personal insolvency arrangements to allow for work on this. There was a court case on which the Government acted as a result of the earlier court decisions in regard to some repossessions, and that clearly had to be acted upon.

What we are aiming to achieve in this area is to give people the maximum opportunity to stay in their homes while working out arrangements with the banking system. The Central Bank, as the Deputy knows, is overseeing that process. There is significant progress on that and, indeed, we read in the newspapers this week evidence of the way in which banks are dealing in a more creative way with people in genuine difficulty.

Clearly, every case has to be dealt with on its individual merits. There is not the opportunity, as the Deputy would like, for someone to say that every case must be dealt with exactly in this way, that is, by writing down the value to the market value. Such options are not available to us because the cost of such on the taxpayer would be so enormous.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Has the Government agreed to the Minister, Deputy Shatter's proposal?

Deputy Richard Bruton: We have to work within the system we have put in place. As I said, it is delivering an increased number of work-outs, restructurings and split mortgages. In the case we have seen, there has been write-downs and warehousing of certain mortgages. There are mortgage-to-rent schemes and an increasing number of options are being developed. That is the way we need to work through these difficulties and try to keep as many people as possible in their homes on an affordable mortgage.

Order of Business

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): It is proposed to take No. 24, statements on the 20-year strategy on the Irish language (resumed), to adjourn at

2 p.m. today if not previously concluded; and No. 21, statements on the Government's priorities for the year ahead (resumed). It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the Dáil shall on its rising today adjourn until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 25 March 2014.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is one proposal to be put to the House. Is the proposal that the Dáil shall on its rising today adjourn until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 25 March 2014 agreed to? Agreed.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Make it Wednesday.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Guím gach rath ar mhuintir na tíre anseo agus thar lear. Guím gach rath freisin ar na hAíre atá ag dul thar lear. Cuirim fáilte roimh an athrú intinne. Nuair a bhí siad ar an taobh seo den Teach bhí siad ag gearán go raibh Aíre ag dul thar lear. Anois, níl ach Aire amháin fágtha sa tír i gcóir Lá Fhéile Pádraig. Níl a fhios agam cad a dúirt an tAire sin leis an Taoiseach nó an fáth a bhfuil sé fágtha.

My first question is about the Charities Bill. Can the Minister give us an update on where are the remaining bits of the Charities Bill? Is the Government planning any changes in light of the revelations this week regarding the director of an organisation being paid by the same organisation to be a lobbyist? Does he envisage any changes on the back of that?

Can the Minister update us on the status of the Seanad reform Bill? Has the Government given any consideration to the various proposals about giving Irish emigrants a vote in Seanad Éireann?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I join with Deputy Calleary in wishing people a very happy St. Patrick's Day. I know many people will be travelling and I hope they do so safely. As the Deputy acknowledges, ministerial travel abroad is of benefit to our economy and the promotion of Ireland as a good location for tourism and economic activity. This is a good opportunity and many countries would be envious of the way in which we can get access to so many different countries to celebrate this festive occasion and to build beneficial relationships from it.

The legislation in respect of lobbyists is in preparation. As the Deputy is aware, the detail has been outlined in broad terms. I will have to get back to the Deputy on the status of the Charities Bill. There is no promised legislation on voting arrangements for Irish emigrants. The constitutional convention is sitting and has, no doubt, made some comments in respect of that, which will come to Government in due course.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Guím rath orthu siúd ar fad a bhfuil gafa leis an bhféile náisiúnta anseo agus thar lear, go háirithe na deoraithe nua atá tar éis an tír a fhágáil le cúpla bliain anuas.

Níl mé ag iarraidh caithimh ar an Aire, an Teachta Bruton, ach i rith Seachtain na Gaeilge is trua nach raibh Aire sinsearach ar fáil chun ceisteanna ó chinnirí nó an tOrd Gnó a ghlacadh trí Ghaeilge. Is tubaisteach é sin. Tugann sé an comhartha mícheart don domhan. Is masla dúinn é atá ag déanamh iarrachta ar a laghad lá amháin in aghaidh na bliana a bheadh an Ghaeilge chun cinn sa Dáil.

Dúirt an tAire liom sa Dáil i mí Iúil 2011 go ndéanfaidh sé iarracht an meabhrán mínithe do gach Bille a chur ar fáil go dátheangach. Níl ceann ar bith foilsithe as Gaeilge nó dátheangach ó shin i leith. Cathain a bheidh athrú ar an scéal sin?

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Tá mé ag lorg eolais maidir le trí Bhille. An chéad cheann ná an Bille um choiriúil caimiléireachta, uimh. 52 ar an liosta. Tá an Bille sin chun Achtanna frithchaimiléireachta 1889 – 2010 a chónascadh. Beidh sé sin tábhachtach maidir leis an gceist is deireanaí a bhíomar ag plé.

An dara Bille ná an Bille maidir leis na hinstiúidí cultúrtha náisiúnta, uimh. 68 ar an liosta. An bhfuil na cinn Billí foilsithe nó an bhfuil aon athrú tuairime maidir le cinneadh seafóideach an Rialtais atá taobh thiar den Bhille?

Maidir le huimh. 66, an bhfuil aon tuairim ag an Aire cathain a bheidh an Bille aitheantas inscne os ár gcomhair? Chríochnaigh an coiste ag plé na cinn Billí agus cuireadh ar aghaidh an tuairisc chuig an Aire roimh an Nollaig.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I join with the Deputy in wishing those who have left our shores to find work well. The most useful thing we can do is create an economy that once again offers opportunities. It is encouraging to see that in the past 12 months, employment growth in this country has been faster than in any other OECD country. Hopefully, we will be in a position to offer more and more people the chance to find work here.

I note the Deputy's comment that it is a pity we do not have an Irish-speaking Minister here. Like many others who have been through our school system - I think we probably sat through 1,500 hours, which someone heard was the estimated time for the teaching of Irish - I would not feel competent to answer questions as Gaeilge with the sort of exactitude that would be necessary in this House. I acknowledge that there are others who can do so. I have been around this House for a long number of years and to be fair to the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Ministers, a far greater amount of Irish is now used in this House than was the case in the many years I have served here.

There is no date for the national cultural institutions (No. 1) Bill and heads have not come to Government. There is no date for the public health (standardised packaging of tobacco) Bill. There is no date for the gender recognition Bill.

Deputy James Bannon: Given the level of crime and corruption hitting the headlines on a daily basis, particularly in respect of the white-collar sector, when can we expect the criminal justice (corruption) Bill to come before the House?

Deputy Richard Bruton: A date has not been fixed for that Bill.

Deputy Dominic Hannigan: No doubt the Minister will be aware that on occasions people have issues with their neighbours about noise nuisance. The noise nuisance Bill, which will help local authorities with fines and new powers, in the pipeline. Cathain a mbeidh an Bille os comhair an Tí?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I am afraid that there is, as yet, no date for that Bill. I know of the considerable interest in that proposed legislation but I do not have a date for it.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Tá a fhios ag an Aire go bhfuil a lán daoine atá ar liúntas cíosa agus ar an scéim cóiríochta cíosa i gcoimhlint le tiarnaí talún ós rud é go bhfuil cíosa ag éirí. Tá cuid acu gan dídean agus ar na sráideanna. Cathain a bheidh an Bille um thiarnaí talún agus tionóntaí os comhair an Tí?

Deputy Richard Bruton: In respect of the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, and the rent supplement, new housing assistance payments legislation is in preparation.

There is no date for the landlord and tenant Bill but work is continuing on it.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: Aontaím leis an Teachta Calleary gur cheart dúinn fáilte a chur roimh an athrú meoin atá tagtha ar an Taoiseach agus an Rialtas. Guím gach rath ar na hAirí agus na hAirí Stáit atá ag taisteal ar fud an domhain chun Lá Fhéile Pádraig a cheiliúradh. Tá súil againn ar fad anseo go n-éireoidh leo tuilleadh infheistíochta a sholáthar don tír agus tuilleadh turasóirí a mhealladh anseo.

Last week, I raised the commitment in the programme for Government concerning the 32 surviving Thalidomide victims. I have raised this matter repeatedly and I understood from the Tánaiste last week that somebody would get back to me to respond to two simple questions. First, what progress, if any, has the Government made in honouring that commitment to these survivors? Second, as yet, has the Minister for Health - as was indicated to me on several past occasions - met with the two organisations representing them?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Unfortunately, I only have a briefing on promised legislation, so I must advise the Deputy to submit a parliamentary question to the Minister for Health in respect of those two matters. I do not know of any promised legislation in that regard, but if there is I will communicate with the Deputy. However, I do not think there is any such promised legislation.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Ba mhaith liom cur leis an díomá atá léirithe nach bhfuil Aire le Gaeilge anseo inniu. Is ceist don duine í Gaeilge a bheith aige nó aici, nó gan Ghaeilge a bheith aige nó aici. Ar ndóigh, feidhmíonn an Rialtas mar aonad. An chéad uair eile a bheidh lá na Gaeilge i gceist, molaim nach mbeidh sé buailte le Lá Fhéile Pádraig nuair a bheidh na hAirí le Gaeilge imithe amach as an tír. Is dócha go dtugann sé drochshampla ceart don phobal faoi Sheachtain na Gaeilge nuair nach féidir rudaí beaga bunúsacha a dhéanamh chun cloí le spiorad an lae. Sílim go raibh sé mífhéarálte an tAire, an Teachta Bruton, a chur sa spota ina bhfuil sé inniu. Nuair a bheidh lá na Gaeilge sa Dáil á eagrú againn feasta, ba cheart dúinn a chinntiú go dtarlaíonn sé níos túisce sa tseachtain, ionas go mbeidh na hAirí atá in ann freagraí a thabhairt dúinn i nGaeilge ar fáil ar a laghad ar lá amháin sa bhliain. Aontaím leis an Aire go bhfaighim freagra i nGaeilge líofa aon uair a chuirim ceist ar an Taoiseach nó an Tánaiste i nGaeilge. Bail ó Dhia orthu.

Ba mhaith liom dhá cheist shonracha a chur. Baineann an chéad cheist leis an mBille atá geallta i dtaobh cosaint na dtomhaltóirí agus iomaíocht, a thagann faoin Roinn Post, Fiontar agus Nuálaíochta. Bhí sé ar an liosta A ag dul siar chomh fada le fómhar na bliana 2012. An féidir leis an Aire a rá linn cén uair a fhoilseofar an reachtaíocht sin? Mar is eol don Aire, tá sé thar a bheith práinneach de bharr rudaí atá ag tarlú ó thaobh cúrsaí mairteola sa tír, mar shampla. Is cuimhin linn cad a tharla roimh an Nollaig maidir le fataí agus glasraí. Tá ceist eile agam. Tá áthas orm go bhfuil Aire Stáit na Gaeltachta ina shuí le hais an Aire. An féidir leis a rá linn cén uair a fhoilseofar go hoifigiúil cinn an Bhille leasmhair ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla? Tá siad ar fáil go neamhoifigiúil ag an saol Fódhla, ach b'fhéidir go bhfuil an tAire in ann a rá linn cén uair a gheobhaidh muid iad go hoifigiúil.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Deputy cannot encourage Ministers to go abroad for St. Patrick's Day and then lament the fact that there are not enough of them here to deal with all the questions as Gaeilge.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The trips could have been scheduled for the weekend.

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Deputy Richard Bruton: To be fair, I have been a Member of this House for many years and I have never seen a Taoiseach and Tánaiste deal constantly with more questions in Irish.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Of course.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The House is making progress in this area but we must acknowledge that not every Member of the House has the level of competence in Irish to deal with the serious matters that Deputies might raise on the Order of Business or during Leaders' Questions. I am therefore dealing with this issue to the best of my ability.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The translation the Minister got from his colleague was not very good. What I actually suggested was that we should have had this debate on Tuesday or Wednesday when the Taoiseach and Tánaiste were around. I explained that I was very understanding of the Minister's situation. It is invidious that the Government has put him in this position here today.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The heads of the Bill reviewing the Irish language will come to the Government shortly. I understand that the consumer and competition Bill will be published in this session.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Ba mhaith liom fiosrú a dhéanamh i dtaobh Bille Uimh. 72 - the Mediation Bill, which has been promised for some time. I am anxious to know whether the heads have been discussed and approved by the Cabinet. If so, when is it expected that the Bill will be brought before the House?

Deputy Richard Bruton: It will be later this year.

Deputy Dara Calleary: It strikes me that the Minister and I will be facing off again next Monday when Castlebar Mitchels take on St. Vincent's. In the absence of the Taoiseach, I wish Castlebar Mitchels every success next Monday in the All Ireland club football final.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Níl sé sin in ord, ach ba mhaith liom-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: Is it promised legislation?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I am afraid the Taoiseach was not good enough to leave me at home to see St. Vincent's win the championship this year, so I too will unfortunately be out of the country when that great contest occurs. However, I certainly wish Castlebar Mitchels well.

Deputy Dara Calleary: But not well enough.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I will stick to the blue and whites, however, and will be supporting St. Vincent's who have earned their opportunity.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Ba mhaith liom Lá Fheile Pádraig faoi mhaise a ghuí ar na Teachtaí Dála go léir agus leis an bhfoireann go léir i dTithe an Oireachtais.

Wind Turbine Regulation Bill 2014: First Stage

Deputy Michael Colreavy: Ba mhaith liom an Bille um Rialáil Tuirbíní Gaoithe 2014 a chur os comhair na Dála. I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to regulate wind turbines through providing limits on the exportation of product generated from wind turbines; protecting nearby dwellings from noise and shadow flicker by providing minimum set back distances; allowing access to public consultative processes and related matters.

In light of the memorandum of understanding signed between the Irish and British Governments concerning the export of renewable energy, we have decided to introduce this Bill to the House. Following last week's announcement from the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Rabbitte, that the current plans to construct wind turbines in the midlands are to be put on hold, and following a meeting between An Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, where it was stated that renewed effort must be given to the export of energy, we consider it is imperative that the Bill should be adopted by the House.

The energy export project may have been mothballed but it has not gone away. This Bill offers proper regulation of the construction of wind turbines and the energy produced from them. Sinn Féin enthusiastically supports renewable energy. We want to see it work. The Bill attempts to impose proper regulation on all aspects of wind turbine developments. It includes proper zoning of areas for wind turbine developments, the duties of planning authorities, set-back distances and the responsibility of decommissioning wind turbines. Many residents in the midlands have been rightly concerned about proper set-back distances from their properties for wind turbines. The Bill seeks to impose a set-back distance of ten times the height of a turbine from any dwelling for turbines higher than 25 m.

Proper regulations should have been put in place already, which is an omission the Bill seeks to rectify. It is critical that there be a comprehensive strategy and set of policies to manage renewable energy produced in Ireland. Ireland has binding targets for renewable energy which it must achieve by 2020. The fact is that it continues to meet most of its energy requirements from imported fossil fuels. Any renewable energy produced here should be directed towards the reduction of the fuel bills many households find burdensome. The Bill seeks to ensure Ireland's energy demands are met prior to renewable energy being exported.

Proper planning is essential to development in rural Ireland. The Government and energy companies cannot ignore the concerns of local communities about the development of wind turbines. The Bill seeks to address many such concerns and it is our hope that the Government will accept it. While the legislation may not be perfect and could well be improved, it is important to have the debate. Concerns have been expressed about the contracts farmers have signed with wind energy companies. Clarity is required on the issues of land access and land use. The farming community must be fully aware of the consequences of signing contracts.

The suspension of the energy export project gives us all an opportunity to set out a clear national strategy and policy for renewable energy production which best serves the interests of the people. Such a strategy and policy, allied with the legislation I am putting forward, will ensure the Government rather than energy companies and their lobbyists will control our energy destiny. We must reclaim our energy future. Is ábhar tábhachtach é seo agus tá mé ag tnúth le díospóireacht air.

13 March 2014

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge: Statements (Resumed)

Deputy Joe O'Reilly: Ós rud é gur beatha teanga í a labhairt, mar a bhí mé ag rá roimh an mbriseadh, tá na scoileanna lán-Ghaelacha thar a bheith tábhachtach. Tá an Rialtas seo ag cabhrú leo siúd atá ag iarraidh a leithéid de scoileanna a chruthú. Tá ceithre bhunscoil lán-Ghaelacha i measc an 20 bunscoil atá le cruthú i mbliana. Mar an gcéanna, tá trí mheánscoil lán-Ghaelacha i measc an 17 meánscoil atá le cruthú i mbliana. Bhí an méid sin ráite agam roimh an mbriseadh, ach fiú é a rá arís.

Tá mé an-bhródúil as an scoil lán-Ghaelach atá againn i mbaile an Chabháin. Tá sí thar barr mar scoil. Scoil den chéad scoth atá inti. Tá mé iontach sásta go raibh an Rialtas seo ábalta foirgneamh deas álainn nua a chur ar fáil in áit lárnach sa bhaile. Tá mé an-bhuíoch don Aire Oideachais agus Scileanna, an Teachta Quinn, as ucht a chabhrach. Tá sé iontach tábhachtach go bhfuil foirgneamh deas álainn ag an scoil lán-Ghaelach seo i lár bhaile an Chabháin. Tá sé sin ar fáil anois, buíochas le Dia. Ba mhaith liom a rá leis an Aire Stáit agus, ar ndóigh, leis an Rialtas go bhfuil mé ag súil go géar leis an lá nuair a bheidh meánscoil lán-Ghaelach in áit éigin i gContae an Chabháin. Molaim don Rialtas agus don Aire Stáit a leithéid a chur ar bun roimh i bhfad. Sílim go bhfuil meánscoil an-tábhachtach, chomh maith leis an mbunscoil. Beidh sé ar fáil go gairid, le cúnaimh Dé.

Tá an Rialtas seo lán-dáiríre faoin straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge. Tá meas agus grá mór againn don teanga. Táimid láidir ar an gceist seo. Tá fochoiste Rialtais curtha ar bun chun an straitéis a chur i bhfeidhm. Tá an Taoiseach mar chathaoirleach ar an bhfochoiste sin. Táimid an-dáiríre faoin straitéis ag an leibhéal sin. Sílim go n-aontóidh gach Teachta liom nach bhfuil éinne sa Teach seo atá níos díograisí agus níos dáiríre faoin teanga ná an Aire Stáit, an Teachta McGinley, atá sa ról seo ag an mbomaite. Tá an-tuiscint, an-mheas agus an-ghrá aige don teanga. Is cainteoir nádúrtha ó dhúchas é. Tagann sé ón nGaeltacht iontach deas i ngleanntain Ghlas Ghaoth Dobhair. Tá a chroí sa Ghaeilge agus in oidhreacht na tíre.

Ba mhaith liom a rá, mar fhocal scoir, go bhfuil gá mór ann go ndéanfaidh gach uile dhuine sa Teach seo iarracht an Ghaeilge a spreagadh ar fud na tíre. Ba cheart dúinn giota beag Gaeilge a labhairt aon uair a fhaigheann muid seans. Is fiú an díospóireacht seo a bheith againn. Ba chóir go mbeadh díospóireacht den tsóirt seo againn gach cúpla mí chun an straitéis a chur chun cinn.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Ba cheart breathnú ar an bpictiúr mór ar lá mar seo. Ba cheart dúinn plé a dhéanamh ar thábhacht na Gaeilge sa tsochaí mar acmhainn náisiúnta. Ní hamháin go bhfuil an acmhainn seo tábhachtach in Éirinn - tá tábhacht leis an nGaeilge go domhanda. Níl sé i gceist agam dul isteach sa straitéis go mion inniu. B'fhéidir gur cheart dom "an easpa straitéise" a rá. Beidh lá eile san fhochoiste Dála amach anseo le sin a dhéanamh. Tá sé molta agam arís agus arís eile gur cheart dúinn an straitéis a chíoradh ó líne go líne. An bhfuil an straitéis á cur i bhfeidhm? Muna bhfuil, cén fáth? Tá leithscéalta airgid tugtha, cé nach bhfuil aon chostas ag baint le go leor de na nithe sa straitéis nach bhfuil á gcur i bhfeidhm. Is dóigh liom, mar a dúirt mé, gur cheart dúinn breathnú ar an bpictiúr mór agus ceisteanna áirithe a chur orainn féin. An bhfuil an Ghaeilge tábhachtach sa tsochaí in Éirinn? An bhfuil tábhacht ag baint léi mar chuid den oidhreacht náisiúnta? Creidim go bhfuil. De réir gach suirbhé dá bhfuil ann, creideann formhór an phobail, ina measc iad siúd nach labhraíonn, nach léann nó fiú nach dtuigeann an Ghaeilge go bhfuil an teanga tábhachtach. Más fiú rud, is fiú cúpla punt a chaitheamh air.

I o'clock

Bíonn caint i gcónaí ar chúrsaí eacnamaíochta agus níl aon amhras ach go bhfuil an eacnamaíocht thar a bheith tábhachtach. Ní féidir le daoine maireachtáil gan airgead. Is féidir go leor a dhéanamh chun cúrsaí an phobail a fheabhsú trí dhéanamh cinnte de go bhfuil saibhreas na tíre roinnte níos chothromaí ar dhaoine agus idir dhaoine. Dearmad an-mhór é a bheith ag ceapadh nach bhfuil aon luach nó nach bhfuil aon rud a chuireann le caighdeán beatha ach airgead agus cúrsaí eacnamaíochta. Ba dheacair a shamhlú sa lá atá inniu ann go gcreidfeadh éinne nach bhfuil tábhacht leis an gcomhshaol nádúrtha. Ba dheacair a shamhlú go bhfuil éinne ann nach gcreideann go bhfuil tábhacht ag baint leis an oidhreacht thógtha atá againn, ag dul siar don tseanaimsir agus foirgnimh atá caomhnaithe anois a tógadh 350 bliain ó shin.

Nach aisteach go minic go bhfuil sé deacair do dhaoine glacadh leis gurb í an teanga an oidhreacht ba luachmhara. Oidhreacht na hintinne atá i gceist anseo. Tá stair breis is 2,000 bliain i gceist leis an teanga. Tá go leor den saibhreas cultúrtha tugtha isteach sa Bhéarla, ach é a athscríobh ón Ghaeilge. Tá logainmneacha na tíre ar fad athscríofa beagnach. Nuair atá duine nó grúpa ag moladh go gcaithfí €3 milliún nó €4 milliún sa bhreis ar an teanga in aghaidh na bliana, deirtear leo nach bhfuil an méid sin ann. Caithfidh sé seo a chur i gcomhthéacs. Caitheann an Stát €53 billiún gach bliain. Seo an comhthéacs don €3 milliún nó €4 milliún a chaitheamh ar rud atá thar a bheith tábhachtach agus thar a bheith luachmhar. Dá ndéarfá le duine nárbh fhiú €3 milliún nó €4 milliún a chaitheamh ar rud atá thar a bheith tábhachtach, bheidís ag gáire fút. Mar sin, is dóigh liom gur cheart dúinn a thuiscint an méid a dúradh sa staidéir teangeolaíochta, is é sin nach bhfuil baol ar bith ar an nGaeilge bás a fháil de thairbhe, buíochas le Dia, an méid oibre le céad bhliain anuas. Tá daoine ar fud na cruinne le heolas maith acu ar an nGaeilge. Ach tá brú ar an nGaeilge sa Ghaeltacht, agus tá sin ar eolas ag an Aire. Ar bhealach is míorúilt é go bhfuil an Ghaeilge fiú chomh folláin sa Ghaeltacht agus atá sí. Thug mé figiúirí don choiste maidir le staid na Gaeilge ag tús na 1950dí.

Tá sé ráite ag na saineolaithe go bhfuil contúirt ann nach mbeidh an Ghaeilge mar phríomhtheanga in aon phobal mura dhéantar gníomh anois. Tá an gníomh seo ag teastáil go práinneach agus ní féidir é a chur ar an mhéar fhada.

Ó thaobh na heacnamaíochta de, is fiú an infheistíocht a dhéanamh. Molaim an Rialtas as na hAirí, atá scaipthe ar fud na cruinne, a chur thar lear. Níor thuig mé riamh an cáineadh a fuairéamar nuair a bhíomar ar an taobh eile den Teach nuair a chuaigh Airí thar sáile ag obair go

dian dícheallach ar son na tíre agus ag déanamh ionadaíochta ar son mhuintir na hÉireann. Níl aon amhras orm is iad ar fud na cruinne go mbeidh siad ag iarraidh marc trádála na hÉireann a chur ina luí ar na daoine a bhuaileann siad leo. Beidh siad ag iarraidh taispeánt gur náisiún faoi leith muid. Beidh siad ag iarraidh saintréithe an náisiúin a chur in iúl, gur pobal faoi leith muid. Bhí mé ann go minic nuair a rinneadh a leithéid. Siombail na hÉireann – an brat, an tseamróg, an ceol, an damhsa – a bheadh á n-úsáid. Tugann na rudaí seo tuiscint ar an bpobal a bhfuil ag dul i bhfad siar. Seo a dhéanann Enterprise Ireland agus Bord Bia atá ag díriú ar an eacnamaíocht. An rud eile a úsáideann siad mar shiombail ná an teanga. Tuigeann lucht margáíochta go bhfuil coincheap ag daoine maidir le muintir na hÉireann mar phobal ar leith, mar náisiún faoi leith agus mar ghrúpa faoi leith. Mar sin, mura bhfuil muid sásta an infheistíocht a dhéanamh maidir leis an teanga, ní hamháin go gcaillimid an leanúnachas a théann siar 2,000 bliain de phobal go raibh an Ghaeilge mar ghnáth teanga acu ach, aisteach go leor, beimid ag déanamh dochair don eacnamaíocht.

Deputy Seán Kyne: Cuirim fáilte roimh an seans cúpla focal a rá faoin Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge. Straitéis 20 bliain atá i gceist, ní straitéis trí bliana atá ann. Níl gach rud sa phlean déanta ach tá dul chun cinn déanta ag an Rialtas ach tá rudaí atá fós le déanamh.

D'fhoilsigh an Rialtas deireanach an straitéis ag deireadh a thréimhse i lár drochstaid eacnamaíochta na tíre. Is mór an trua nár fhoilsigh siad an straitéis i lár an Celtic Tiger nuair a bhí airgead sa tír. Is é sin ráite, ní theastaíonn airgead chun chuile rud a cur i bhfeidhm sa straitéis.

Tá dul chun cinn déanta ag an Rialtas ó thaobh na bpleananna teanga sna limistéir Ghaeltachta. Tá tús curtha leis an gcéad trí phlean. Tá sé in Acht na Gaeltachta go mbeidh ról ag Údarás na Gaeltachta cuireadh a thabhairt do gach ceantar Gaeltachta plean a cur le chéile. Tá sé suas do phobal na Gaeltachta a gceantair féin a shábháil ó thaobh stádas Gaeltachta. Más rud é nach bhfuil ceantair in ann plean a cur le chéile, b'fhéidir nach mbeadh aon ról acu sa Ghaeltacht ag dul ar aghaidh.

D'fhéadfadh go mbeadh na ceantair gan aon phlean curtha amach as an nGaeltacht. Níl an dualgas ar an Stát aon cheantar a choinneáil sa Ghaeltacht. Tá an dualgas sin ar an bpobal i ngach ceantar.

Taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht tá plean do bhailte atá láidir sa Ghaeilge nó atá ag cur an teanga chun cinn. Tá Foras na Gaeilge ag obair ar an bplean sin agus tá sé soiléir le tamall anuas go bhfuil feabhas ar chaighdeán na Gaeilge mar gheall ar na Gaelscoileanna ar fud na tíre. Is maith an rud é go bhfuil daoine taobh amuigh don Ghaeltacht ag teacht le chéile chun ár dteanga a fheabhsú agus a chuir chun cinn. Is iontach go bhfuil an feabhas seo taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an bpolasaí nua chun cuóta a thabhairt isteach ó thaobh earcaíochta sa tseirbhís phoiblí. D'athraigh an Rialtas i 1974 an polasaí a bhí ann go raibh sé riachtanach Gaeilge a bheith agat le hoibriú sa tseirbhís phoiblí. Cé go raibh daoine ag tabhairt amach faoin bpolasaí sin ní dhearna an chéad Rialtas eile aon athrú ar an gcinneadh sin, nó aon Rialtas ina dhiaidh sin. Bhí seans ann i rith an Celtic Tiger nuair a bhí méadú ag teacht ar an seirbhís phoiblí cuóta a chur ann ach níor thóg an Rialtas ag an am an seans sin. Anois tá na daoine céanna ag rá nach bhfuil seirbhísí ar fáil trí Ghaeilge sa Ghaeltacht. Céard a rinne siad chun é sin a athrú? Is mór an trua don teanga nach ndearna siad aon rud sa tréimhse sin nuair a bhí ardú sna huimhreacha sa tseirbhís phoiblí. Tá cuóta againn anois agus beidh ar an Stát daoine le Gaeilge a thabhairt isteach sa tseirbhís phoiblí. Is é seo an chéad chéim. Tá sé suimiúil an rud a tharla

san Iosrael blianta ó shin. Bhí laghdú ar an gcaighdeán agus ar úsáid Hebrew. D'athraigh an Rialtas an polasaí go gcaithfeadh daoine an teanga Hebrew a úsáid chun aon seirbhís a fháil ón Stát. D'éirigh leis an bpolasaí sin chun an teanga Hebrew a shábháil. Cén sórt tuairimí a bheadh sa tír seo dá mba rud é go raibh polasaí mar sin againn don Ghaeilge?

Freisin tá an Roinn Caiteachais agus Seirbhísí Poiblí ag iarraidh a fháil amach ó gach Roinn an méid daoine atá líofa sa Ghaeilge chun na daoine sin a úsáid ó thaobh déileáil leis an bpobal. Tá roinnt daoine atá líofa sa Ghaeilge nach bhfuil ag obair sa phríomhlíne agus ba cheart go mbeadh ról acu ann.

Tá feachtas anois ag lucht na Gaeltachtaí faoina gcearta. Tá an ceart acu gur chóir dóibh seirbhísí a fháil trí Ghaeilge. Ach ní raibh na seirbhísí sin acu roimh 2011 nuair a tháinig an Rialtas seo i gcumhacht. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil chuile dhuine sa Ghaeltacht dáiríre faoin teanga ach níl sé ceart go bhfuil siad ag cur milleáin ar an Aire ná ar an Rialtas faoin easpa seirbhísí sa Ghaeltacht. Más rud é go bhfuil daoine dearg le fearg mar atá siad ag rá, cén fáth nach raibh fearg orthu roimh 2011 faoin easpa seirbhísí trí Ghaeilge?

Tá an straitéis againn agus caithfidh an Rialtas í a cur i bhfeidhm. Tá ról ag comhlachtaí agus eagraíocht phoiblí freisin as ocht n-oibleagáidí atá leagtha amach sa straitéis. Mar shampla, tá ról ag Coimisinéir an Gharda Síochána faoin earcaíocht atá ag dul ar aghaidh anois. Tá ról ag Ceann Foirne Óglaigh na hÉireann ó thaobh earcaíochta maidir leis an straitéis freisin. Tá sé leagtha amach sa straitéis i gCuspóir 12 go leanfar agus déanfar forbairt ar úsáid na Gaeilge sa Gharda Síochána agus sna Fórsaí Cosanta.

Maidir le Cuspóir 10 faoin gcúnamh agus tacaíocht don Aontas Eorpach i bhfeidhmiú an cinneadh a dhéanamh chun Gaeilge a bheith ina teanga oifigiúil, tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an Rialtas ag déanamh teagmhála le grúpaí agus eagraíochtaí Éireannacha san Eoraip maidir leis seo. Tá sé ráite ag an Aire go mbeidh an Rialtas ag smaoinreamh faoi seo go luath i mbliana. I mo thuairim féin, ba cheart go mbeadh ról láidir ag an nGaeilge san Eoraip agus go mbeadh deiseanna ag daoine atá líofa sa Ghaeilge.

If this debate was taking place 17 years after the introduction of the strategy and there were lots of things remaining to be done, I could understand the concern. However, we are only in year three of the strategy. Progress is being made but, as acknowledged by the Minister of State, Deputy McGinley, and others, there is more to do.

I know, through my role as a public representative and former councillor of Galway County Council, that there are people in various sections of the local authorities who can converse with the public in Irish. It is important these people are to the fore in that regard. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is currently engaged in ensuring that all Government bodies and agencies have in their employ people fluent in the Irish language who can engage with the public. As I said earlier, recruitment is currently under way in the Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces. As set out in the strategy, these bodies are required to promote the Irish language when recruiting. It is the responsibility of the Garda Commissioner and Chief of Staff to ensure adherence with the strategy in that regard.

I recently spoke to a principal of a Gaeltacht school, although not a Gaelscoil, about the progress of the Irish language at that school over the past number of years. He told me that while progress was being made, much was dependent on teachers. He said that a teacher who was a confident native Irish speaker had more chance of instilling the grá for the language in

his or her pupils. He also told me that for this reason the board of management of his school had taken the decision to continue the use of English rather than Irish textbooks at the school, which was interesting. He said that without Irish textbooks, Irish could only be taught to a particular level. Under Acht na Gaeltachta, the local authorities are required to get involved with their schools with regard to progressing the Irish language. In this regard, a school might be encouraged to teach particular subjects through Irish using Irish textbooks. As it is difficult to ask parents to purchase Irish and English textbooks for all subjects, where a school makes such decision, would it be possible for a small deontas to be made available to parents? I am sure this is an issue we will come across in the future in respect of other languages. It is an interesting point which had not crossed my mind until I spoke to the principal concerned.

I support the right of people to protest for their rights, including to do their business as Gaeilge. I have no problem with that. Complaints have been made about the lack of Irish-speaking staff in the HSE and other bodies. As I said at the committee on the Irish language last week, while the Minister has a role in this regard, these bodies also have a role to play. I acknowledge the recruitment of Irish-speaking staff is difficult owing to the moratorium. This is the reason for the introduction of the new quota system in the context of recruitment.

Last month, I sent a tweet as Gaeilge, following which I received a response informing me that I had put a fada on the first “a” in damáiste when it should be on the second one. While I sent a reply thanking the person concerned, I wondered if picking people up on such issues discourages people from attempting to use the Irish language. What is important is that people make an attempt at it. People are not being praised for their attempts at speaking the language; rather they are being criticised for their failure to do so perfectly. That puts people off. The Minister of State who is fluent in Irish is very accepting of those of us who are less than perfect at doing so but make an effort. It is important there is the same acceptance across the Gaeltacht. Owing to our education system not everybody is flúirseach sa teanga.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Cúpla bliain ó shin tháinig na páirtithe agus na heagraíochtaí agus an grúpa go léir le chéile chun Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge a chur i bhfeidhm. Is rud iontach é mar is annamh go mbíonn comhdhearcadh ag an méid sin daoine sa tír. Bhí tacaíocht ó gach cearn den Teach agus beagnach gach cearn den tír agus den domhan Gaelach. Bhí fuinneamh agus dóchas ann. Bhí daoine ag iarraidh go mbeadh dul chun cinn déanta mar gheall ar an nGaeilge a shábháil ar dtús agus é a chur chun cinn timpeall na tíre. An fáth a raibh an straitéis ann ná go raibh an-chuid taighde déanta ag na saineolaithe. Bhí faitíos orthu go raibh deireadh chun teacht leis an nGaeilge mar theanga phobal sna Gaeltachtaí.

Stop an comhdhearcadh agus an comhoibriú nuair a tháinig an Rialtas seo i gcumhacht. Roimh an toghchán deireanach, bhí Fine Gael ag rá go raibh siad ag smaoineamh ar stop a chur leis an nGaeilge mar ábhar éigeantach don ardeistiméireacht. Is dóigh liom gur chruthaigh sé sin an t-atmaisféar don Rialtas a bhí le teacht. Ceapaim go bhfuil an Rialtas seo idir Fine Gael agus Pháirtí an Lucht Oibre mar cheann de na Rialtais is mó in aghaidh na Gaeilge i stair an Stáit. Is léir os na rudaí atá déanta ag an Rialtas seo go bhfuil Rialtas frith-Ghaeilge againn sa tír seo.

Ba mhaith liom labhairt faoi chúpla cinneadh atá tógtha ag an Rialtas ón am ar ghlac an tAire Stáit an ról seo. Chuir siad deireadh le hionadaíocht dhaonlathach in Údarás na Gaeltachta. Níl dlúthcheangal idir muintir na Gaeltachta agus Údarás na Gaeltachta ann a thuilleadh. D’ísligh an Rialtas an méid airgid a bhí ag dul isteach sna heagraíochtaí Gaeilge, sa Ghealtacht féin agus sna meáin Ghaeilge. Cuireadh deireadh leis an nuachtán Gaelscéal. Tá sé mar sprioc

sa straitéis 20 bliain go mbeadh “rochtain éasca” ag muintir na Gaeltachta agus na Gaeilge “ar ábhair chlóite i nGaeilge”.

Chuir an Rialtas deireadh le scéim labhairt na Gaeilge, a chur airgead ar fáil do theaghlaigh lonnaithe sa Ghaeltacht chun cabhrú leo a bpáistí a thógáil le Gaeilge. Bhí sé go hiontach gur thug scéim labhairt na Gaeilge figiúirí dúinn gach bliain i dtaobh an méid páistí a bhí á dtógáil le Gaeilge ag teaghlaigh ar fud na tíre. Tá an t-eolas pleanála a bhí ag teacht amach gach bliain imithe anois, áfach. Sheol mé isteach iarratas chun an pacáiste teaghlaigh a chruthaigh an Rialtas in áit scéim labhairt na Gaeilge a fháil. Bhí náire orm nuair a tháinig cúpla dlúthdhiosca agus cúpla leabhar ar ais sa phost. Nuair a chuir mé ceist ar an Aire Stáit faoin ábhar seo ag an am, más buan mo chuimhne dúirt sé go raibh thart ar 200 pacáiste tar éis dul amach go dtí teaghlaigh éagsúla. B’fhéidir go bhfuil ardú tagtha ar an bhfigiúr sin ó shin i leith.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Tá breis agus 2,000 pacáiste imithe amach anois.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Is maith an rud é go bhfuil a leithéid de dhul chun cinn déanta. Ceapaim gur cheart don Rialtas i bhfad níos mó bolscaireachta a dhéanamh sa chomhthéacs seo chun dul i dteagmháil le gach éinne atá ag iompar clainne, ní hamháin sa Ghaeltacht ach sa Ghalltacht freisin. Ba cheart go mbeadh fógraíocht i ngach ospidéal chun tuismitheoirí nua a chur ar an eolas i dtaobh na tacaíochta atá ar fáil. Muna bhfuil an teanga ag dul ó ghlúin go glúin, brisfidh an nasc agus tiocfaidh an Ghaeilge chun deiridh.

Tá praiseach uafásach déanta ag an Rialtas i dtaobh an Státchórais. Cuireadh deireadh leis an mbónas de 6% dóibh siúd a bhfuil an Ghaeilge ar a dtoil acu. Dar leis an iar-Choimisinéir Teanga, tógfaidh sé beagnach 28 bliain chun an méid Státseirbhísigh le Gaeilge a luaitear sa sprioc nua atá leagtha amach ag an Aire Stáit a bhaint amach agus an sprioc sin a chomhlíonadh dá réir. Nuair a chuirim glaoch ar eagraíocht Stáit ar nós Revenue, agus é ar intinn agam an líne Ghaeilge a phiocadh, de ghnáth bíonn rogha na Gaeilge ag an deireadh. Bíonn orm fanacht go dtí an deireadh chun an líne Ghaeilge a fháil agus fiú amháin ansin ní fhaighim an answering machine de ghnáth. Go minic, ní bhíonn an t-eolas atá á lorg agam ag an duine a chuireann glaoch ar ais orm agus ní bhíonn sé nó sí in ann cabhrú liom. Ós rud é go bhfuil sé ródheacair gnó bunúsach a dhéanamh leis an Státchóras trí mheán na Gaeilge, roghnaíonn Gaeilgeoirí an rogha Béarla go hiondúil.

Nuair a dhéanaim iarracht ticéad a cheannach ar an Luas, tá gach rud i mBéarla. Is féidir an Ghaeilge agus cúpla teanga eile a úsáid má tá an rogha sin sofheicthe i gcúinne an scáileáin. Ba cheart go mbeadh an rogha idir an Ghaeilge agus an Béarla a phiocadh amach ar an gcéad scáileáin. Nuair a bhí an córas nua ag teacht i bhfeidhm in earnáil na dtacsaithe, bhí ar Chonradh na Gaeilge iarradh ar an Roinn Iompair, Turasóireachta agus Spóirt comharthaí Gaeilge a chur ar fáil. Ba cheart go mbeadh an Rialtas tar éis a chinntiú go raibh comhartha Gaeilge i ngach tacsáí. Tarlaíonn an rud céanna nuair a thagann gach scéim nua Rialtais amach. Tharla sé i gcásanna ar nós Irish Water, JobBridge agus Gateway. Ní chaitheann baill an Rialtais an caipín Gaeilge nuair a bhíonn siad ag smaoinreamh ar na hábhair seo. Mar a dúirt an t-iar-Choimisinéir Teanga agus é ag éirí as a phost, is rud imeallach í an Ghaeilge don Rialtas.

Bhí sé náireach nach raibh éinne ón Rialtas i láthair nuair a tháinig an t-iar-Choimisinéir Teanga isteach chuig an bhFochoiste um an Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge chun a chuid saineolais, taithí agus cleachtadh a roinnt leis an bhfochoiste. Ní raibh siad fiú sásta éisteach leis an saineolas sin. Dúirt sé go raibh daoine sa Státchóras ag iarraidh an Ghaeilge a imeallú. Bhí sé an-suimiúil gur thagair sé den mhéid a bhí le rá ag iar-státseirbhíseach sinsearach, Seán Mag

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Leannáin, ar an ábhar seo. Dar leis an tUasal Mag Leannáin, tá “growing evidence that there is a strategy afoot to do away with what’s left of Irish in the public life of the country”. Lean sé ar aghaidh:

The civil service establishment ... are almost 100 per cent united in their view of Irish as an irritating thorn in the administration far better to ignore it as if it didn’t exist and to starve the Official Languages Act of the resources to implement it. Let the whole thing wither on the vine.

Is í sin an tuairim atá ag duine a bhí an-sinsearach sa Státchóras. Tá an-taithí aige i dtaobh an tslí ina n-oibríonn an Státchóras. Caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil straitéis frith-Ghaelach, seachas an straitéis 20 bliain, i gceist ag an Rialtas. Tagann cúpla Teachta Dála ó Fhine Gael go dtí cruinnithe na gcoistí a bhaineann leis an nGaeilge uaireanta. Ní bhíonn le rá acu ach “cén fáth go gcaithfidimid é seo a dhéanamh?”. Is féidir liom sampla a thabhairt. Nuair a chuir an HSE comhartha suas i bhfoirgneamh sa Ghaeltacht i mBéarla amháin, dúramar gur cheart go mbeadh sé dátheangach agus gur chóir go mbeadh aon chomhartha sa Ghaeltacht i dteanga na ndaoine lena mbaineann an tseirbhís. Dúirt Teachta Dála ó Fhine Gael a bhí ag an gcrúinniú gur praiseach a bhí ann - gur cheart go bhfaighfidís an tseirbhís amháin agus is cuma faoin teanga.

Ba mhaith liom pointe an-tapa a dhéanamh mar gheall ar chúrsaí oideachais. Tá sé soiléir go bhfuil an córas nua pátrúnachta atá curtha i bhfeidhm ag an Rialtas agus an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna ag cur bac ar ghaelscoileanna nua. Tá sé uafásach deacair. Tuigim go bhfuil 300 páiste i gceantar amháin i mBaile Átha Cliath, as 600 páiste go hiomlán sa cheantar, ar an liosta feithimh cé go bhfuil dhá ghaelscoil sa cheantar. Ní féidir le muintir na háite Gaelscoil nua a chruthú. Níl aon tacaíocht ar fáil le haghaidh sruthanna Gaeilge a bhunú i scoileanna lán-Bhéarla. Tá teorainn curtha ar an nGaelscoil san Uaimh, mar shampla, fiú go bhfuil éileamh iontach sa bhaile. Bhí cúpla scoil lán-Bhéarla sa cheantar ag smaoineamh ar sruthanna lán-Ghaeilge a bhunú chun freastal ar na leanaí ón nGaelscoil. Nuair a chuaigh siad go dtí an Roinn, fuair siad amach nach bhfuil aon tacaíocht ar fáil dóibh chun cabhrú leo é sin a dhéanamh. Is léir go gcuirtear bac ar lucht Gaeilge na tíre seo gach uair a dhéanann siad iarracht céim chun tosaigh a thógáil faoi údarás an Rialtais seo.

Deputy John Deasy: In the first instance, I wish to notify whomever is due to speak next that I will not use all of the ten minutes available to me. At most, I will use three or four minutes.

I wish to focus on one specific issue relating to the Official Languages Act - and the ten-year review relating thereto - namely, the requirement on the Government to publish policy documents in Irish. As I understand it, there have been newspaper reports that the draft of the official languages (amendment) Bill includes a provision removing the requirement for the publication in each of the official languages of documents setting out public policy proposals. I have raised the issue previously. According to a national newspaper, the amendment will address one of the main concerns that has arisen with regard to implementation costs associated with the Act.

This is an issue I raised ten years ago in the House when the Official Languages Act was passed. I took the view that the money would have been better used for the Irish language in a different manner. It was perfectly simple. The reason I took this view was that the principal of my secondary school, Fr. Patrick Moran, approached me one day in Dungarvan and made the case to me that it was ridiculous to be printing many of these documents, which no one would read, in Irish when at the same time neither he nor the Department could fund students in his

school who wanted to do their leaving certificate examination in Irish. He was informed the stream would not and could not be funded after the second year. He suggested something had gone wrong with the policy when something like that occurred. I believe he had a point and I still do. The previous speaker referred to new Gaelscoileanna. I make the case using the example I have just cited that the money being wasted on printing some of these reports in Irish could have been better used in the past ten years on the Irish language.

The people who contacted my office ten years ago were from the Gaeltacht in Ring. They made the case that the provision was ridiculous and that the money would have been better spent elsewhere within the Irish language area. However, it fell on deaf ears. At the time the then Minister, Deputy Ó Cuív, who was the author of the legislation, was not having any of it. However, I believe people who were involved in the Irish language at the time did not think it was a good use of money.

How much is at issue? It is difficult to know because it involves every local authority, not only the Departments. I got the figures last week and in some cases they have reduced their costs while in others they have gone up in the past year. Astronomical sums of money are not at issue but over ten years it amounts to millions of euro and if we add in the local authorities, then it amounts to a great deal of money given the publishing, advertising and translation costs.

I am pleased to see this is finally being addressed. I know the Minister of State has referred to the matter in various fora. I am surprised it has taken ten years to realise this money could have been better spent within the Irish language. I am surprised it has taken this Government three years to deal with the matter and act on it.

I said publicly ten years ago that we had made a mistake by supporting this provision in the Official Languages Bill, as it was at the time. The person who was the spokesperson for my party at the time is the Minister of State, Deputy McGinley. His comment at the time was that I was speaking in a personal capacity. It is nice to know that I may no longer be speaking in a personal capacity. It is nice to know that some action is finally being taken on this measure. I am unsure whether this money will go back into the Irish language or whether it will simply be a saving for local authorities and Departments. I have not seen the draft, if such a draft exists, but I am pleased this is finally being addressed after ten years. The money would have been better spent within the Irish language rather than publishing reports that no one reads. Simple measures could have been taken to fund new Gaelscoileanna or streams of education in order that people could have done their leaving certificate examination in Irish. I am pleased it is finally being addressed.

Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dinny McGinley): Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis na Teachtaí. Seo Seachtain na Gaeilge. Rinne duine an phointe nár chóir a bheith ag caint ar chúrsaí Gaeilge lá amháin sa bhliain, gur chóir go mbeadh sé mar ghnáthpháirt de obair na Dála. Ní easaontaím leis sin. Mar a dúirt an tAire, an Teachta Bruton, i rith Ceisteanna na gCeannairí, tá an bheirt againn sa Dáil le tamall fada, breis is 30 bliain, agus tá i bhfad níos mó Gaeilge á labhairt i láthair na huaire ná mar a bhí le blianta fada. Is iontach an rud é go n-úsáideann an Taoiseach, an Tánaiste, ceannaire Fhianna Fáil, ceannaire Shinn Féin agus Teachtaí eile a gcuid Gaeilge rialta go leor sa Teach. Tá sé sin tábhachtach mar tugann sé dea-shampla agus ceannaireacht don phobal. Go minic sílim go bhfuilimid anseo inár n-aonar agus nach bhfuil éinne ag éisteacht. Tá daoine ar fud an domhain agus ar fud na tíre ag éisteacht linn, fiú ag an nóiméad agus úsáid á bhaint acu as an dteicneolaíocht úr.

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Rinneadh tagairt don Ghaeilge sna seirbhísí poiblí. Admhaím nach bhfuil gach rud mar ba mhaith linn a bheith. Tá go leor talaimh le déanamh suas ach ar a laghad tá aitheantas ann anois go bhfuil easnamh ann agus go gcaithfidimid rud a dhéanamh. Nuair a bheidh earcaíocht ar siúl beimid ag díriú isteach ar aitheantas, mar chéad chéim, a thabhairt don riachtanas an Ghaeilge a bheith sna seirbhísí poiblí.

Nuair a bhí cúrsaí eacnamaíochta faoi lánseol sa tír, agus airgead le caitheamh gan stró, agus nuair a bhí na mílte á tabhairt isteach chuig an tseirbhís poiblí, níor chuimhnigh aon duine gur mhaith an rud go mbeadh céatadán áirithe le Gaeilge a bheith acu. Rinne an Teachta Kyne an pointe sin. Ach anois táimid ag díriú isteach ar leibhéal na hearcaíochta. Chomh maith leis sin tá anailís á dhéanamh i ngach rann, gach comhlacht agus gach rann Stáit cén áit a bhfuil gá le daoine a bhfuil Gaeilge acu le freastal ar an bpobal a éilíonn í. Is í sin céim ar aghaidh.

Tá an Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge á plé i láthair na huair. Tá trí bliana imithe. Tá go leor rudaí ag tarlú gach lá. Tá go leor ag tarlú sna Gaeltachtaí. Tá 26 ceantar aitheanta, 26 de limistéir phleananna teanga, agus tá trí cinn acu sin á n-eagrú agus mé ag labhairt anseo. Beidh tuilleadh á dhéanamh roimh dheireadh na bliana. Ar a laghad is iarracht é sin an taoide atá ag trá le fada i leith na teanga agus na ceantair Ghaeltachta, a chasadh. Tá dúshlán mór ann. Tá mé cinnte go bhfuil taithí ag Teachtaí ar Ghaeltachtaí – rugadh cuid acu sa Ghaeltacht agus tá Gaeltacht mar chuid de na Dáilcheantair. Tá Gaeltacht deas bríomhar i gContae na Mí. Gaeltacht ar leith atá ann mar tugadh daoine ó na Gaeltachtaí eile chuig an áit sin. Tá na daoine ag coinneáil an teanga bheo ansin. Tá sé aitheanta sa suirbhé teangeolaíochta go bhfuil an brú ann sna Gaeltachtaí agus sin an fáth go bhfuilimid ag cur tús anois leis na limistéir phleanála teanga agus leanfaimid ar aghaidh leo.

Ar ndóigh tá ceantair go leor taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht agus níor chóir dúinn dearmad a dhéanamh go bhfuil 40,000 duine óg ag freastal ar scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge. Beidh na páistí sin ag fás suas agus an Ghaeilge acu.

Tá go leor ag tarlú ach tá go leor rudaí a bhfuil dúshlánach chomh maith. Cuireann sé aoibhneas orm éisteach leis na daoine a labhair anseo inniu agus meas acu ar an teanga. Ní raibh aon chaitheamh anuas ar an teanga, mar a tharla roimhe seo sa Dáil na blianta ó shin. Tá dea-thoil agus tacaíocht don teanga le feiceáil. Caithfidimid an tacaíocht sin a chur ag obair ar mhaithe leis an teanga. Tá sé dúshlánach ach is deas an rud é a bheith ábalta oibriú le chéile. Is minic a bhí mé ag caint ar chúrsaí Ghaeilge agus maidir leis an nGaeilge, mar a tharla maidir le Tuaisceart Éireann, cuirimid aghaidh aontaithe. Aon uair a bhí caismirt faoin Ghaeilge, níl a fhios agam an í an teanga is fearr a thagann amach as.

Gabhaim buíochas arís as a méid a dúradh agus an tacaíocht a léirigh daoine don teanga. Táimid go léir anseo chun ár ndícheall a dhéanamh cibé seal ama atá againn anseo.

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

Deputy James Bannon: I will share time with Deputy Coffey. Another Deputy is due to arrive as well, but I am uncertain.

I thank the Acting Chairman for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Ireland has

moved on much in the three years since the Government came to power, but there is always room for improvement. The Government's plan is to get our country back to work and on track. We are starting to see investment returning to the economy, with many positive job announcements this year. The overall employment levels grew by more than 60,000 in the past 12 months, proof that the Government's jobs strategy is working. During the same period, the private sector added approximately 2,000 jobs. That sector is being supported by the Government's various stimulus plans.

We kept our promise not to raise income tax rates, because a tax on income is a tax on jobs. We defended our corporation tax rate, which is crucial for attracting jobs and investment from abroad. Since entering government, we have worked tirelessly to restore our international reputation. Our now well renowned reputation has helped to bring major job announcements by companies like Google, Mylan, eBay, PayPal, and Irish pharmaceuticals.

Balanced regional development is necessary and we must encourage companies to diversify investment throughout Ireland. I am concerned that many highly educated graduates and members of the trained workforce in the midlands are being abandoned at their greatest hour of need. Some 16,000 people in Longford-Westmeath are waiting for help. They want hope to replace despair by way of a job creation policy for the midlands.

Constructive engagement with the agencies needs to be a feature of the Government's approach to job creation. Social provision is given reluctantly, with every obstacle making the process difficult for claimants. Those who desperately want to return to the workforce find doors closed.

We also need a more visible presence on the international business stage. We have only to consider the Germans, French and British who send their president or prime ministers to sign up new international contracts. We usually send delegations from IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland. While they are fine people, they do not have the same political clout as a Head of Government. Our Heads of State and Government must take a more active role in securing contracts and deals for Irish firms. In particular, they must lobby Canada, Russia and other oil-rich countries to garner new business for Irish companies. There must be a greater Government push to ensure that Irish business is supported abroad through our ambassadorial network and political input. Our low corporation tax rate of 12.5% and Ireland as a business-friendly country are the carrots that should be used at every opportunity to encourage companies to locate here.

It is important that basic infrastructure such as roads and essential services be supported and maintained. It is also important that the Government give the green light to the motorway between Mullingar and Rooskey, the most critical piece of infrastructure for the midlands.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Deputy James Bannon: We must consider the legislation governing driving instructors. There should be a greater emphasis on showing respect for other road users instead of getting clients over the hurdle of passing tests. When a driver in the US is about to reach disqualification stage, he or she must undertake a training and driving test programme. This is something that should be considered for Ireland, as it would lead to improved driving techniques by careless drivers while giving them a second chance.

I have an issue with the law in a couple of respects. For example, a person in whose name a vehicle is registered may be given penalty points even though he or she can prove that some-

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body else was driving the car. Even the Taoiseach could get caught on that one. I would also like to see sensible speed limits of greater than 30 km/h on national roads on the outskirts of villages like Rathowen, Ballinalack and Newtownforbes on the N4.

Broadband is vital for the economy of the midlands. Without it, the ability of companies to conduct business in the global marketplace is limited or undermined. Our business sector is suffering from a lack of competitiveness in many parts of the country, particularly the midlands, because we did not introduce broadband on time. Ireland is close to the bottom of an EU league table on broadband availability in schools - we are 20th out of 27 countries. If we do not address this problem now, local rural communities will die as young people leave broadband deserts. Young people in rural Ireland are suffering significant educational disadvantage due to the lack of broadband access. They experience difficulties doing homework and projects due to lack of Internet availability. They are also at a considerable disadvantage socially as they are unable to socialise with friends on websites like Facebook, which can provide a major social outlet for those living in remote areas.

The agri-sector has the capacity to lead the economic recovery, now that it is given proper supports. This Government will invest over €12 billion in Irish agriculture between 2014 and 2020. A total of €8.5 billion will go towards direct payments to farmers, while over €4 billion will go towards rural development. This is a hugely significant development for the agricultural industry and is a record in the history of the State. It is very important for the Irish economy to support our farmers. The Irish family farm is the foundation stone of the rural community and it is driving the rebirth of the agrifood services. Agriculture is at the heart of working life in Longford-Westmeath and while farming had to deal with more than its fair share of setbacks in recent years, farmers in this constituency have displayed great resilience in both dealing with and bouncing back from the effects of the recession. Fine Gael has always had a good record in supporting agriculture, having established the Office of the Agriculture Ombudsman which allows farmers to seek redress. My priority is to ensure this funding is put to the best use to grow and develop the industry based on producing food in a safe and healthy way while protecting the environment.

As a rural Deputy and a farmer myself, I know first hand how important agriculture is to our economy. Funding agriculture in our local communities is a positive investment with long-term economic and social benefits. As the rural development programme is co-financed by the EU, it is important to draw down the maximum funding under Pillar 2. It would make no sense to hand back money to Europe at a time of grave economic difficulty for the farming community and the country. The way to restore our economy is to support our farming community because farmers will build and spend thus helping to drive economic recovery.

I support the timely and efficient payment of farm entitlements. I campaigned for the prompt payments regime now in place. It is important to point out that nothing has been finalised as yet and everything is up for negotiation. I will do my utmost to see that existing schemes are protected and the necessary supports provided under Pillar 2 are included. I am confident the farming community will play a strong and an important role in revitalising the economy. The Government is committed to overcoming the challenges facing the agricultural sector. I want to see a sustainable future for the agricultural community. Providing the best possible education opportunities for young farmers is the key to giving Irish agriculture a competitive advantage in the future.

I call on the Minister to focus on rural job creation. Longford has excellent business prem-

ises which would be very attractive to prospective investors. There are at least 50 vacant units around Longford town in the many business parks. I have invited the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Bruton, and the Taoiseach to make a return visit following their visit towards the end of last year. I invite them to send the State agencies to Longford to review these facilities and structures as well as existing businesses in order to highlight and identify the opportunities already in place for job creation and industry in rural counties such as Longford and Westmeath.

The problem of the availability of social housing in Dublin was discussed yesterday. There is no place cheaper for purchasing homes than in the midlands because of the rural renewal scheme that ran on for too long. A home can be purchased at one eighth of the price of a home in Dublin. Consideration should be given to relocating businesses to the midlands. I am sure the Acting Chairman will agree with me.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe O'Reilly): My indulgence with regard to the Deputy's speaking time would suggest my assent.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution on this topic. It is a pity that the Opposition has chosen to vacate the Chamber and not to engage with the Government. Fianna Fáil should listen and learn from its mistakes and the damage it has done to this country.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: In February 2011, when this Government took office, the deficit of €20 billion was lumbered on the backs of the Irish people. The country was haemorrhaging 1,600 jobs per week, our international reputation was in tatters and our economic sovereignty was lost. A total of 460,000 people were unemployed, existing businesses were struggling and losing competitiveness, with debt levels out of control. The banking system was insolvent, credit had dried up and emigration was rampant. The construction sector was decimated. There was a real risk at that time that our essential social services, including education, health and social welfare, would collapse. That is the legacy of the Fianna Fáil-led Government in 2011. I am glad to say that I am part of a Government that faced up to its responsibilities and took on its shoulders the responsibility of the mandate from the Irish people. We were faced with an unprecedented disastrous situation. Difficult choices had to be made to stabilise the economy, to restore our international reputation, to cut the deficit and to bring our public finances under control, to recover our economy and to create job opportunities and growth.

I thank the people for their resilience in staying the course in the difficult times. They deserve great credit for the progress that has been made. The small and medium enterprises and employers who have traded through these difficult times deserve great credit. They have sacrificed much but they have proven again that Irish resilience and fight-back can work. We are now beginning to see the first signs of recovery.

The options for the Government to work through this process were developed gradually and it has been a difficult period. I am a backbench Deputy who supports the Government I have supported difficult budgets but the signs of recovery are visible. The levels of employment are rising as unemployment figures are reducing. The Government has stabilised the economy and brought the public finances under control.

I agree with previous speakers who have referred to balanced regional development. I

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welcome my colleague, the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Phil Hogan, from the south-east region, who shares many of my concerns with regard to balanced regional development. There has been a debate about issues such as the housing crisis and rental problems in the Dublin area. Dublin as the capital city is the first city to come out of the recession but property prices are rising as a consequence. I hope they will never rise to the same heights of previous years because housing and rents must be affordable. The answer lies in balanced regional development.

I come from Waterford in the south-east region where the unemployment rates are particularly high, if not the highest in the country. There needs to be a focus on delivering essential services and jobs to those regions by the Departments and agencies. I refer to the regional aid programme which is due to be reviewed.

2 o'clock

In the period 2007 to 2013, regional aid for large companies in the south east was 10%, while for similar companies in the BMW region it was 15%. For medium firms, the rate was 20%, compared with 25% for the BMW region. Likewise, while smaller firms elsewhere received 30% aid, those in the BMW region were allocated aid of 35%. The statistics clearly show that high unemployment rates in specific areas require a review and rebalancing of regional aid in favour of the regions that are under serious economic pressure. The south east is one of those regions.

I am calling on the Government to review the regional aid programme and, in its submission to Europe, to ensure an increase in the allocation of regional aid to Waterford and the south east. We must have an equal playing field and an opportunity for new businesses to be established in that region to address the unemployment problem there. Other issues that need to be addressed in respect of the south east include regional infrastructure, a university for the region, provision of a fibre telecommunications cable, safeguarding of essential services and a greater focus from IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland.

We have an opportunity now to grasp the opportunities and potential that are out there, but it must be done in a fair and equitable way. Balanced regional development is the best way forward for the country as a whole.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. It is helpful to recall the situation that pertained when this Government assumed office three years and two days ago. There was no confidence among people in this country at that time. There was no confidence in the banking system. On the international stage, confidence in and respect for Ireland was at an all-time low. In short, we were at our lowest ebb. I assume many colleagues were of the same view as me at that time, namely, that we might not survive. I very much doubted that it was possible to survive, without major social upheaval, in the type of climate into which the Government was then facing.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and other Ministers on their execution of what amounts to an economic miracle in the shortest possible time. It was due to the huge efforts of individual Ministers and the example they were shown by the leaders of the two parties in government that we have achieved such success. The Government was facing an impossible task, with no confidence among people in this country that anything could be done. As Deputy Coffey has pointed out, the numbers of unemployed were increasing on a daily ba-

sis. Everything was on a downward trajectory and, as a result, our standing in the international arena was seriously damaged. The leaders of the two parties in government and their Ministers set about the impossible task they faced with no support from the Opposition. The negativity from the other side of the House was in evidence from the very beginning. Individual Ministers were targeted and addressed in the House in a derogatory fashion, and the quality of the debate directed at them was appalling at the best of times.

Despite all this, the Government has prevailed. It is usual in this country for very little credit to be given to those who take on the impossible task and succeed, and we are seeing the proof of that now. An all-out effort is being made to downgrade the achievements of the Government. We have had smears and sneers from all sides as an attempt is made to convince the public that nothing has been done. In fact, a great deal has been done to drag this country out of the depths and put it back on the map once again. That achievement is down to the Herculean efforts of every Minister in this Government every single day since their appointment. Their performance is in stark contrast to that of the outgoing Government, where Ministers ran away from their responsibilities and some did not even know what was happening. That Government washed its hands of the situation it had created, with Ministers happy to walk away and leave it to the Irish people and the incoming Government to take responsibility.

Great credit is due to the people of this country, in both the public and private sectors, for the huge sacrifices they have had to make and the massive burden they have borne. I agree with Deputy Coffey that the Irish people deserve all praise for taking up that challenge presented to them and sticking with it. They proved that given leadership and inspiration, they could achieve greatness, and so they did. That greatness was our survival, against all the odds and when all of the indications suggested we could not. International financiers did not expect us to survive. Europeans in general believed we would not survive. Everybody took the view that our economy was a basket case. Fortunately, the Government and the people have prevailed and we are on the road to recovery.

It is important to recall the huge sacrifices made by people right across the public sector. Every employee has suffered massively as a result of cuts, not at the discretion of the Government but necessitated by the lunatic policies pursued by its predecessor. There are those who claim to have seen the collapse coming, but they did not articulate at the time what they now claim to have been obvious. It certainly is true, however, that as far back as 2002 and 2003, the writing was on the wall for anybody who wanted to read it. The problem was that the Government at the time was having too much fun. We were all aboard a carousel and the Government could do no wrong. Emissaries were coming here from Brussels on a weekly basis inquiring as to how we were keeping the economy going. It was all down to social partnership, they were told. In fact, social partnership was the death knell for the economy because no regard was had in that process for issues like competitiveness. It was all about buying off anybody who had a problem, which certainly solved the first problem but also created an even larger one. As I said, the sacrifices made by the public sector have been huge. I hope in the time ahead that those workers will be able to bask a little in the reflected glory of what has been achieved.

Workers in the private sector, meanwhile, were the first casualties of the crash. The huge job losses Deputy Coffey referred to took place in the space of one year or less. Everything went downhill and everybody was looking at their neighbours and wondering who was going to be next. We have not yet worked through all the problems we inherited from that period, but a great deal of work has been done. The catastrophe endured by private sector workers did at least serve to let our European colleagues know that the economy was not at all that it had

been made out to be. The so-called boom period was not really a boom, but merely a bubble or glass shell. When the cracks came, they came immediately and with huge consequences for every sector.

Deputy Coffey referred to education and health, two crucial sectors in any society. The Opposition likes to remind us of promises that were made by the incoming Government. All I can say is that the only promise I or anybody around me made, given the situation in which we found ourselves, was to do our best to ensure the country's survival and safeguard core services. That was all we had to do. This Government had only one thing to do, namely, to pull the country back from the brink. Our job was to offer people courage and some type of inspiration. In order to ensure the country's survival, the Government had a responsibility to take the right decisions, some of which were very difficult.

The Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform were the two crucial Departments in driving forward that effort. The Opposition hoped those two Ministers would not last six months, that the country would come down around their ears and they would never be seen again. The Opposition was disappointed. The Ministers set about their task in an objective and constructive way and they did the right thing. They were responsible for the future of the country, not concerned for their own gratification, and all credit is due to them. The same applies to the Taoiseach and Tánaiste. No other party leaders in government during my time in this House - it is not today or yesterday I came here - have done so much to inspire the people and have stuck together so well in doing so.

A Department of which I have some knowledge from a previous existence, the Department of Social Protection, deals with what is obviously a very sensitive area in difficult times with a high level of unemployment. All credit is due to the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton. Hers was a very difficult task. The Opposition Members howled with glee when they believed she was in difficulty from time to time. Its members rubbed their hands and hoped the end was in sight and that the people would embrace them once again and call on them to lead them to the promised land. The Minister was not in any way put off. She stuck to her job and did so very well. She would admit herself it was an extraordinarily difficult task in the circumstances.

Let us consider the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, its Minister, Deputy Phil Hogan, and his colleagues. Their job was to restore the country's water infrastructure under its remit that had been neglected for approximately 20 years. Nothing had been done about it. When the current Government took office, all kinds of foreign bodies and matter were floating in the drinking water supply in parts of the country. There was a concerted campaign by people on the other side of the House, who must have gone out to inspect the septic tanks because they are not present, to undermine the necessary efforts of the Government to provide vital infrastructure in keeping with 21st-century requirements and put us on a competitive footing with states throughout the EU and globally. All credit is due to the Minister, Deputy Hogan, and his colleagues for their work and sacrifices, bearing in mind the abuse they have taken in their effort to put in place the foundations of what will be of benefit to the people.

The Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, was criticised daily. It is amazing that it has been possible to maintain health services to the extent to which they have been maintained, with fewer staff, less money and a greater throughput of patients. The Minister and his Ministers of State have got no credit for it, nor do they expect to get credit. However, it is important that they stick to their task and try to deliver the goods so as to have continuity of service. The people

depend on the decisions made now for the future. Despite all the hassle and abuse concerning developments in health service over recent years, the service has survived. In this regard, one must acknowledge the work of a committed group of people working internally in the service. Despite this work, all we hear is criticism about private insurance costs and claims we will all be unable to pay for insurance next year, etc. The Minister remained and remains committed.

With regard to education, I have referred already to the efforts made. When the Government came into power, it was asked whether the Minister would be able to deliver and maintain the services and contain the demand throughout the country at the same time as operating within budget. He did so and has done an outstanding job.

Housing has been mentioned very often in recent days. For those of us who continue to work on the ground - our number is diminishing - it was quite obvious from five to ten years ago that we were heading towards a housing crisis, as the Acting Chairman, Deputy Wall, well knows. It was clear that the efforts being made to address the issue were nil. What happened was that the previous Administration decided it was not going to provide any public authority housing at all and that all housing would be provided privately in the future. It argued this was the correct approach but we now are where we are. Some 100,000 families are on local authority waiting lists. The current Government is now being urged to build houses and it is argued we should have done so in three years. The previous Government was doing nothing only looking at the problem for 15 years. The only thing it did in the 15 years was count the number on the waiting list twice. It discovered that if one counts often enough, the number shrinks of its own accord because people change address, and some people are not recorded.

Let me proceed to energy and communications, for which the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Rabbitte, is responsible. He has done an excellent job, and has set about providing the future foundation for the country in a fundamental way that will be of benefit to the people, whose population will have increased in ten, 15 or 20 years. This job was important.

Agriculture and transport comprise two areas in which the two relevant Ministers have been spectacularly successful, even given the restrictions that obtain in the current climate. They should be congratulated on it.

I wish to proceed to the sensitive area of job creation. When the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, took over responsibility in this area, there was no hope or possibility of achieving anything. The future looked dim and gloomy, in which fact the Opposition rejoiced. It knew what this was like and it allowed it to happen, sadly. I congratulate the Minister.

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, has a new Department. She is the first Minister with responsibility for children and youth in the history of the State. Hers has been a great achievement and she is to be congratulated on her success to date.

I want to make a point on the most recent crises, which seem to arise daily. The Minister for Justice and Equality, as with every other Minister, entered office in an extraordinarily difficult economic time but has managed to keep the service going. That was a huge challenge. He has managed to rise to it with the support of his colleagues in government, and he continues to do so.

I have never seen such politicisation of An Garda Síochána in my time in this House. Any

time I witnessed politicisation in the past, I became alert and worried about where we were heading. If, as time unfolds, we politicise the police force, we will do a very dangerous thing and go in a very difficult direction.

I am so sad and sorry for those absent members of the Opposition who have been so eloquent and condemnatory in the debate over the past week. They have found nothing positive to say about anything but that is their problem. Negativity is the business and game in which they indulge. It is negativity for purely political purposes and nothing else. It does not achieve a whole lot. If three years ago the Government had been as negative as the Opposition is now, we would be worse off than when we started.

Deputy Liam Twomey: In the dying days of the last Fianna Fáil coalition, the country was facing a crisis that had significant political, economic and social consequences. Many effects of the crisis will be felt for generations. People will remember the convoy of Mercedes cars making their way towards Farmleigh. Each of the then Ministers had a few words to say, not realising that, in the eyes of the people watching, their behaviour indicated a Government that was arrogant and completely out of touch with the crisis they faced.

Many who were Members at the time in question will have met the European Commissioner, Mr. Olli Rehn. One of the messages the Commissioner took from his visit to Ireland was that the then Government, run by Fianna Fáil, had completely and utterly lost the trust of the Irish people. It was only a few short weeks later that Mr. Ajai Chopra crossed the road from the Merrion Hotel to the Department of Finance, putting an end to an era that was very sad for the people of Ireland.

There are many members of Fianna Fáil and other members of the Opposition who want to confine the period in question to history. It is not historic, however, because it lives with us every single day. There are far too many citizens in mortgage arrears and negative equity and those who will be making mortgage repayments with much-reduced incomes. The many people in question are in both the public and private sectors and are deeply unhappy with what has happened to them. Therefore, the fallout from the crisis is not historic, it is with us day in and day out.

There is also a State mortgage that has been heaped on all of us who are still working and our children. This State mortgage, which has been used to pay back the loans we took out to preserve our banks, is the equivalent each year of the universal social charge. This is another penal tax that was landed on the people and it is being used to pay back a loan that was essentially taken out to pay for the banking crisis - a loan heaped on the people by the previous Government. This is not historical. Everything to do with that State mortgage and our own mortgages has been as a consequence of some extremely bad planning by the previous Government.

Three years later we are in a better place. We no longer talk about being thrown out of the euro or becoming a default nation. People are backing and investing in Ireland, both from outside coming in through foreign direct investment, investing in the assets and structures of Ireland, and from within the country with people starting to invest again in the confidence that there is a future for themselves and their families in this country.

We will never forget the sacrifices made by all citizens of this country. Their sacrifice has been as great as that made by the citizens 100 years ago when the country gained its independence. We must now acknowledge that the economy has stabilised to a degree.

Some remarks were particularly insulting, including Deputy Ó Cuív's claim that no new jobs had been formed in this country. That is deeply insulting to the 68,000 who have come off the unemployment register and are now working. They are contributing to society and to their families. These are real figures and these are real jobs. Deputy Ó Cuív was wrong to make such a statement in the House.

Anybody who reads anything about economics and economic recovery will know that a country needs to stabilise its economy before seeing significant reductions in unemployment. One of the great achievements of the past three years is that we have not just stabilised our economy and are coming out of the crisis and starting on the road to recovery, but in tandem we have also reduced unemployment, which does not usually happen. That shows the importance of the Government putting a clear focus on jobs when it was restabilising the economy and getting things right.

There is a continuing need to focus on other social aspects as part of the recovery. We have got the economy right and done much of the heavy lifting in order to stabilise our taxes and expenditure. It is now time to focus on the social aspect of our society and economy. Many people have spoken about the current housing crisis, a very serious issue that must be dealt with.

We need to invest in education because the strength of our educational systems in the past got us out of many of the previous recessions that have struck the country. I am particularly concerned that for the first time no Irish third level institution is ranked in the top 100 universities in the world. University College Dublin and Trinity College Dublin were traditionally in the top 100 and I believe that Trinity College Dublin only dropped out of the top 100 this year. It is important that we make the investment to have our universities back in the top 100, which is incredibly important for our international reputation. We have always had a strong reputation for our doctors, engineers, postgraduates and PhD students. It is important that we retake the high ground in regard to the status of our universities and do so quickly.

Another incredibly important social service, which will come into focus considerably more now that we are working our way out of the economic crisis, is the health services. The health services continue to need more reform - the job has not been done there. Universal health insurance is not an option at present because so much needs to happen beforehand to improve the effectiveness of our health services and to improve the delivery of health care. The new hospital groups must reorganise much faster than is happening. There must be a change in how we deliver services and it must come much quicker.

There is a non-consultant hospital doctor and a consultant crisis in our hospitals at the moment. This crisis is more acute when we consider hospitals outside the major urban areas, but it is a crisis that is coming to the hospitals in our major urban areas. It is a crisis that has developed over the past two decades and needs particular focus. We do not need to leave it get to the point where the recovery could take as long as it has taken for us to end up in this situation in our health services.

The current GP contract has created major controversy. As a GP, I have an interest in what is happening and I understand it quite well. I find some of the sections far too vague at the moment to be accepted and taken seriously. Some sections interfere with the normal doctor-patient relationship and will need to be significantly renegotiated. Many GPs have found some the language to be deeply offensive to people who provide an excellent service.

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I am glad that the Minister of State, Deputy White, has committed to a speedy negotiation of the contract because primary care is working very well at the moment. However, we need a new structure for the new century. We need to move away from the acute illness based structure of our primary care services and to look at the chronic care management programmes that are far more important. Many GPs are already doing what we are trying to get from the new GP contract, but it is not part of their contract and we must formalise these structures better. That is where the focus of the negotiations should be because it is about protecting patients in the 21st century.

I would like to see the development of a patient safety authority. We have had a number of crises and seen how patients are treated. Many improvements in how services are delivered have been made in recent years. HIQA has improved standards. The Medical Council is working efficiently in introducing competence assurance programmes for doctors. The Government has done much to protect many of the institutions of the State as we have gone through this crisis. In order to protect patients we need a proper patient safety authority with real power, along the lines of the Mental Health Commission. Patients who suffer mental illness are far better protected in the health services than patients who suffer from other illnesses or have other concerns to raise.

We must commend the Government on the extraordinary work it has done in the past three years. We must commend the people on what they have achieved despite the sacrifices they have made. We should be grateful we have such strong institutions in the State, including our schools, Civil Service, Garda and Army. People respect what they do and they respect being Irish people and being members of the Irish nation. I am glad we are now back to being responsible for our destiny.

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): It is well documented that this Government inherited a basket case of an economy and in the past three years we have made significant progress in addressing this. The previous Fianna Fáil-Green Party Government was an embarrassment nationally and internationally. In the last few months of its term of office, Ministers did not even turn up to events at home and abroad. They threw in the towel and abandoned their democratic responsibility to our State and its people. They let everybody down and people have not forgotten the consequences of their political abdication.

One of the key planks of the progress that has been made in the past three years has been in the area of job creation. We have reduced the unemployment figures but we must do much better. Our medium-term economic strategy sets the objective of reducing unemployment to below the eurozone average this year and to below 10% by 2016.

For my part, the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government is playing a key role in implementing the programme for Government and I am happy to report that we have made significant progress in delivering on the broad range of actions for which my Department is responsible. As Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, I have implemented the largest programme of reform since the early 1960s. There is real evidence that our hard work is bearing fruit and making an important contribution to economic and physical regeneration, social and community development and environmental protection. I have led an extremely ambitious programme of reform since coming to office, with a major focus on strengthening our democratic system, improving the environment and ensuring effective and efficient services for the public. We have put people first.

As a key goal of the local government reform programme, I want to see local authorities as the key drivers of local enterprise, and this will be done by the establishment of local enterprise offices. These offices will contribute to national recovery through the timely delivery of our policies and programmes, especially in support of job creation. I look forward to the establishment in April of local enterprise offices to provide strengthened support to microenterprises through local authorities, where they will respond to national enterprise and employment initiatives by providing local support.

The Action Programme for Effective Local Government, published in October 2012, set out Government policy for a range of reform measures, including the establishment of local enterprise offices, in regard to the structures, functions, funding, governance and operational aspects of local government. The legislation providing for much of the reform programme is now in place with the enactment of the Local Government Reform Act 2014, which was completed in January of this year. This will deliver a much more streamlined system, with the number of local authorities reducing from 114 to 31 at this year's local elections and with the number of councillors down from over 1,600 to 949. New governance arrangements will apply under which elected members will have more powers in terms of policy development and will be better positioned to oversee the implementation of policy by the executive, delivering improved outcomes on the ground for the people. Local government will have a wider and clear role in regard to economic development, including the adoption of regional spatial and economic strategies, to which all relevant agencies will be required to subscribe.

Provisions to enable the holding of elections to the new councils on 23 May have already been brought into force and phased commencement of other provisions of the Act and formulation of related regulations, orders and guidance to give effect to specific measures is proceeding apace. A key element of this will involve a renewed focus on local government performance, particularly through the establishment of a new national oversight and audit commission. As well as modernising structures, the reform Act strengthens local government functions in some very important areas, particularly economic and community development. When the new structures are bedded down, I will be recommending a rigorous programme of engagement with other Departments and agencies to initiate a substantial programme of devolution of further functions to local government. Meanwhile, to maintain the momentum towards greater devolution, the Government recently agreed a procedure for "local government proofing" of all future proposals for public service functions at local level, which will ensure that local government is the default option for governance and public service at local level.

The Gateway scheme is now starting to build towards a critical mass. The purpose of the scheme, in conjunction with the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton, is to allow the long-term unemployed to make a contribution locally and, at the same time, learn some new skills. It is not to mask the unemployment figures, as some on the Opposition benches are snidely suggesting. By the end of this year, we hope to have 3,000 long-term unemployed people complementing existing local authority staffing resources. These people will learn new skills, which should contribute to their employability into the future.

The programme of assistance agreed between the Government and the EU-ECB-IMF required the Government to introduce domestic water charges. In the programme, the Government promised to introduce a fair funding model to deliver clean and reliable water, establish a new State-owned utility to take responsibility for water infrastructure, and implement a metering programme and water charging system based on usage above a free allowance. The Government has made significant progress on these commitments. On 1 January this year, Irish

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Water became the national water services authority. Significant progress has also been made on the roll-out domestic water metering programme which, together with the establishment of the Commission for Energy Regulation, CER, as the independent economic regulator for the water sector, will help to underpin the new sustainable financial model for water services into the future. To date, we have installed approximately 140,000 meters and in excess of 1,000 people are currently employed on the installation programme.

While the dedication and commitment of the local authorities and their staff in delivering water services was never in question, and although some on the Opposition benches wrongly sought to denigrate their contribution in the provision of water and sewerage services over the years, it was nonetheless clear there was requirement for reform of the delivery structures. The system lacked economies of scale. For example, the operating expenditure per connection was more than twice the average of UK water companies. Capital investment on water infrastructure needs to increase, as we see in today's EPA report, which suggests a sizeable additional capital investment is required to bring us up to the necessary standards that will prevent the European Commission from taking this country to court again on many occasions in the future, as it did in the past in regard to groundwater quality.

At an early stage of establishing the public water utility, we commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers to carry out an assessment on which model should be used in order to set up Irish Water. The assessment assumed annual investment level requirements of €600 million per annum. In 2014, Irish Water will invest some €310 million in core water services infrastructure, which will create and sustain up to 3,000 jobs.

CER recently outlined its timetable for the approval of water charges. In April, it will undertake public consultations on a range of issues, including domestic and non-domestic tariff structures. In August, it will announce its final decision on the approved level of domestic and non-domestic water charges. Irish Water will commence charging domestic customers from October next and the first bills will issue from January 2015. This is the source of income that will be required to repay the loans that will be achieved on the financial markets in the future in order to pay for the additional capital investment that will be urgently required in order to create job opportunities and in the interests of public health.

Since taking office, the Government has introduced radical and significant reforms to the operation and financing of the political system. The Electoral Act 2011 allowed for a reduction in the number of Deputies, which will result in 158 being elected at the next general election compared to 166 in the 2011 election. The Act also provided that the writ for Dáil by-elections must now be issued within six months of the vacancy occurring. The spending limit for candidates at Presidential elections will be reduced from €1.3 million to €750,000 and the maximum reimbursement payment to candidates for Presidential elections will be reduced from €260,000 to €200,000.

The Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012 brought into force restrictions on corporate donations, considerable reductions in the maximum amount that a political party or an individual can accept as a political donation, reductions in donation reporting thresholds and a ban on the receipt of all cash donations over €200. The Act introduced a new requirement that to qualify for full State funding, provided to political parties under the Electoral Act 1997, a qualifying political party must have at least 30% women candidates and at least 30% men candidates at the next Dáil general election, and this will rise to 40% after seven years. If a party does not meet these thresholds, its funding will be halved.

Constituency and local electoral area boundaries have been reviewed and revised for local, European and Dáil elections, which will improve the representational balance across the country for all elections. We are continuing with our busy programme of reform in this area. Last month, I published for consultation the general scheme of the Seanad Electoral (University Members) (Amendment) Bill, which provides for the election of the six university Senators to be more democratic. This will include the provisions that were already approved by the people in a referendum in 1979.

Turning now to the community area, the local and community development programme, LCDP, is the largest national social inclusion support programme of its kind in the State. It provides employment, training, personal development and capacity building supports for the harder to reach in the most disadvantaged areas in our communities. The successor LCDP is at design stage. The current programme is being implemented on a transitional basis for 2014 and all contract holders operating within the programme through the local development companies will continue to the end of this year. There will be seamless transition to the new LCDP committees of local authorities and communities at the beginning of 2015. As an integral part of the alignment process, the management and oversight of the LCDP will transfer within each local authority, initially from 1 July this year as an oversight measure, and in terms of the management and operation of the programme from 1 January 2015. I want to assure the local development companies that, in regard to the 1,650 people who are employed in those companies at present, even though they are private companies, the financial allocation of €48 million this year should be sufficient for them to continue with most of that employment in the context of the financial resources available to them, and in view of the fact they have to make decisions as private companies as to whether they have sufficient resources for administration, or not, as the case may be.

The LCDP will require tendering in future, so we will have to change this mechanism. Following legal advice from the Attorney General, we are now obliged to tender for these programmes in order to comply with competition law.

The Leader programme, on which negotiations are taking place at present with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for the next seven-year programme, does not need to be tendered. However, we will have to see what resources are available in regard to that programme to ensure we have a rural development programme at local level that is operated effectively and efficiently, and in the interests of maximising the amount of money that will go to projects and front-line services rather than administration.

I want to place local government as the main vehicle of governance and public service at local level, including at social and community development level. Better alignment of local government and local development will achieve a more joined-up approach to service delivery at local level. The Local Government Reform Act 2014 provides the legislative basis for the alignment, including the establishment of local community development committees and the preparation and implementation of local economic and community plans. LCDCs will be established in each local authority area. They will have oversight and planning responsibility for local development and community programmes in their area. They will have a democratic mandate because they will be reporting to the local authority members elected on 23 May 2014. We have already established some front-runner, as it were, LCDCs in a number of local authority areas and will learn from those experiences to ensure we have the best possible structures in place that will include the community and local government sector working together on behalf of the people and in respect of all the projects at local level.

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The Leader programme for 2007 to 2013 was valued at €375 million. The finalisation of negotiations is ongoing and we expect to have agreement in the next six weeks. In the last programme, 5% of the Common Agricultural Policy moneys were allocated for the purpose of the rural development programme. The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and I have got agreement through negotiations that the initial amount of money to be delivered through Leader will be 7% or €153 million. There was an opportunity in the negotiations with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform for some co-financing to top up that amount for the next seven years. My Department will seek expressions of interest to develop and submit local development strategies in respect of Leader in autumn of this year. It is expected that the process of selecting suitable local development strategies for implementation through Leader will take place over the second half of this year and early 2015, with commencement shortly thereafter in early to mid-2015.

Our environment is a key national resource which requires protection, and I have led significant improvements at national level and during our EU Presidency at international level. My Department published a comprehensive waste management policy, entitled A Resource Opportunity, in July 2012. The policy provides for a focus on resource efficiency as a critical element in a holistic waste policy. The emphasis is on prevention of waste in the first instance and the resource potential available within our various waste streams. By not generating waste, we can eliminate the need to handle, transport, treat and dispose of it and thereby avoid having to pay for these services. We will continue to drive waste reduction through the existing producer responsibility initiatives and the development of new compliance schemes.

A number of important commitments under the new waste policy have been delivered on already, for example, new household food waste regulations and the establishment of the three new waste management planning regions. Continued roll-out of the waste policy is a primary focus for 2014. This year, I will introduce a new regulatory regime to improve the regulation of household waste collection.

There is major growth and jobs potential in the composting and anaerobic digestion area. To tap into that potential and to support the development of indigenous bio-waste treatment capacity, brown bin collection services will be provided to more households this year on a phased basis, with roll-out to population centres greater than 10,000 persons. This will enable households to reduce their waste collection costs and reduce the quantity of waste sent to landfill. I will continue to focus on improving the quality of our environment through the remediation of legal and illegal legacy landfill sites throughout the country, the development of new structures to provide for enhanced enforcement of waste legislation by local authorities and the Environmental Protection Agency, and the exploring of ways in which the existing enforcement regime can be made more responsive with a greater use of fixed payment notices, as used in respect of littering.

In 2012, my Department introduced a once-off litter enforcement grants scheme, targeted specifically at the issue of fly tipping and small-scale illegal dumping and encouraging local authorities to enhance their existing enforcement activities through measures such as the purchase of CCTV equipment to allow for the effective monitoring of known litter blackspots. I launched a national campaign in conjunction with Fáilte Ireland, local authorities and the EPA that was supported by the print media to highlight the economic value of our environment and encourage the public to report all incidences of illegal dumping to the EPA's national environmental complaints hotline.

In June 2012, we ratified the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. This involved introducing a number of pieces of legislation to assist Ireland in meeting its obligations under the convention. In respect of environmental infringements or court cases with which we are threatened by the European Commission before the European Court of Justice, I inherited a situation where 31 cases against Ireland were brought before the European Court of Justice in 2010. These have been reduced to nine open environmental infringement cases. This is the type of concerted effort we have been making over the past three years to ensure Ireland complies with European Commission rulings and European Court of Justice judgments, unlike our predecessors who ignored rulings and judgments in respect of septic tanks and groundwater, costing the taxpayer €2.7 million. By reducing the number of infringements, we are saving the taxpayer a lot of money as well as protecting our environment.

Climate change remains an issue which will continue to present challenges for us all for decades to come. In the context of sustainable development, I will maintain progressive development of national policy and legislation in response to climate change. Recognising both the challenges and opportunities of a low carbon future, the Government is developing a high level national vision on transition to a low carbon, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable economy by 2050. In parallel, we will continue to work on progressing national greenhouse gas mitigation through the ongoing low carbon roadmapping process. Following through on the national climate change adaptation framework, we will also continue to maximise the operational dimension through sectoral and local adaptation planning. The spatial planning process provides an established means through which to implement and integrate climate change objectives at local level. Local development planning will become the mechanism for delivery of local climate adaptation action. I met the Commissioner for Climate Action, Connie Hedegaard, last week and emphasised to her that the effort-sharing arrangements of 2008, when the previous Government was asleep at the wheel in respect of the burden on Ireland, will not be repeated on this occasion in the context of climate change negotiations and that agriculture and land use must be seen as providing food security for the people of Europe and the world rather than as a soft touch in respect of climate change policy.

A range of challenges were left for this Government to deal with in the wake of the economic crisis, including in the areas of housing and planning. We have made considerable progress in dealing with legacy issues like Priory Hall, pyrite and unfinished estates. I compliment the Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, on the progress she has made and her co-operation in many of the important areas of building control and outdated building regulatory practices.

I am proud of what this Government and my Department have achieved to date, particularly in the transformation of the political structures and the provision of services to the people. With the forthcoming local elections, people will have the opportunity to elect representatives to new and more efficient local authorities. They will be better able to access services which will be delivered in a more efficient manner. I believe I have put in place the necessary first steps in ensuring sustainable recovery, the development of thriving community and local government sectors and an environment of which we can all be proud. The progress to date has been made through a co-operative approach with central and local government working together with agencies and communities. This spirit of shared ambition for our country will help deliver on the objectives of this Government's challenging programme. We will continue to implement the necessary and difficult measures that are needed to restore our economic prosperity, particularly for the people who require jobs. Nobody in this Government could be satisfied to inherit

an appalling political and economic legacy. Equally, members of this Government are angry at having to impose severe financial pain on families and businesses arising from the policies of our predecessors. The people are very mature. They realise that difficult decisions were and are necessary to deliver for the best interests of the country in the long term.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Jack Wall): The next speaker is Deputy Pat Deering who is sharing time with Deputies Anthony Lawlor, Damien English, Tony McLoughlin and John Paul Phelan.

Deputy Pat Deering: Like a number of my colleagues, I was elected to this House for the first time just over three years ago and am honoured to be here. In the 2011 general election, the main issue on which we campaigned was trying to fix the economy. We were given a mandate as a party of Government to fix the economy. We faced a number of other issues as well. The famous five-point plan was used regularly. The number one issue was fixing the economy, the second issue was jobs, the third issue was reform, the fourth issue was health and the fifth issue was the banking sector.

Three years ago, as we all know, this economy was in rag order, mainly due to the neglect caused by 14 years of inept government. The troika had been brought in, we had lost our sovereignty, and for the second time in my short lifetime, the country was bankrupt. Where are we now three years later? There is no doubt we are in a more solid and stable place than we were three years ago. The troika has gone and we are back in business on our own terms. We no longer need stabilisers to give us any assistance. No one could dispute that we are in a better state. We still have a long way to go but we have made substantial progress in stabilising the economy, which is the important issue.

Our second priority during the election was the creation of jobs. Despite the fact that we hear the Opposition's daily rhetoric about the type of jobs that are being created, some 61,000 jobs have been created in the last year which is a substantial number. That is 1,200 jobs per week compared to losing 1,700 jobs per week during the time of the previous Government. Those 61,000 positions are real jobs but there are still far too many people unemployed and far too many people have emigrated. We need to get those people back into country again and back on the workforce. It is a key issue to get those people back to work as quickly as possible.

Even though 61,000 jobs have been created, we need to get more jobs back into rural areas. In my own area of Carlow, for example, I was disappointed to learn that we have had only seven IDA Ireland site visits in the past three years. Regional areas need to be recognised more substantially in future. One good thing that the Celtic tiger left us was the country's good road network, so Ireland does not finish at Newlands Cross anymore. It is necessary to get more foreign direct investment down the country, even though I realise it can be difficult to do so.

In his speech, the Minister mentioned the new local enterprise offices, or LEOs, which constitute a positive move. They should be efficiently resourced, however. While I do not wish to be parochial about the matter, in my own area of Carlow I understand that a minimum of three Enterprise Ireland employees are needed in these LEOs. Carlow has only two such employees at the moment and an extra one has been sought for a while. It is important that every LEO should be on the same footing so that every area will have an equal advantage in terms of job creation.

Jobs are important in rural Ireland and nowhere more so than in Carlow which has a high

unemployment rate. Two main industries which have left the area in the past ten years have not been replaced. It is a crying shame that the sugar factory and sugar beet industry have left our shores. The Acting Chairman, Deputy Wall, has a lot of knowledge in that regard. The closure of the sugar factory in Carlow affected not just the local area, but also hauliers and others who were indirectly affected. At its peak, the Braun Oral-B factory employed 1,100 people. Those industries need to be replaced, so I would encourage the Government to ensure that we have as much foreign direct investment as possible.

Agriculture is a key area of employment. In the so-called Celtic tiger years, agriculture was not highly thought of. Bricks and mortar have now been replaced by agriculture and it is sexy again to talk about the agri-sector. Much work has been done in that regard over the past three years. Last year alone we had substantial exports in that sector of over €10 billion. In addition, the Common Agricultural Policy has been renegotiated with a €12.5 billion stimulus package coming into this country in the coming period. While CAP has been important, there are challenges ahead which need to be negotiated in order to try to achieve the full Harvest 2020 targets.

I wish to bring to the Ministers' attention the relationship between large multiple retailers and primary producers. It is a subject that has been dealt with extensively by the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine. That area needs to be addressed in the short term, so I would encourage the Government to introduce the consumer and competition Bill as soon as possible. That legislation will provide for a statutory code of conduct for the retail industry. We should have an independent arbitrator to ensure that the sector is streamlined and works properly.

As the Minister rightly said, on 23 May we will have the biggest reform of local government in the history of the State, which is welcome. In addition, Dáil reform needs to move on further, despite the fact that we have Leaders' Questions on Thursdays, Topical Issue debates, Friday sittings and longer sitting hours. The Oireachtas committee system is essential and does much valuable work. However, the idea of having to run back and forth from committees to the Dáil Chamber must be addressed. I propose that we should have a committee week once a month whereby the committees would report to the Dáil at the end of that particular week. We could thus do away with moving back and forth from the Chamber to the committees. Members who sit on a number of committees would have an opportunity to contribute to all of them. The Government should examine that proposal.

The Order of Business in this House also needs to be examined. It is farcical for Members to ask what is happening concerning forthcoming legislation, even though they have the details in front of them. Such matters could be dealt with by a letter to the Ceann Comhairle because at present it is a waste of time. Everybody should have an opportunity to use the valuable time here to raise as many issues as possible.

We should also consider reforming the Whip system, even though it has operated thus for many years. However, we should first consider reforming the committee system where valuable work is done, but everybody should be on the same wavelength.

The recent statements on the Government's priorities for the year ahead are valuable in setting out a stall outlining what has been done in the past three years and also what needs to be done during the next couple of years.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I am glad to have an opportunity to speak on this matter. The

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Minister must be used to the fact that he never sees any Opposition Deputies here when there is good news to be announced. The good news began yesterday for St. Patrick's weekend with the "Inspire Ireland" video. It has currently gone viral on YouTube. We must build on the success we have had as a result of the last three budgets. There has been no increase in income tax, which the Government promised when it came into office. In addition, we did not touch any core social welfare payments.

Ireland was the first country to successfully exit from the bailout. In addition, we did a deal on the promissory note exchanging it for long-term government bonds, and economic growth has increased. Recent figures have shown that the domestic economy grew last year, and the NTMA has sold €1 billion in bonds below 3%. All of this attracts a positive sentiment towards Ireland from the rest of the world. We have reformed the banking system and jobs have been generated. When this Government took office, almost 15% of the workforce was unemployed, while the figure is currently just below 12%. We need to work harder on that, nonetheless. Having stabilised the economy, we now need to grow it.

I wish to raise certain points that the Minister might take into consideration for the year ahead. We have been targeting economic sectors, including construction. Part 5 of the Planning Act needs to be changed, however, because local authorities have ceased to build houses. I welcome this week's announcement allowing local authorities to build houses again, particularly in Kilcock in my own constituency. However, the Minister should encourage local authorities to have more shovel-ready projects on stream. The fault in my own constituency of Kildare North is that Kilcock seems to be the only shovel-ready project. There are no other such projects ready to go.

3 o'clock

I urge the Minister to contact the County and City Managers Association to ensure managers are more proactive in getting projects ready. Then, when the funds are made available, they can actively pursue the building of more houses.

I would like to see tax breaks for middle income families who have taken the brunt of what has gone on over the last number of years. I would also like to see a broadening of the tax bands. It is too easy for people to go on the higher rate of tax when the threshold is just over €32,000. People speak to me about their fear of getting a pay rise as they automatically go on to a tax rate equivalent to approximately 52% above €32,000. I hope the Minister passes on to the Minister for Finance the idea that he might expand the tax bands for those on middle incomes who have taken the brunt of the pain over the last number of years. I would also like to see tax relief on child care costs, which have been growing exponentially. It is almost like a second mortgage for those who have a number of children. I ask the Minister to pass on to the Minister for Finance my request for tax relief for child care costs.

Many of us were elected for the first time three years ago with no idea of the workings of the House. We can look at it now. While I welcome some of the reforms which have been made, we must go further. I agree with the procedure for taking Topical Issues, which is an excellent addition. I welcomed the Constitutional Convention. It is a great idea to involve civil society in the process of making progressive changes to the Constitution. I liked the way in which civil society got actively involved in the debate on the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act. We should do that for more legislation. However, there are certain things I find difficult to stomach. People stand up on the Order of Business and ask questions to which they know the answer. I

do not know to whom they are grandstanding, but it seems to be a waste of valuable time. It is easy to make a telephone call to the relevant Department to inquire as to when legislation will be brought forward. The Order of Business should be used for Ministers to come to the Chamber and take questions on topics of the day of relevance to their Departments. The questions should be posed in an unstructured manner. While that would put Ministers under a certain degree of pressure, they would be well able to handle it.

I welcome attempts to bring more women into the Dáil. I do not agree with quotas, which are demeaning to women. However, I would like to see the Dáil become a much more work-friendly and home-friendly environment. There is no crèche here or other facilities to encourage women to come to work here. I am not in favour of quotas and would prefer to see women who are here on merit rather than on another basis. There used to be quotas for sheep years ago and we used to keep the numbers up in order to obtain payments. That is what seems to be happening here with regard to women.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: There are sheep here.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: Positivity has emerged over the last year. One can feel it on the ground. The confidence is returning to the people. Once there is confidence in the economy, the economy will grow. We have seen that in the figures for the gross domestic economy for the last year. While we are here to support Ministers in what they are doing, we also intend to keep them on their toes. We will not be quiet little backbenchers up here at the back. We will shout loudly every now and again when it is necessary.

Deputy Damien English: I am pleased to contribute to this discussion on the Government's priorities for the year ahead. Nothing is more important for Ireland at this time than maintaining our plan for jobs and growth. As far as I am concerned as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, the main priority is the first of those words, "jobs". When the Government took office in 2011, the jobs outlook was so bad that the live register was heading for 500,000. When the Taoiseach launched the 2014 Action Plan for Jobs two weeks ago, the CSO announced that just over 250,000 people remained unemployed. While that remains far too high, we have come a long way in three years. The unemployment rate has fallen for 19 consecutive months from 15.1% in February 2012 to 11.9% in February 2014.

Last October, we debated whether we needed a precautionary line of credit in order to safely exit the bailout. The proof that the correct course of action was adopted came in yesterday's NTMA bond auction. In the first bond auction since September 2010, the NTMA raised more than €1 billion on the international bond market at an historically low rate of 2.967% for our ten year benchmark bond. This is the lowest rate at which the State has borrowed funds and it highlights the significant progress made over the last number of years. Ireland is on the up again. People have made great sacrifices and endured much to make this happen. However, many have not yet enjoyed any upswing from the economic recovery. Far too many individuals and families remain battered by unemployment. They have yet to see recovery in their own lives. When we discuss Government priorities, we always come back to the primary challenge we face, which is jobs, jobs and jobs again. We cannot be found wanting in rising to the challenge.

Exiting the bailout was not an end in itself but was only the end of the beginning. Just as it had a plan to exit the bailout, the Government has a clear plan for jobs and growth. The strategy is based on three pillars - responsible management of the public finances, banking reform and job creation in the domestic economy via Irish entrepreneurs, tourism, rural enterprise,

retail and the renewed construction market. This year will, rightly, see a renewed focus on the domestic economy. My committee, which is a cross-party committee, will focus on the retail sector and the rebuilding of many town centres nationally which have suffered greatly over the last number of years. We must ensure that economic recovery reaches every part of the State and not just urban areas. Spreading growth is very important. I am pleased that the new Action Plan for Jobs includes an IDA programme to build advanced manufacturing facilities and office space in regional locations to attract companies to more diverse areas.

Construction continues also have an important role to play. An industry which became bloated in the boom has now contracted far too much. I am glad to see that the Action Plan for Jobs includes a priority for Government of publishing a construction sector strategy by the end of the month. Our population is growing and will need schools, houses and infrastructure to prosper. The construction industry must expand sensibly to meet this demand. As we expand the construction sector through various public and private sector capital projects, we must use our imaginations to ensure that our own Irish-based companies win many of the contracts to keep jobs local. It is down to imagination. I dealt with a man recently who makes a lot of furniture for libraries, etc. Very often tender conditions require that a business has a high turnover, four or five years' experience in an industry or a record of previous Government projects before it can secure even small contracts. We must use our cop-on to ensure that we design projects which will win jobs locally. We have adjusted the weighting but there are other things we can do. I have a constituent who cannot win a contract locally. Such contracts often go to companies based in the UK and he ends up getting the work anyway through them. It is a crazy situation. We must use common sense to ensure that as we re-ignite the construction sector, our own companies can win some of these projects.

On the Action Plan for Jobs, I have specific points for the Ministers for Finance and Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, respectively, on the importance of supporting two initiatives in the year ahead that will go a long way towards helping SMEs. Consulting Ireland's mission is to provide practical support to consultancy practices and individual consultants based in Ireland to target and develop in emerging markets by exploiting opportunities which are primarily funded by the major international funding institutions. Under the stewardship of Séamus McCann, its key objectives are to ensure that Ireland regains its status as a leading payer and increases its share of ever-expanding overseas consultancy opportunities in these markets. By increasing their volume of business in overseas markets, members of Consulting Ireland will contribute to all sectors of the Irish economy as follow-on business is won by other companies. While Enterprise Ireland is providing some supports to Consulting Ireland, a great deal more would be gained by Irish businesses if there were additional focused measures adopted by Government. There are more than 200,000 public sector contracts to be won on a weekly basis internationally. Ireland used to be a leading player in winning these contracts, but we let matters slip during the boom years.

We must focus our minds. If Irish companies can win consultant contracts, the economy will gain from the additional work they provide. Significant opportunities are going to waste. While the issue was partially addressed in Action Plan for Jobs, we must press ahead and develop this area to create and sustain jobs. I would have liked to raise a number of other issues but I am aware that other Deputies wish to contribute.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: Many positive changes have taken place in the past three years but much remains to be done. The Government set out a list of priorities and is committed to fulfilling them and making Ireland a better country for everyone. First and foremost, it wants

to get the country working again by further reducing the number of unemployed. Its focus lies in helping the domestic economy through measures such as delivering inward investment from multinational companies, expanding exports and promoting Ireland as a tourist destination.

Productive infrastructural development is central to economic prosperity and industrial advancement. The availability of quality infrastructure is critical to productivity and competitiveness. Many gaps in our infrastructure remain and need to be addressed to aid economic recovery and environmental sustainability. Given the reduced level of resources available, the Government is committed to ensuring the country's infrastructure is capable of facilitating economic growth, enterprise development and job creation. In the past decade or thereabouts, approximately €70 billion has been invested in infrastructure and the productive sector, considerably improving the quality and quantity of infrastructure.

Many improvements have occurred in the past couple of years. The rural transport programme has been overhauled, restructured and placed on a more stable financial footing to protect it. New statutory guidelines have been published for planning authorities on the preparation of local area plans. Work is also under way on the N7 Newlands Cross and N11 Rathnew projects and preliminary work has begun on joining up the two Luas lines. Shannon Airport has been given independence and has increased passenger numbers. A sum of €70 million in funding has been approved to help communities devastated by recent storm and flood damage and €1.9 billion has been allocated for the new rural development programme. A nationwide broadband mapping project is also under way to identify areas that will need State-led intervention to deliver high speed broadband. These projects offer significant economic benefits and will continue to be supported in what is a much less favourable funding environment. The Government will continue to provide for the maintenance of our roads to protect the value of previous investments. It will also target the improvement of specific road segments where this will have a clear economic benefit.

The strong export performance in recent years is reflected in growth in traffic on the Dublin Port tunnel. The national road network stretches for 5,500 km, including almost 1,200 km of motorway, and now carries approximately 45% of total road traffic. The road network is a crucial component of the economy's export potential and carries goods to airports and ports for delivery to global markets.

It is clear that if we are serious about developing the regions, we must invest in infrastructure, particularly the motorway structure. Since I was elected to the House in 2011, I have constantly campaigned for the upgrade of the N4 and N16. Works on the N4 from Collooney to Castlebaldwin have gone to planning and I thank the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Leo Varadkar, for his positive engagement with me on the occasions that I have highlighted the lack of motorway connection between Sligo and Dublin, in particular, the safety deficit on the part of the road on which the works will take place.

Our efforts to attract investment into counties Sligo and Leitrim are being thwarted because industrialists travelling west past Mullingar think they are heading into the outback. A good supply of efficient and educated workers in my region has resulted in investment by medical device and pharmaceutical companies. We would fare much better, however, if the region had transport access. While the Government cannot create jobs, it can create an environment in which others are encouraged to create employment. The N16 provides direct access from Sligo to Belfast through counties Sligo, Leitrim and Cavan. I am pleased to report that this is the first Government in many years to spend money on developing and realigning this road. The Minis-

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ter has approved spending in excess of €2.5 million, which has enabled Leitrim County Council to improve safety, especially for large lorries travelling between Sligo and Belfast. Much more investment is required and I encourage the National Roads Authority and Minister to provide money from any future stimulus package that may come available.

In recent times, the county has been subject to extreme weather and severe flooding, which have highlighted the role of infrastructure in the smooth running of society. For this reason, the Government will continue to maintain and invest in vital infrastructure services, particularly flood defence. Although much infrastructural provision is delivered through commercial semi-State companies and the private sector, the State has an important role to play in this regard. It is vital that the correct policies and regulations are in place to maximise efficiency and competitiveness in the delivery of new facilities and utilisation of existing facilities. The Government plans to direct significant funding towards the maintenance and rehabilitation of regional and local roads.

I welcome the recent allocation by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Phil Hogan, of €500,000 to enable local authorities in counties Sligo and Leitrim to repair some of the damage done to local roads as a result of severe weather events. The allocation of €300,000 from the Office of Public Works and the office of the Minister of State, Deputy Brian Hayes, has allowed Sligo County Council to provide sea defences at Strandhill. The damage done by storms and coastal erosion in recent years threatened the future of this vibrant tourist village. More than 500 seasonal jobs depend on the resort's ability to attract golfers, surfers and tourists in general. I am pleased, therefore, that the Government has made such a positive response. Places such as Rosses Point, Enniscrone and other parts of Strandhill need assistance for works to complete more flood defences. I am hopeful that applications Sligo County Council has submitted to the Office of Public Works will be approved to allow the relevant projects to proceed.

I commend the Government on providing funding for projects that were essential in maintaining our infrastructure. I will support efforts in the next two years by the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and their Cabinet colleagues to place job creation at the centre of this country's future. The facts show that their approach is working. If we achieve growth of more than 2% this year, an effort should be made to reduce income tax for lower earners. When all other factors are considered there should be a large gap between what a person receives in social welfare payments and what he or she can earn in a basic job.

In 2015, the tax base will have been widened as a result of the introduction of the property tax and water charges. These changes have been a necessary response to the events that occurred between 2008 and 2010 when the system, with its excessive reliance on taxes on work, collapsed. I urge the Government to examine this area and try to reduce the burden on working people and families in the next two budgets.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: It is appropriate that the House have discussions of this nature now and again. Given that most debates consist of Second Stage speeches on legislation, it is no harm to have a discussion on the political priorities of the Government or Opposition from time to time. It is obvious from the benches opposite, however, that the Opposition does not have many priorities this afternoon.

I will echo some of the comments made by previous speakers. Deputy English raised the difficulty experienced by one of his constituents who is involved in construction and can no lon-

ger tender for small school building or infrastructural projects because the thresholds pertaining to turnover have been changed. This is a significant problem and I am sure every Deputy will be aware of similar cases in their constituencies. Viable and successful businesses, which have done substantial work on infrastructural projects over the years, are being prevented from tendering for works, including relatively small projects, because their turnover falls below a threshold that has been set at a very high level. These companies may end up doing the work in any case as they are often subcontracted at a later date by the company that wins the tender. This issue must be addressed, especially as the Government is set to make an announcement on infrastructure and the construction sector a couple of weeks from now.

I also echo some of the sentiments expressed by Deputy Lawlor on the procedures of the Oireachtas. Changing the manner in which the Dáil and Seanad do their business should be a Government priority. The Government has correctly prioritised a number of reforms in the economy, judicial system and health system, including the manner in which the Health Service Executive and Department of Health operate. It has not, however, fundamentally altered the way in which the Oireachtas, specifically the Dáil, carries out its business. I was taken by comments made by Deputy Charles Flanagan last week on a number of changes that should be made. The Deputy made a strong case for the establishment of a firmly independent Office of the Ceann Comhairle. He called for the Ceann Comhairle to be elected by Members because under the current system he or she is elected in theory only because the nomination is made from another quarter. He also recommended the introduction of a well-resourced parliamentary legal office. While we do have legal supports in the Oireachtas, they are over-stretched. If we want a strong committee system that works properly then that parliamentary legal office needs to be resourced accordingly to fulfil its function.

With regard to the daily business of this House and the Order of Business, it is often said that one should not ask a question to which one does not know the answer. Most days the Order of Business in this House is ridiculous in terms of Members often raising constituency issues which have a tenuous link with forthcoming legislation. Like me, the Minister of State, Deputy Brian Hayes, and the Acting Chairman, Deputy Tuffy, are former Members of the Seanad where the Order of Business operates differently and is much more topical in terms of matters that are urgent on a particular day. There is an argument to be made for improving and greatly altering how the Order of Business in this House operates.

On the improved economic situation of the country, the main issues during the last general election was the economy and jobs. For the first time in six years, we are now seeing significant economic improvements and a significant decrease in the number of people unemployed. This is not down to emigration alone, as it may well have been during the early days in office of this Government. More than 60,000 jobs have been created to date. I was sickened to hear a former Cabinet Minister, Deputy O'Dea, say on national television, and re-echoed in this House yesterday by Deputy Ó Cuív, that these jobs are imaginary or, more pointedly, that jobs created in the agriculture sector are not real jobs. During the past 12 months, there has been a significant improvement in employment in the agriculture and food sectors. Those jobs are real. Deputies O'Dea and Ó Cuív should, perhaps, speak to people in their constituencies of Limerick and Galway who work in the agriculture and food sectors, which people know that those jobs are real.

I commend the Minister for Finance and the Minister of State, Deputy Brian Hayes, on yesterday's progress by the National Treasury Management Agency in auctioning off €1 billion worth of bonds at an unprecedentedly low bond yield rate, which is indicative of the significant progress which this Government has made in terms of our funding ourselves into the future,

which was a core part of the argument on which the last general election was fought.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: In the short time available to me, I wish to focus on the emerging housing crisis which needs to be top of the Government's agenda. I know that the Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, is aware of the extent of this problem and is taking measures to tackle the it head on. However, I believe there is a lack of recognition around the Cabinet table of the extent of the crisis, which is the reason I raise the matter today.

I see this crisis manifest itself on a daily basis in my own constituency from Swords to Balbriggan. Having heard the contributions of other Deputies in the Dáil during yesterday's debate on the housing issue, I know that they encountering the same problems day in, day out. We need unanimous ministerial support to address our social housing problem and to give it the priority it deserves. Only with this support, will there be enough political will to ensure further measures can be delivered. We need that political will and we need it now.

We need to provide new social housing units as a matter of urgency. The previous Government stopped building social housing units long before the economic crash. Owing to its reckless disregard for the economy and the fiscal crisis left to this Government there was no money to recommence building when we first came to power. The much heralded NAMA units we hear so much about are part of the answer but they will not solve the problem. We need properly planned local authority housing and integrated, mixed developments in order to provide stable homes for people who are on waiting lists and for those who find themselves homeless. I welcome the two announcements this week by the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan in regard to void housing units and first build of new housing stock since the economic crash in 2008. We will continue to push for further steps towards the provision of more housing units.

We also need to ensure that Part V planning in respect of social housing remains in place for when the private housing market picks up. Part V housing is an important part of social housing provision. As the economic crash has proven, we cannot rely on Part V housing as our only source of social units. We also need to build additional units through the local authorities. More people are becoming homeless owing to the housing crisis. People on rent supplement who are unable to have their tenancies renewed are particularly affected. If one visits any of the property websites and searches properties for rent in North County Dublin one will struggle to find properties which will accept rent supplement. I regard this as economic discrimination and I will be calling on Cabinet to consider legislating against the practice of excluding people in rent supplement from applying for rental properties. In this regard we also need to prioritise the roll-out of the housing assistance payment announced last July. This move will integrate payment of rent supplement and the social housing support systems by local authorities. We also urgently need to re-examine the cap levels for rent supplement. Everybody in this House will agree that rent supplement is not a sustainable system long term. While the current situation is being tackled, discretion for the setting of rent caps needs to be devolved to community welfare officers. Community welfare officers understand the local markets, know the people involved and have the professional experience to deal with cases fairly and appropriately.

The announcement earlier this week by the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, in regard to the allocation of €15 million towards the redevelopment of void or vacant housing stock will result in the speedy turnaround of up to 500 units throughout the State which would otherwise be further delayed and not tenant ready. While this is a good step, more is needed. I believe the Government should set a statutory target for void units. Current time lags of nine months and upwards are too long. I believe as part of the Government's strategy on housing that we

should look to establishing a statutory target for void housing units, which should be set at 2% of housing stock, or less. We have a housing crisis and a Minister of State in place to beat it. However, the entire Cabinet needs to accept the breadth and complexity of this crisis. North County Dublin is an example of what is happening countrywide. I believe a secure roof over a person's head is a basic right. This should be the number one priority for the Government until such time as this crisis has passed.

I take issue with Deputy Michael Martin's expressed concern in the House earlier this week that we are spending too much time debating the Government's priorities. I remind Deputy Martin that I have the same mandate from the people of north County Dublin to speak on their behalf as Deputy Martin has from the people of Cork and I reject his attempts to deprive me of that.

I welcome the opportunity to speak today and I urge the Government Whips to continue to provide all Deputies with opportunities to speak in this House on behalf of their constituents.

Deputy Ann Phelan: While there are a number of areas on which I could focus, like Deputy Brendan Ryan, I propose to focus on the issue of social housing, as it is an issue that effects my constituency considerably. While I am aware that the priority of this Government is jobs the housing crisis that is emerging will have to be addressed.

I am a member of the Labour sub-committee on housing which have been actively identifying specific areas that require precedence and focus by the Department. There is a developing crisis within this sector which is due to the shortage of supply. Currently, the demand for social housing units exceeds the supply to such an extent that it is effectively proving impossible for our local authorities to meet the needs of those most in need and most vulnerable. Like some of my colleagues, my office is inundated with housing representations on a daily basis. This has increased significantly over the past nine months, due in particular to a combination of factors. My office is in weekly contact with the housing officers in Carlow and Kilkenny local authorities. We are also in contact with the housing organisations, Respond and Focus Ireland, which are also under tremendous pressure. Homelessness has become a pressing issue. We do not have in place adequate policies to ensure that individuals and families can avoid having to live on the streets. Three weeks ago the Constitutional Convention made a decision to recommend that economic, social and cultural rights, including that to a home, are contemplated by the Constitution.

As a result of the action taken by the Government, we now have an economy which is on the cusp of recovery. Unfortunately, however, there is now an even greater demand on the system what was the case in previous years. The assessment of social housing need for 2014 reveals that there are 89,000 people who are in need of housing. This fact is further amplified by the current cap on rent allowance and high rental rates. The latter have resulted in a substantial reduction in the availability of private rented accommodation. In Kilkenny alone, the rental rate which obtains has reached a staggering €850 per month. When one visits various websites devoted to rented accommodation, it is often stated that those on the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, need apply. The RAS has played a pivotal role in recent years in delivering units within the private rented sector to those most in need of housing. I am of the view that emphasis must be placed on the private rented sector in the short term in order to alleviate the pressures on local authorities and housing organisations. Introducing a form of rent moderation or rent control in the private sector could provide to be a viable option. Most individuals and families are unable to access affordable private rented accommodation as a result of a lack of availability

or because rental rates now exceed the cap. That which I suggest would merely be a form of crisis management and it is not intended to be a long-term solution. If we are to address the issue of rental rates in the short term, I suggest that an interdepartmental approach be taken by the Departments of the Environment, Community and Local Government, Social Protection and Public Expenditure and Reform.

In the long term, the Government must prioritise both direct provision and Part V provision. The Government and local authorities need to be directly involved in the roll-out of social housing into the future. This has always been Labour Party policy. I congratulate the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan who has taken heed of the concerns being raised by her colleagues and local authorities. Earlier this week funding was allocated for the direct provision of housing units in Carlow and Kilkenny. In that regard, €1.8 million was allocated to Carlow County Council and €1.5 million was allocated to Kilkenny County Council. In focusing on direct provision, perhaps the Government should investigate the option of the State offering subsidies or tax incentives through the provision of low cost loans instead of tax reliefs. This could work to increase the availability of properties, ensure the repayment of loans and provide private landlords with the option to renovate their properties and bring them up to standard. In doing so, they would be obliged to sign their properties into the rental accommodation scheme for a explicit period and offset the repayment of the loan against the scheme.

I am of the view that this is a positive debate as opposed to being a back-slapping exercise. It is important to point out that a great deal of good work has been done by the Government during the past three years.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Like previous speakers, I was happy when I learned that the Government intended to make time available for statements on its priorities for the year ahead. This debate provides us with an opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved. However, it also allows us to consider what we want to do in the coming period. As a backbencher, I do not often get the opportunity to speak in this Chamber and I sometimes envy the amount of speaking time those on the Opposition benches enjoy. In that context, I welcome the opportunity to have my voice heard.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: While I acknowledge the amount of work the Government has done in focusing on job creation, the economy - both of which had to be prioritised - and placing the country on a firm financial footing once more, we must also consider the impact of other events, both international and weather related, in the context of this debate.

The first matter to which I wish to refer in this regard is the amount of flooding we have experienced this year. In 2012 the Joint Committee on Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht produced a report on flooding in the aftermath of a huge summer flooding event which occurred on the River Shannon. I would like that report to be debated in the House at some point during the current year. I realise that there are very pressing matters which must be discussed. However, it is very important that the report in question should be debated here. While flooding events in urban areas often hit the headlines and are the subject of news reports, there are other parts of the country which are flooded on a regular basis and this has an impact on home owners, landowners and businesses. While flooding has subsided in some urban areas, it was not done so in a number of rural ones. The Oireachtas joint committee did a great deal of

work when compiling its report and I hope it can be debated in the House, along with the eight recommendations the members of the committee feel should be implemented in order to tackle flooding on the River Shannon as a matter of urgency.

The second matter I wish to discuss is that which relates to a rural and regional enterprise strategy. I welcome all the efforts of the Government and the various agencies involved to ensure that the creation of jobs - by means of foreign direct investment and by indigenous companies - in urban areas. However, I represent a rural constituency, Laois-Offaly, and I would like much more effort to be invested in trying to raise the boats of those who live in the midlands. While the latter is not usually the subject of major job announcements, there is no doubt that it has a story to tell in the context of its very skilled and excellent infrastructure. There is a need to focus on these two aspects. One action we could take is to adopt a more coherent tourism strategy, particularly as the midlands has a great deal to offer. It must be noted that many agencies responsible for dealing with tourism. The issue of broadband must also be dealt with, once and for all. Small and medium enterprises are struggling as a result of a lack of regular and constant access to broadband. IDA Ireland does not arrange that many tours of the midlands for potential investors from abroad. There is excellent industrial infrastructure in place in towns such as Tullamore, Edenderry and Birr and this could be used by foreign business which want to establish operations here.

I welcome the efforts made to date in the context of Dáil reform. I particularly welcome the introduction of quotas to encourage increased female representation in this Chamber and in the Seanad. Meeting such quotas is going to present a challenge for the political parties but it would be better for society as a whole if the level of female representation were increased. In the context of other reform, I am concerned that there is conflict with regard to the work schedules of the Dáil and committees. I am of the view that this matter should be examined.

I would like action to be taken, as soon as possible, on the report of the Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality into the review of the legislation on prostitution and the reform of the latter in terms of prosecuting the user. The Attorney General and the Department of Health have been asked for their opinions in respect of the report. I urge that this matter be tackled as soon as possible because a serious problem exists in this country in the context of trafficking, prostitution and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. I accept that this issue is very broad but there is no doubt that we need to focus on it.

Deputy Simon Harris: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Government's priorities for 2014. The attitude adopted to this debate in recent weeks by the Opposition shows that it has not learned any lessons from the past. Before I arrived in this House at a time when the country had more money than sense, announcements relating to Government priorities were made in hotel function rooms rather than in this Chamber. Deputy Martin likes to refer to the importance of the role of Parliament. This debate reflects the importance of the Parliament by giving Members regardless of party affiliation an opportunity to send a clear message to the Government regarding their views and those of their constituents on what it should prioritise for the coming year. This is a welcome debate and I thank the Government and the Taoiseach for facilitating it. We have come a long way in three years and today's sale of ten year bonds clearly shows as much. They have now reached a record low; never before have we sold ten year bonds at below 3%. That in itself is a reflection of the work the Government has done to restore international and economic credibility to the State. However, for the second half of this Government's term the work will involve how we take the recovery and stability from a macro level and bring it to every community in the country and to every family and home. That is the

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body of work that remains to be carried out. I will briefly focus on five areas that I am keen for the Government to prioritise and work on in the coming year.

The first is the area of youth unemployment. We need to maximise and harness everything we possibly can from the youth guarantee scheme. The scheme was negotiated by the Irish Government during our Presidency of the European Union Council. The scheme gives our young people an opportunity to tap in to training programmes and further education. It sends out a message that the country does not simply say to young people who are unemployed that they should go down to the dole office and get their giro. Rather, it says that they have a future in this country, that we need their brains, energy and enthusiasm and that we need to harness these for the future of our economy and society. The plan submitted by the Government to the European Commission for approval in respect of how we wish to implement the youth guarantee scheme in the country is a welcome step, but we need to do more. We must consider the programmes we have in place for entrepreneurship and other areas that we could tailor to encourage our young people to get involved in entrepreneurship. The statistics in the country for the number of young people who set up their own business is significantly behind the European average and I hope this is something we can try to rectify.

We need to examine how we fund many other services. One crucial example is the disability sector. We have seen relevant examples at the Committee of Public Accounts and people have read about it in newspapers in recent weeks and months. The State took the view that its only responsibility to people with disabilities was to write a cheque and then instruct the service provider to provide the services. That was clearly not good enough and we have seen the problems that can arise when there is no proper oversight. There is a commitment in the programme for Government to the introduction of individualised funding or personalised budgets for people with disabilities. We promised this model of funding during the election, we campaigned on it and both parties put it into the programme for Government. If such a model was in place then it would not be possible for issues such as those relating to the Central Remedial Clinic or the Rehabs of this world to arise. They would not arise if we had a situation in which the client was empowered. There is no way any other citizen in the country would be treated the way people with disabilities are treated in respect of that funding model.

We need to continue to prioritise and work on the area of mortgage arrears. I know the banks are due before the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform in April. Progress is being made in this regard but we need to continue to work on it and get the message out to the banks that telling people that a voluntary sale is the only option is not a long-term sustainable mortgage solution.

We also need to realise and get the message out as we approach the local elections that our local economies and local government structures need to play their part. If I open any local newspaper in the country I will see references to an individual calling on the Government to do something, and this has been the case for far too long. There is a role for a Government and national bodies but there is a role for councils, councillors and local communities as well. The establishment of the local enterprise offices will afford an opportunity for debates and discussions on structures to revitalise our main streets and how to bring the recovery from a national level down to a local level.

We need to re-examine our education system. We need to figure out how to ensure that it continues to be relevant to our economy and society. One area we need to examine is how we teach information technology and computing in schools. People used to ask what the business

language of the world was and someone would suggest that it was French or Chinese. Another language of business in the world now is coding. We have seen major work done by organisations such as CoderDojo and we have seen major companies such as PayPal locate in this country but we must realise that teaching people how to type on a word processor in schools has nothing to do with the knowledge economy. We need to go on to take the next steps. These are the five areas I hope the Government will continue to work on and give some priority to during 2014.

Deputy Seán Conlan: The problems we face as a country are precisely the problems we faced when we came to Government three years ago, namely, the creation of jobs, unemployment, emigration and personal and public debt issues. We have gone a long way towards tackling some of the major macroeconomic issues and we should give credit where credit is due in terms of what the Government has done in the past 12 months to deal with the bank guarantee, the promissory note deal and the removal of the troika from the country. While some said it was not a tangible thing to remove the troika, it has resulted in a major feel-good factor nationally and it has helped the national psyche in terms of people feeling more positive towards the future and the development of the country.

The Minister for Finance, the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation and all the Ministers in the Government deserve credit for their efforts to deal with the legacies of Fianna Fáil. We have created 61,000 jobs in the past 12 months. More than 19,500 IDA Ireland-supported jobs have been secured in the past two years as well as more than 5,000 Enterprise Ireland-supported jobs in the past 12 months. Long-term unemployment figures are down. In particular, in the counties I represent along the Border - Cavan and Monaghan - long-term unemployment figures are down.

More needs to be done on the jobs front to develop better infrastructure along the Border. There should be more joined-up thinking between the State agencies in the South and those in Northern Ireland to ensure the peripheral areas of the North and the South are not left behind. One legacy of the past is that we still do not have a proper basic road network along the Border. It should have been put in place during the past 20 years. I realise some of the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation money went towards reopening roads but there has been no concerted, cohesive approach to developing roads. Nothing has been done in the case of the A3 from Monaghan to Belfast. At the moment the United Kingdom Government is introducing a tax on Irish trucks using Northern Ireland roads. We have gained a concession for the road between Monaghan and Dundalk through South Armagh and the road between Monaghan and Cavan through Fermanagh, but more needs to be done, and I would not limit it to the A5. There is much talk of looking for concessions for the A5 but all the major national roads, including the M1, the A4, the A5, the A3 and the A1, should be exempted from this tax. My preference is for all roads in the North to be exempted to develop an all-Ireland economy. It is a retrograde step for the British Government to introduce this tax. It will increase transport costs throughout the island and certainly it is not welcome.

Unemployment rates have come down significantly in recent years. The rate is 11.9% at the moment. More needs to be done. I believe the Action Plan for Jobs, the JobsPlus scheme, the youth guarantee scheme and the local enterprise offices being introduced by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Hogan, and the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Bruton, will all help to tackle the unemployment problem.

We need to reverse the disastrous economic policies of Fianna Fáil. Fianna Fáil was great

for Perth, Melbourne, Sydney and all of those cities because they got cheap Irish-educated labour to go over there and develop those cities. Fianna Fáil was brilliant at exporting our young people to develop those cities. Fine Gael needs to get those people back. As skill shortages emerge in the coming 18 months in the economy because of the shovel-ready projects we will be bringing on stream, whether in health, education or elsewhere, we need to advertise in those cities and make our young people over there aware of the job opportunities at home. It would represent a failure of this society if we fail to bring our young people back. It is a simple thing but it needs a concerted effort by central government to advertise in those cities and make the people in those cities aware of what is available at home and then get them back home.

I referred to investment in shovel-ready projects. Our county managers throughout the country should be mandated by central government to get design and planning out of the way for much-needed projects so that when funds become available, the projects go ahead immediately and we are not left waiting with a lag of two years, nine months or 12 months before we get started. The county managers should be mandated to establish what is needed in each of the counties and then proceed to get the design and planning stages out of the way. Many of the planning offices are under-utilised the moment. I believe this approach will pay dividends in the medium term rather than the longer term.

We are in a position now where we can avoid some of the mistakes of the past and even the present in terms of town centre development. I hate to see the situation which is constantly unfolding whereby central government, local authorities or state agencies use public money to invest in what are basically steel sheds on the edges of town centres. These buildings are of no architectural merit whatsoever. This is happening while our town centres rot and buildings of historical and architectural merit are not developed. This has been a failure of our society for many years. It should be addressed and it can be addressed, but it needs a co-ordinated approach from the various Departments. This is something we need to do now before things start to improve significantly throughout the country.

My final point relates to town centre development. While there has been an improvement in retail figures in Dublin and along the east coast, many parts of rural Ireland and small towns outside the commuter belt are not seeing any major uplift in retail. We need to develop a cohesive planning strategy to ensure that communities throughout the country have proper services in place and that some supports are put in place by the State. That is what happens in other economies and countries. Where areas have no pharmacies, general practitioners or basic services, some State supports are put in place to look after their communities. Some might claim that this is support for retail and manufacturing and that we do not want to go down that road, but if we are to have a co-ordinated response in areas of deprivation or where there are diminished services because of emigration, it must be managed centrally. The free market does not always provide these services.

An issue affecting many Border counties is symptomatic of the fact that our society is not as competitive as it should be. It is easier for foreign companies to win tenders in the Republic than Irish companies. We must consider what we can do to make it easier for Irish companies, fully cognisant of the restrictions placed on central government by European law. For the past ten or 15 years it has been much easier for UK companies to tender for and win projects in the Republic than Irish companies. The Government must consider what further measures can be put in place to redress this imbalance. If we can do this and reduce the unemployment rate during the next four or five years to 4%, 5% or 6%, to the point at which there is effectively employment, the Government will have done the country some service.

If we want to develop a mature democracy, we must get rid of the populist politics of the past and the sticking plaster politics of Fianna Fáil and ensure we will never again have the high levels of emigration of the past ten years. It was a failure of our society in the 1930s, 1950s and 1980s that we could not educate and find work for our young people. We needed to send them across the world to find work. I hope the Government will put in place strong, sound economic measures to ensure this will not recur. That is the responsibility of everyone in politics. We must keep those on the benches opposite from getting back into power to mess up the economy again and leave people with no option but to emigrate. That is key for the Government and we are on the right track. I wish Ministers well in their tasks in the coming 12 months.

Deputy Frank Feighan: I take great pleasure in contributing to the debate on the question of what the Government has done and intends to do. We exited the bailout programme last December. Our grandfathers fought for this country and we set up and defended the institutions of State. It was harrowing to see a party that had always put its own interests ahead of those of the country selling it and a result, we lost our economic sovereignty.

It is good that more than 60,000 new jobs were created last year and that unemployment is now at its lowest level since 2009. The economy is growing and significant progress is being made, but our society has faced considerable difficulties. Most business people have lost their businesses; hundreds of thousands of people entered into unemployment; most house owners are in negative equity; and many of our brightest young people have emigrated. It was claimed that Ireland would need to default, but we did not; we kept to the plan and I am delighted that it has worked.

I have been dealing with the issue of turf cutting in my constituency. My party and the Government were left a ticking time bomb by the Fianna Fáil Administration. This matter should have been addressed in early 2000. Instead of getting a deal along the lines of that for the sugar beet industry, this issue was kicked to touch. Fianna Fáil introduced the great lie - as I cannot use that word, I will say “untruth” - that there was a derogation to cut turf for ten years. When I visited Brussels after three months with a few colleagues and Mr. Conor Skehan of the Peatlands Council to meet the Commissioner, Mr. Janez Potočnik-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joanna Tuffy): The Deputy cannot use the word “untruth” either.

Deputy Frank Feighan: I will withdraw it. We told Mr. Potočnik that there was a derogation for ten years and that we wanted a further six months, given the fact that the subject was complex, difficult and emotive. The Commissioner looked at us and asked, “What derogation?” There had never been one. Instead of dealing with the issue at the time, Fianna Fáil left it for us to handle.

I am delighted that nearly 1,000 families in special areas of conservation, SACs, in my constituency are receiving compensation of €1,500 per year each for the next 15 years, tax free and index linked. Those who did not want money could avail of free turf or be relocated to other bogs. This is the case, regardless of Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan’s claim that nothing is being done. In 2005 the Fianna Fáil Government decided which natural heritage areas, NHAs, would be blocked. In May 2010 the Fianna Fáil Cabinet decided that there would be restrictions on turf cutting from the end of December 2013. Once again, the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Jimmy Deenihan, has dealt with the matter. Following dialogue with Brussels, the most heavily cut sites have been excluded, avoiding an impact on more than 80% of

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active turf cutters. Does anyone listen? The answer is no, as the press goes for the sensational story. A great deal of work is being done behind the scenes and on the ground and I do not doubt that vast numbers of good, decent people have received their compensation or been relocated and are glad to be able to cut turf. I know from speaking with them that they are happy.

Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan stated no one had applied for turf cutting compensation in my county. I stated 600 had applied, but 800 people had actually received compensation. He stated there would be no money for compensation, but people have been receiving money for the past two years and will continue to do so. The Deputy has got it wrong. The only person who has done anything for turf cutters in County Roscommon is Deputy Frank Feighan in working with his colleagues and the Minister. The only difference between Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan and me is that, although neither of us has ever stood on a bog, at least I admit it.

Deputy Joe Carey: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Substantial progress has been made by the Government in a relatively short time. In March 2011 Ireland was a much different place, it was in political and financial meltdown. Slowly but surely, in 2014 it is fighting back and moving in the direction of recovery. Significant work by the Government and the people has resulted in this becoming the first country to emerge from a bailout programme. The troika left our shores last December; the promissory note payments and Anglo Irish Bank are no more; the economy is growing; and we have returned to the international bond markets.

The most pressing issue faced by the Government was and continues to be job creation. In the limited time available to me I will speak on this matter. In response to the jobs crisis, the Government put in place Action Plan for Jobs in early 2012. It is a whole-of-government approach involving every Department and agency, with quarterly targets and assigned responsibilities. The plan was aimed at systematically, brick by brick, building a sustainable economy that could create the number of jobs we needed. Our competitiveness has improved steadily since the process was first launched, moving from 24th in the Institute for Management Development rankings in 2011 to 20th in 2012 and 17th in 2013. We are regaining the ground we had given up. A competitive economy will stimulate job creation. By metric, the jobs plan is working in a macro sense.

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However, many people are not feeling it yet and we still have a long way to go. It is important to remember, however, that we have gone from a situation where we were shedding 1,600 jobs per week to one where we are now adding 1,200 new jobs per week. It is painstaking work but it can only be done, point by point, action by action.

I said before in the House that I am disappointed with the geographical spread of new employment, as it is currently skewed towards the major urban areas of Dublin, Cork and Galway. I believe more attention and support should be given to the regions to ensure a more balanced and ultimately sustainable employment recovery.

Shannon Airport is the major driver of economic activity in the mid-west and County Clare. There has been an extremely encouraging start to the airport's new status as an independent entity which bodes well for the future. In its first year as an independent airport under the capable guidance of chairperson, Rose Hynes, and chief executive officer, Neil Pakey, it has reversed five years of successive passenger decline by recording an increase in passenger

numbers on 2012. Passenger growth is the initial priority for Shannon. Progress on the wider plans, including the development of an international aviation services centre to complement the existing cluster of 40 aviation related businesses, has also been made. The State airports (Shannon group) Bill is set to be introduced to the Dáil for debate prior to Easter with enactment expected before the summer recess. The significant strengthening of destinations and services for passengers at the airport this year is no doubt as a result of the Government's decision to change the administrative model radically and create the new independent structure.

Ryanair has eight new destinations this year to Berlin, Faro, Fuerteventura, Krakow, Munich, Nice, Paris, Poitiers and Warsaw. Aer Lingus Regional is almost doubling capacity, including a new Bristol service, while Aer Lingus has also just launched its first daily year-round transatlantic flights since 2009 with its Boston service. It will commence the six times weekly New York service in March and a new Malaga service in April. United Airlines will increase its capacity on the Chicago route by 88% this year.

Shannon Airport has stepped up to the mark as a key economic driver for the region. The recent high-profile investments such as Donald Trump's acquisition of Doonbeg golf course and his planned investment would not have happened without the existence of Shannon Airport. The renewed energy, vibrancy and strong momentum at the airport is very welcome. I am confident that more direct and indirect jobs can be created in the mid-west and County Clare as a result.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: This debate should not be viewed as being a list of achievements or back slapping by the Government, rather it is a means of putting forward the Government's priorities to the House and to the people. We acknowledge that the Government has had to make tough decisions. I pay tribute to the people for their role and assistance in rescuing the country's economic sovereignty. Everything we do in politics must be for the sake of our people, the men and women of Ireland who have paid a price through emigration and unemployment to ensure our country returns to being a place where people can have work and live a full life.

The primary task of this and any Government is job creation and job retention to avoid a culture of dependency on welfare while recognising that the most vulnerable must be looked after. We must help indigenous small and medium enterprises to become the powerhouse of the economy. The scourge of emigration must be tackled. On the eve of the St. Patrick's Day holiday, it is important to use this occasion to encourage our emigrants to return to become entrepreneurs and movers in the national economy.

People must be empowered. The Constitutional Convention was a tremendous success. I pay tribute to Tom Arnold, Art O'Leary, the citizens and the elected parliamentarians who gave complete commitment to considering the issues in pursuit of reform of the Constitution to make it better suited to a modern Ireland. One hundred citizens and parliamentarians worked together effectively to devise constitutional reform.

This House should reform its procedures for doing its business. As a Chairman of a committee, I suggest we should examine how the committee system operates. Some committees are perhaps more intent on getting headlines and looking for a scalp rather than debating and analysing the issues before them. The House should examine how to make itself more relevant to the outside world.

Job creation is vital for my constituency. A total of 1,000 new jobs in Cork city have been

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created this year and €33 million has being provided by the IDA and Enterprise Ireland since 2012. More than 1,100 jobs have been created in the period 2011 to 2013. These jobs are a fantastic boost for Cork city, cementing our city's strong reputation for attracting foreign direct investment and for being a hub and gateway for Munster and the south west. It is clear that companies believe Ireland and Cork have become much more competitive and that this is a country in which they are confident to do business and in which to make long-term investment. The jobs announced are in diverse areas such as construction, manufacturing, science and technology, engineering, information technology, finance and administration. These jobs are to be welcomed, not least because the trend shows we are open for business and we have a qualified and educated workforce ready to be employed. The potential benefit for local economies is crucial. The Government is delivering for our people while acknowledging that the people have made sacrifices.

I compliment the Minister of State, Deputy Brian Hayes, on his handling of the recent flooding events. I was a Member in 2009 when Cork was flooded. At that time there was procrastination, obfuscation and inaction. This Minister of State was actively engaged in providing a template for dealing with flooding in Cork city and county and how flooding can be averted in the future. It is not a simple matter of flicking a switch because it requires a progressive and planned approach. I welcome the funding of €100 million. I hope the three-year project in 2015 will end the worries of many about flooding in the city and county of Cork.

The people of Cork are not insular and are instead very outward looking. We need a convention centre in Cork and the Government has given €10 million to this project, along with €6 million from the city council. The convention centre, by its nature, will increase footfall in the region. I call on the Government, the Dublin Airport Authority and all stakeholders to ensure Cork Airport is not a white elephant and becomes a pivotal player in driving economic change and a better lifestyle for the people of the south west. It is a gateway and a hub for job creation. I do not want it to become a white elephant and I have a fear it will become one.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: There is a saying that Kilkenny used to be the capital of Ireland, Dublin is now and Cork will be in the future. If Deputy Buttimer has his say, that will happen sooner rather than later.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate, which is taking place in week one of the fourth year of this Government's term. It is a good time to review where we have come from and look ahead to what needs to be done in the coming years. Some speakers referred to job losses, the bailout and so on, while others focused on the improvements in the economy and State finances. Reference was also made to today's news regarding bonds. There are people who would decry Professor Morgan Kelly for shooting a precautionary arrow across the bows last week when he highlighted the fragility of the economy at this time, and the vulnerability of the small and medium enterprise sector in particular. While his comments might be a case of stating the blindingly obvious, it is important we keep in mind that factors which may not be within our control could at any time jeopardise the progress we have achieved to date.

One lesson we should all have learned from the so-called Celtic tiger years is that an arrogant and cocky Ireland was not a place that endeared itself internationally. When this Government assumed office, apart from restoring the economy, we had to work in parallel to restore our reputation as a country that is serious about doing business and doing what we do best. We had to show we could go back to looking after the basics that are fundamental to an export-driven open economy like ours.

A great deal of good work has been done in the past three years and we are in a position now to capitalise on that. However, there are areas which require a sustained focus. It is often said, correctly, that it is not possible to tax one's way out of a recession. Equally, however, the talk in recent weeks of some benefits for taxpayers in the next budget is a cause for some concern. We must avoid cutting taxes in such a way that we end up with another unsustainable boom. Having said that, we have seen how measures such as the VAT rate reduction for services industries, including tourism, have led to job creation and an overall increase in revenue for the State. In such cases, taxes forgone should be viewed as an investment in the economy, whether it be €200 million, €300 million or €500 million. If we get the balance right in this regard and proceed slowly and incrementally, we can create jobs and reduce the national deficit by growing the economy rather than imposing additional taxes, cutting services and reducing the public sector wage bill. We must be as efficient as we can - that goes without saying - but we also must consider the bigger picture.

Several speakers referred to the issue of housing, which is something I raised at a parliamentary party meeting last night. We are at a crisis point in Wicklow and other counties, especially those close to major centres of population. It is a problem that must be addressed urgently. Deputy Brendan Ryan made a very valid point about how community welfare officers manage rent support in the short term, but there is no long-term fix. The problem is we do not have vacant houses in any significant number in the areas where they are most needed. There are 2,500 people on the county waiting list in Wicklow, for instance, with probably another 2,000 on the town lists of Bray, Wicklow and Arklow. That is a serious problem.

Rural development, the Leader programme and the work of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas are issues on which we need to focus in the coming year. The status of An Post and the post office network was highlighted recently and is central to the restoration of the rural economy. I have written to every Minister seeking assurance that the post office service will be favourably considered as a front office of Government for the delivery of licences, certificates and forms.

I am glad to see the Minister of State, Deputy Brian Hayes, in the Chamber. Deputy Buttimer is right that he has proven to be a hands-on Minister of State who does not try to plámás people with quick-fix solutions that cannot be honoured. He tells it as it is and should be commended on so doing. I wish him well in his other endeavours, albeit he will be missed if he is successful. I am not saying this because his wife is from Wicklow but because it is genuinely my view.

Deputy Dan Neville: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I will focus, in the time available to me, on the area of health, which is one of the key issues of concern to people. I intend to deal specifically with mental health issues. The Government has a policy of developing the mental health services, an undertaking it gave in the programme for Government. While progress has been made, there is concern regarding the level and pace of that progress. The funding has been made available, but the pace of change within the Health Service Executive is not what we would like. What is needed at this point is a full report to the Oireachtas regarding the HSE's expenditure of moneys allocated since the beginning of the Government's term for developing mental health services.

We are coming from a very low base in this regard, with only 5.3% of the total health budget allocated to mental health services. In England and Wales, that figure is 13%, while in Scotland it is 18%. The Scottish authorities have made considerable progress in the development of

mental health services, with a reduction in the rate of suicide of 17% in recent years. This has been achieved by the introduction of new policies and strategies that were made possible because 18% of the health budget is ring-fenced for mental health. The HSE, through its National Office for Suicide Prevention, has a policy of developing suicide prevention programmes, suicide research and support for the bereaved. The budget for that office has doubled under this Government, from €4 million to €8.9 million. The Road Safety Authority does a very good job and deserves whatever funding it gets, because too many people are still dying on our roads. However, when one compares its budget of €41 million with the €8.9 million allocated to the National Office for Suicide Prevention, one sees how far we still have to go.

Towards the end of this year, Reach Out, a programme that was initiated ten years ago to progress the development of suicide programmes, will come to an end. While preparations are being made for a follow-up programme, I have concerns in this regard. It took three years to develop Reach Out, during which time the then Government, whenever it was requested to respond to needs in this area, was able to reply that it was waiting for the expert group to report. The whole process was stagnant for three years while the report was being produced. The National Office for Suicide Prevention is conscious of what took place on the last occasion and that those who want to develop suicide prevention programmes are concerned it could recur.

Approximately four years ago, the State and the HSE introduced a programme to reduce stigma entitled, See Change, on which we would like a report because the funding available is inadequate. A key step we must take to improve mental health services and reduce the incidence of suicide is to ensure people can gain access to services early. One of the key obstacles is stigma and denial in regard thereto. I would like to see these objectives acted on by the Government through the programme for Government.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Like other speakers, I believe the progress made to date by the Government is significant. General indicators show our debt is now very much sustainable and that growth has returned. Unemployment levels are dropping, employment is increasing and there is low inflation. Generally, therefore, progress is reasonable.

I wish to talk about challenges at national level and those that arise for me at local level as a Deputy in Limerick city. With regard to national challenges, I wish to take up a point on Professor Morgan Kelly's commentary on the SME sector. The challenges are such that there is a need to ensure we can decouple property debt from the business and working capital debt of SMEs. In many cases during the Celtic tiger years, sound businesses invested in property, thus affecting their capacity to maintain and create jobs. Our first priority must be to ensure mechanisms are put in place to decouple property debt from business debt. Ironically, this was done for the banks through NAMA in that many of the development loans causing difficulties for the banks' balance sheets were transferred to the agency. We must consider doing something similarly creative for the SME sector.

As the economy continues to grow, we must ensure the banks can provide adequate capital, particularly where bridging finance is required by companies for building projects. Thus, if there are opportunities in the marketplace, the banks should provide funding in advance. This might arise where funding is required to build a small estate. Typically, a company may need to invest in plant and equipment to create and export products. We must create an environment in which people can establish an enterprise culture in the SME sector and must reward them for doing so. As we all know, the multinational sector is vital, but SMEs are the backbone in terms of job creation.

Locally in Limerick city we have made significant progress in the past three years. Limerick local authorities will be merged into one after the next local elections. At executive level, this has happened. There is a Limerick city economic plan for the period to 2030, but we need to consider strategies for rural villages. Doing so is vital. In County Clare the relevant villages include Parteen and Ardnacrusha. On the Limerick side, they include Castleconnell, Murroe, Cappamore, Caherconlish, Doon and Ballyneety. It is a question of putting a mechanism in place to ensure they can survive and prosper.

Multinational jobs are being created consistently by a wide range of companies across a range of sectors, which is very welcome. I visited Dell only last week and learned that it employed 1,000 people in Limerick consistently in value-added jobs and creative areas. This is to be welcomed.

In Limerick, in partnership with the Shannon Airport Authority, we are putting in place a plan for a diaspora centre. The national diaspora centre, proposed under the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, will, if successful, be a major provider of jobs and spin-off economic activity in the region, including Limerick city. I am very supportive of the project, on which I am actively engaged as it will bring major benefits to Limerick and the wider region.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Brian Hayes): I thank my colleagues on both sides of the House who contributed to the debate. It has been a useful and worthwhile exercise that has demanded that every Minister answerable to the House set out his or her priorities for the year. It was important that priorities were set out in plenary session, not only in order that Members could hear them but also that they could assess the Government's success, or otherwise, in pursuing them. The great majority of speakers in the debate were on the Government benches or the Front Benches of the various parties. This is important as it allows Members to tease out how the priorities relate to their constituencies and areas of policy interest.

As we stated when we published the medium-term economic review at the time of our exit from the bailout programme in December last, the key responsibility of the Government is to continue to make, on a brick-by-brick basis, progress in the economy. That progress can really only be tested by measuring the number of jobs created and the confidence that I hope is being restored in the economy. The fact that the National Treasury Management Agency was able to publish today the very significant news of the sale of the ten year bond, at an historic low level of 2.9%, is to be noted. It was the first ten year bond sale since 2010 and is another example of investor confidence in Ireland.

Ireland is a small, open, trading economy that is very much determined by and based on the level of investment and economic interest of major trading partners. As a small, open, trading economy, investor confidence is king. We will not get money back into Ireland or enjoy construction and other opportunities unless we have a sound financial basis. The clear commitment of the Government, as set out in medium-term economic plan, is to eliminate the deficit by 2018. We are committed to continuing to make progress next year and thereafter on reducing the deficit, which was our undoing in 2008 in 2009. I very much hope the Government will continue to work with colleagues on all sides of the House in pursuing its objectives and, ultimately, being accountable for these objectives as we proceed this year. I thank all Members for their contributions.

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Topical Issue Debate

Coroners Service

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Ceann Comhairle and his office for allowing me to raise this issue. None of us can imagine the horror of losing a child or a sibling at a young age, but that happened on 16 August 2009 when Sebastian Creane was murdered in his home by Shane Clancy. One can only imagine the lengths one would go to as a parent or a sibling to get answers to try to understand what led to such an event. The Creane family have been on that journey since that horrific night and have been treated abysmally by the organs of the State.

I will be submitting separate parliamentary questions on the role of the State broadcaster. It is hard to imagine that six weeks after that incident, RTE thought it appropriate to devote a segment on “The Late Late Show” to the murder of Sebastian Creane. Less than six weeks after he died and before the inquest into his death, it thought it was worthwhile to debate the issues surrounding it. It decided to proceed without involving the family even though they would not have been able to do so at that stage. RTE’s behaviour was crass and unbelievable. It was a dereliction of its duty to the people as the State broadcaster. Those involved in the decision to broadcast should hang their heads in shame and answer the questions put to them about that programme.

Sebastian Creane was murdered by Shane Clancy who took his own life on the same night, so there are two families grieving. However, the coroner’s inquest into the death of Shane Clancy proceeded with very little input from the Creane family who had questions they wanted answered. They put those questions to the coroner and he agreed that their submissions would be respected at Shane Clancy’s inquest. It was agreed that there would be input from a representative of the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland. Those agreements are all on record because having been so alienated by the institutions of the State, the Creane family felt the need to record the conversation. At that meeting the coroner said he knew they were there because of RTE, such was his awareness of “The Late Late Show”.

However, none of the agreements the coroner entered into was fulfilled at the inquest. The inquest returned a verdict that did not answer the family’s questions and they were then forced to go to the High Court at considerable distress on top of the most unimaginable distress already to try to get the answers. So far they have not been able to get those answers. This shows that at a coroner’s inquest, there are very few avenues for a family to pursue their questions, an issue we need to address.

Where a coroner has let a family down and has not adhered to his commitment to them, there is no redress for that family. We are all subject to performance reviews as public servants. We go before the electorate. Every other member of the public service is subject to some sort of review. Coroners must be and there must be an avenue for families who feel alienated by an inquest process to get justice and get answers. There should be some recourse available where a coroner has not done his or her job.

This was the most horrific tragedy and unimaginable loss. That loss and sense of betrayal have been exacerbated by the response of the organs of the State, a State that seeks to cherish children and cherish its citizens, but instead forces them to go down a legal route while they

grieve over the loss of a son, brother, nephew and friend. Surely we can do better.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brian Hayes): On behalf of the Minister for Justice and Equality, who unfortunately cannot be here, I thank Deputy Calleary for raising these matters and I appreciate the concerns he has articulated. As the Deputy will be aware, the relevant circumstances are linked to a very tragic set of events which occurred in 2009 and resulted in the deaths of two people. The Minister is very conscious that these deaths have impacted significantly on the families concerned and this is, of course, fully understandable.

The primary legislation currently applicable to coroners, the Coroners Act 1962, specifically prohibits the consideration or investigation of any question of civil or criminal liability at an inquest. In that regard, it is a requirement that the inquest must be confined to ascertaining the identity of the person on whose death the inquest is being held and how, when and where the death occurred. With regard to the holding of an inquest under the 1962 Act, a coroner is a statutory officer exercising quasi-judicial functions, in which regard he or she is independent. Accordingly, a coroner is responsible for the holding of an inquest and for conducting the inquest. In that regard, it is not open to the Minister or his Department to intervene on a particular case. However, the courts have ruled that they have the capacity to determine whether a coroner may have exceeded his or her jurisdiction in respect of a specific inquest. Within that framework an application for a judicial review may be made if it is considered there has been a defect in the conduct of an inquest or in its conclusions.

The circumstances linked to the case referred to by the Deputy are undoubtedly complex and it would not be appropriate to enter into a discussion on them. That being said, I might mention that these circumstances have led to judicial review proceedings which were initiated against the Minister for Justice and Equality and the Attorney General. In the event, the proceedings were not successful and, given the background involved, the State did not seek to recoup its costs.

No doubt the Deputy will recall that the Coroners Bill 2007 was restored to the Order Paper in 2011. The Bill provides for a comprehensive overhaul of the law relating to coroners and it provides for the recognition of the views of a victim's family. In particular, section 36 provides that the coroner is required to inform the family of the deceased person, or such interested person as the coroner considers appropriate, of a range of matters relating to the investigation of the death. The coroner is required, in as far as is practicable, to keep such persons informed of the progress and conclusion of the investigation. The Coroners Bill is being reviewed within the Department of Justice and Equality. This process will be completed as quickly as possible and the Deputy can be assured the concerns he has raised will be taken into account in the course of the review. The Minister is very conscious of the hurt and trauma for family members involved in this tragic case.

Deputy Dara Calleary: When will we see the Coroners Bill in the House? Does the Bill make any provision for sanction if a coroner does not perform his or her duty? Will there be a way of measuring how that duty is performed in terms of his or her interaction with the family, including taking expert evidence that may be suggested by the family in order for them to get answers?

While we disagree with the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Shatter, on many things, he has a consistent track record of involving victims and promoting the rights of families

of victims. In that context, this matter is very urgent. Families who are traumatised and suffering enormous grief should not have to go to the courts to get answers. I hope the Minister will use some of the findings from this case to enhance the Coroners Bill to give the families of victims, particularly in a murder case, a better standing and respect. The Minister should look at the issue of media treatment of cases, particularly before a formal inquest gets under way, to ensure the rights of families are respected up to and during the inquest process.

Deputy Brian Hayes: I thank the Deputy for his remarks. The Bill was published in 2007 and it is unacceptable it has taken so many years to get it on the Statute Book. The Deputy asked about the timeline. I understand it is the firm intention of the Minister to review this as quickly as possible in order that we can make progress and review it in a way which involves many of the issues the Deputy has mentioned. In regard to civil law, as he rightly points out, there has been a substantial improvement in respect of the treatment and the rights of victims in cases before the ordinary courts. Whether there would be some new provisions within the Bill to deal with coroners where some malpractice or complaint has arisen is, I believe, a separate issue on the basis that there always has to be, under our system of courts, some form of a judicial appeal. The current dilemma is basically on a point of law rather than conduct and that issue would have to be teased out.

With regard to the Deputy's concerns about the review, we need to get to the review and resolve this as soon as possible. We certainly need to enhance the standing and the information given to victims and their families as a result of cases before the Coroner's Court because, of course, the court is a fundamental part of finding the facts of a case, certainly in regard to the basic information as to how someone died and the circumstances around it. People who die have rights too. It is established under international and Irish law that there is a right to find out exactly what occurred, when it occurred and the how, if one likes. In so far as we need a piece of modern legislation in respect of the Coroner's Court, the existing legislation is certainly not adequate and the Minister accepts that. As far as he is concerned, it is a priority to fix that by way of the review, as he has outlined.

Hospital Consultants Recruitment

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I am very pleased this subject has been selected. I doubt the Minister for Health or any other Minister can be satisfied with the situation that pertains in regard to neurological services. We have just seven rehabilitation consultants in the country and we are ranked second worst in Europe. If we increased this figure to 50, we would still be ranked second worst in Europe, and if we increased it to 150, we would still have fewer consultants *per capita* than Serbia, Croatia or Latvia, all of which have overcome very serious economic and governance issues in recent years.

This is having a very direct impact on people who urgently need care. It is inhibiting and making people dependent rather than independent, and that itself has costs. The Neurological Alliance of Ireland, which is an excellent organisation that works tirelessly on this issue, has produced statistics recently that show 40% of those affected could not access neuro-psychological services, 25% could not access physiotherapy or occupational therapy, 57% were badly impacted by the rising cost of medication, 25% were forced to use private physiotherapy services, which is a very big expense for them, 17% were refused a medical card, 10% had their medical card withdrawn and 84% had serious concerns into the future about the cost of health

care and cutbacks.

The alliance has identified a number of areas where it believes changes need to happen urgently. The question of waiting lists and the recruitment of specialists is critical. Multidisciplinary care is hampered by an over-stretched level of staffing and the embargo. The aftercare at community level is practically non-existent in some areas. This is an area where we are not working very smartly in that it will cost us to keep people dependent. Urgent investment is required in this area.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: I welcome the opportunity to raise this very important issue. There are some very startling figures in regard to the number of people who are suffering with neurological problems. More than 700,000 people in Ireland have some neurological condition and in ten years time there will be 860,000 such people. That is a staggering number of people who will be impacted and it points to the urgency of the issue. Some 44,000 individuals are newly diagnosed each year and 89,000 individuals are disabled by their neurological condition. In excess of 66,000 people care for someone with a neurological condition. I know people's eyes sometimes glaze over when one starts quoting numbers, but these are very stark and startling figures.

I will not repeat the points made so ably by Deputy Murphy in regard to the low number of neurologists in the country. I take a moment to reflect on our colleague, Deputy Nicky McFadden, who is suffering from motor neurone disease. What we need is not just adequate but proper neuro-rehabilitation. If the people who are suffering from any of the many known diseases which are neurologically based, such as multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease and motor neurone disease, do not have proper access, they are less likely to return to work, which may be possible depending on their condition. They are also more likely to need expensive nursing home care and their stays in hospital will be for longer or they will be more frequently readmitted. We need to look at implementing the neuro-rehabilitation strategy which was planned in 2011 by this Government. That is something we need to prioritise and I call on the Minister for Health and the Government to do so.

Deputy Brian Hayes: I thank both Deputies for raising this very important issue on health care provision and service. As both Deputies will know, in 2011 a national policy and strategy for the provision of neuro-rehabilitation services in Ireland was set out for a four-year period from 2011 to 2015, and the Health Service Executive established the clinical rehabilitation medicine programme by way of a number of initiatives in that area. Many people believe the key to success of these developments is the approval and assignment of regional rehabilitation medicine consultants, which was the point raised by Deputy Murphy. I want to put on record, because it is important to do so, that the number of rehabilitation medicine consultants nationally increased from seven to 12 in 2013 with the appointment of five new national and regional specialists currently taking up posts, a point I will return to later. Specialist inpatient and outpatient units have been identified to operate in each of the four current Health Service Executive regions, with clinical governance and expertise provided by the National Rehabilitation Hospital.

I understand the National Rehabilitation Hospital has put in place a number of new initiatives to address the issues raised by the Deputies. The first is a pooled shared waiting list so that, whereas previously the patient waited for the consultant he or she was under, the patient now waits with everyone else and, as availability arises, he or she is dealt with. Second, the early access rehabilitation unit caters for patients whose treatment programme can typically be

completed in a shorter period, which enables increased throughput of patients with less complex needs. Third, the National Rehabilitation Hospital actively manages the waiting time for admission to the high-intensity rehabilitation beds, and the current average waiting time for admission is down from 273 days to 148 days, so obviously some progress has been made under the National Rehabilitation Hospital.

The Government has committed to part-funding a 120 bed rehabilitation unit with integrated therapy spaces to replace the existing National Rehabilitation Hospital at an estimated total cost of €54 million. The national clinical programme for neurology has reviewed the demand and capacity for access to neurology consultants for adult services. Consultants have been appointed to seven of the proposed ten additional posts over the past 18 months. The remaining three consultant posts are in various stages of the national recruitment process. One consultant neurologist has commenced in paediatric services, along with two additional consultant paediatric neuro-physiologists. The HSE has made commitments in the 2014 operational plan on the implementation of the neuro-rehabilitation strategy. A steering group has been established to guide its implementation and ensure adequate links with the clinical rehabilitation medicine programme.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The improvements are tiny in comparison with the need identified. It is shameful. When one looks at the return from being smart and helping people to rehabilitate in order that they can play a more active and, possibly, complete role in society, it is mind-blowing that our ambition is so limited. It is not just about counting the cost of appointing specialists; it is also about outcomes and the roles people can play. We talk about the provision of high dependency beds in the National Rehabilitation Hospital; there are only three such beds. We are keeping people in acute hospitals when they could move to rehabilitation centres. It is so short-sighted. Money is also being cut in the not-for-profit sector in which there is voluntary support. Therefore, people are being hit on the double. There is a need to revisit this issue. It is about working in a smarter way and taking a longer view. Too little has been done.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: I very much welcome the news that additional consultant neurologists have been appointed this year, but that is only part of the picture. There are many other parts of the strategy on which we need to focus. Only a very small proportion of people can access the National Rehabilitation Hospital. I think the figure is about one half because of where they are located. Those living in regional areas need to be able to access specialist rehabilitation services in regional hospitals. There is also a need for community-based teams to provide rehabilitation services for people close to their own homes. Aids and appliances will be needed to enable response times to be much quicker. People with a neurological condition require counselling, support and information. This is part of the bigger picture for those who urgently need a response from us to resolve the difficulties they are experiencing.

Deputy Brian Hayes: I share the frustration of colleagues about the roll-out of a programme that dates back to 2011 and a strategy which at the time was to be achieved within a four-year timeline and their desire to achieve much more for people who find themselves in this position. As Deputies Marcella Corcoran Kennedy and Catherine Murphy said, this is about more than just acute hospital services. It is also about the supports we need to provide for communities to help people on their journey of rehabilitation.

On behalf of the Minister for Health, I wish to state the Government is committed to the strategy and believes it is the best way to achieve the improvements in services for people who find themselves in this position. Obviously, the commitment to part fund to the tune of €54

million a new rehabilitation centre with over 120 beds and which will provide multidisciplinary therapy support is welcome, but we must get on with the task of fully funding the service because that is the only way we will be able to make a difference. I note that the steering group has been established. I am not aware whether both Deputies are members of the Joint Committee on Health and Children, but it might be offer a useful opportunity to call in the steering group at the earliest opportunity to see what progress we can make, particularly in making sure the three additional postholders are in place this year. Providing for such oversight of the work of the steering group would be very useful and is something the Minister would support. We need to keep up the pressure to make sure we deliver on the strategy.

Counselling Services

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Rape Crisis Network Ireland, RCNI, is a specialist information and resource centre on rape and all forms of sexual violence. It is the umbrella body for member rape crisis centres which provide free advice, counselling and support for survivors of sexual abuse. There is real concern about the future of RCNI as its funding is due to cease at the end of March and that a tendering process for services is proposed when an invaluable service with a proven track record is already available in RCNI.

RCNI is responsible for the development of a national database which is essential in developing policy objectives and service responses. These data represent the collective story of the survivors who have utilised rape crisis services and are a vital tool in working to end sexual violence and providing the best possible service for survivors.

RCNI represents member rape crisis centres on important committees such as the National Steering Committee on Violence Against Women and its sub-committees, the regional advisory committees and the Commission for the Support of Victims of Crime. Its representation on these committees ensures survivors' voices are heard at a national level. It partners with Foróige, the national youth organisation, to deliver the integrated youth development programme REAL U.

RCNI is responsible for the development of the best practice model signed up to by all member rape crisis centres. All rape crisis centres sign service level agreements with the HSE which require compliance with Children First. RCNI monitors member rape crisis centres to ensure each centre is compliant in meeting all Children First requirements and ensures all rape crisis centre boards have adopted best practice standards not just in respect of Children First but in all policies.

RCNI is responsible for providing member rape crisis centres with specialised training for both staff and volunteers around court and Garda accompaniment. It has a dedicated expert and specialist resource to support a wide programme of work to obtain justice for the victims of sexual violence. It provides rape crisis centres with the opportunity to interact with each other, allowing them to learn from each, support and help each other, share resources and ideas and inspire each other.

If funding for RCNI is discontinued at the end of March as has been signalled, it will, in turn, have a seriously negative impact on individual rape crisis centres and the survivors who use their services. Iarraim ar an Rialtas gan maoiniú a ghearradh don eagrais fíor-fíúntach agus tábhachtach seo. Tá RCNI ag cabhrú le lár-ionaid ar fud na tíre atá ag tacú le daoine a d'fhulaing éigniú. Beidh sé scanallach má leanann an Rialtas ar aghaidh leis an chiorrú seo. In

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ainm na ndaoine atá ag braith ar an seirbhís seo, ná dean é.

Deputy Brian Hayes: I have a reply from the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs who, unfortunately, is out of the country. She asks me to apologise to the Deputy for being unable to attend the debate and is grateful to the Deputy for putting this matter on the agenda of Dáil Éireann. I will not read out the first page of the reply because we know about the Child and Family Agency which I think we all support and the work it is doing in the provision of domestic and sexual violence services.

As part of the establishment of the new Child and Family Agency, a dedicated position of programme manager for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence has been created. I understand the new programme manager took up the position in early February this year. I also understand the HSE spent over €17 million on the provision of domestic and sexual violence services. This included the funding of 60 services and centres throughout the country comprising €10 million for 20 crisis refuges, more than €4 million for 16 rape crisis centres and almost €3.5 million for 24 support services.

5 o'clock

Rape Crisis Network Ireland received funding of €256,000 from the HSE in 2013. The financial statements for 2012 indicate that the organisation received total income of more than €650,000, including €256,000 from the HSE. Rape Crisis Network Ireland had a two year service level agreement with the HSE which expired on 31 December 2013, but which was extended to 31 March 2014 to allow for the establishment of the Child and Family Agency, the appointment of a programme manager for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services, and to enable the agency to tender for future support services to support front-line agencies. The recently appointed programme manager responsible for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services is working with the head of procurement in the agency to establish a tender process, due to begin in September, for longer-term provision of support to front-line agencies from 2015. The process will be open to all qualified providers, including Rape Crisis Network Ireland, to tender for this new contract.

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs discussed the issue of funding of Rape Crisis Network Ireland with Gordon Jeyes, who is the CEO of the Child and Family Agency. It has been decided to commission specific projects from a number of providers during 2014, including Rape Crisis Network Ireland, and discussions regarding these contracts are in train. In allocating funding for support activities to front-line services in 2014, the focus is on activities that will enhance the capacity of the agency to ensure front-line services are supported in the delivery of high quality effective services. I assure the Deputy and the House that funding is ring-fenced to provide front-line services in this area and there are no plans to reduce supports to key services.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I thank the Minister of State and appreciate that the Minister is not in the country, and that he is delivering the reply on her behalf.

I appreciate it will not be possible to get into the nitty-gritty of this, but it seems to me that for a part of this year we will not know who will fulfil the critical function that RCNI has fulfilled very effectively during its tenure, to my best knowledge. A process will now get under way with the signalled conclusion more than six months away, when a decision will be taken on funding supports for the provision as and from 2015 of the services that RCNI has fulfilled. I

am very concerned about the here and now. This is not a matter we can move about on a chess board or anything else. It is of such serious and immediate import that we must have permanently in place the overarching role that RCNI has clearly played as a critical umbrella force on behalf of the rape crisis centres across this land.

I can only urge the Minister of State to use his own good offices with the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to appeal for every consideration to be given to the role of the RCNI and to its continuance at least during any so-called interregnum period. Those from rape crisis centres who have been in touch with me would favour RCNI being able to continue to carry out its particular role and service. I have no reason to dispute that. If those who are at the coalface of the provision of supports to victims of sexual violence have absolute confidence in RCNI, then I believe their opinion must count for something.

Deputy Brian Hayes: I very much appreciate the remarks of Deputy Ó Caoláin concerning the very important role RCNI plays. I am aware of that. Without understanding a huge amount of the reasoning behind this, it probably comes down to the fact that since 1 January 2014, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs took over responsibility in this area instead of the Minister for Justice and Equality. It falls under her remit because the Child and Family Agency is within her Department. From a good governance perspective, it is important that where the State is grant aiding organisations, it does so in a clear, transparent way. It would seem that the new director believes the appropriate way to channel the very significant resource, which is not diminishing in any way, is in a way which effectively invites tenders again for longer-term funding rather than the kind of annual funding which most organisations feel to be unfair to them.

The question the Deputy raises is the here and now, as the funding envelope finishes at the end of March and he wants to know what will happen between now and September. The key issue is whether there can be any retrospection when the issue comes, because I do not want to interfere with the tendering process, nor does he. It probably is fair that there should be some interregnum period while the tendering is taking place for accessibility of funding. The Deputy is wondering what happens between now and September, and I would be confident of its later continuation and support. I will raise this issue specifically with the Minister to see exactly what additional support can be given between now and September.

Community Welfare Services

Deputy John O'Mahony: I appreciate that this topic was chosen. It comes about as a result of the centralisation of social welfare and community welfare services in Mayo. I acknowledge the reasoning behind it, which is the creation of a one-stop-shop and improved services for people on social welfare in order to get long-term unemployed people back to work. Community welfare officers deal with a range of other subjects, however, and many of those are emergency situations at short notice. We have a huge area where there is no public transport, but many of the people who call to the clinic would not have their own transport and they need to talk to someone face to face.

The worst affected area is in east Mayo, followed by south Mayo. Clinics have been closed in Kilmovee, Kilkelly, Charlestown, Kiltimagh, Swinford, Ballyhaunis and Foxford. This means that the entire east Mayo area is left without a community welfare service on the ground. My own home parish of Kilmovee has been assigned to Ballina, which is 51 km away. Mayo is

the third biggest county in the country. Kilkelly is a similar distance to Ballina. Ballyhaunis is assigned to Castlebar, which is 45 km away. Kiltimagh is 26 km away. I note that Westport is 11 km from Castlebar, but its service has been retained, although I have no problem with that. I point that out more for the need for something to be done about east Mayo rather than to close down any other service. South Mayo has also been badly affected including Cong, Shrule, Holymount and Claremorris. I do not want to jump up and down, as it were, without making suggestions. There could be a centralised office in east Mayo, which has an area larger than County Louth. A central office would provide a point of contact within reasonable distance and would represent a solution. Another option presents. Kilmovee is one of the places I mentioned. It is six miles from Ballaghaderreen, Roscommon, where there is an office, but people are being told in the Kilmovee community centre, where the social welfare officer calls once a week, that there is no cross-border co-operation. People must therefore make a round trip of more than 100 km even though there is an office six miles away. There must be a solution rooted in common sense. I look forward to the response. I will then have a couple of further questions.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform Deputy Brian Hayes: I apologise on behalf of the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Burton, who cannot be here this evening. She has asked me to respond.

A key objective of the transfer of the community welfare service, CWS, from the Health Service Executive to the Department of Social Protection on 1 October 2011 was to provide a streamlined and consistent service to the customer. As part of this process and to support the Department's activation commitments under the Pathways to Work programme and the development of Intreo services nationally, it has been necessary to review the administration of all services, including the CWS. Pathways to Work involves the provision of opportunities, support and assistance to unemployed people by intensifying the Department's level of engagement with them, particularly those who are or become long-term unemployed. The Intreo service delivery model offers practical, tailored employment services and supports for jobseekers. This new service model, which is more efficient in its delivery, is being rolled out across the country. Roll-out is due to be completed for all offices by the end of 2014. Speaking as Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works, I understand we will be up to 62 by the end of the year. The most recent completion was in Castlebar.

To maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of operation and to ensure continuity of service in light of reducing resources in County Mayo, a decision was made to relocate the CWS to five dedicated locations where Intreo centres will operate. These locations are at Achill, Ballina, Belmullet, Castlebar and Westport. A full range of services will be available at single locations in these places. In the coming weeks, up to eight staff drawn primarily from the CWS will take up new roles as activation case officers supporting those who are unemployed across County Mayo. Where the CWS is being re-structured, alternative arrangements are being put in place to ensure customers are provided with ongoing access to the supports provided by the service. In general, this means the frequency of available public clinics has increased, an improved and enhanced telephone service is available, and alternative arrangements are in place for those who cannot travel due, for example, to illness. These arrangements include visits to the client's home if necessary. Customers who live closer to clinics in other counties can also be accommodated by visiting those clinics instead and practical local arrangements can be made in this regard. I hope, therefore, that the issue the Deputy raised can be resolved.

Deputy John O'Mahony: That might be a solution.

Deputy Brian Hayes: It is also important to note that people claiming supports under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme tend to interact with the Department only on an occasional basis. This may be where, for example, they seek an exceptional needs payment or claim additional supports such as rent or mortgage interest supplement, which are usually reviewed once to twice yearly. Staffing needs for all areas within the Department are continuously reviewed to ensure the best use is made of all available resources with a view to providing an efficient service to those who rely on the schemes operated by the Department and that the services provided are reconstituted, where necessary, to meet the changing needs of society.

Deputy John O'Mahony: I thank the Minister of State for the statement, especially the clarification on cross-border co-operation. A solution may be possible, which is not what I heard on the ground yesterday. If that has changed, I welcome it. I ask the Minister of State to seek clarification from the Minister for Social Protection on the issue of home visits. Is that something that can only occur in exceptional circumstances or is there wider scope? It would be a solution in certain cases in which transport issues arise. Is it an exceptional or real option? I also ask the Minister of State to inquire of the Minister whether I can meet officials in the west on the cross-border issue. It is timely we are discussing the matter today since the last clinics will take place either today or tomorrow. I am anxious therefore that a solution be put in place as quickly as possible to overcome the problems to which I have referred. I have not mentioned south Mayo in great detail. It would be useful to put a cross-border arrangement in place with neighbouring Galway for that part of Mayo.

Deputy Brian Hayes: The suggestion of a meeting with officials is a very practical one. The manager of the local service should meet the Deputy to iron out some of these issues. We have five Intreo offices in County Mayo.

Deputy John O'Mahony: One side is left.

Deputy Brian Hayes: I accept that the spread is more north and west than south. They are fine offices. I was recently in Castlebar for the opening of the Intreo office there and passed by the Achill office on my way to look at the flooding problems. The offices represent a much better way to transact business. People can use the five offices, which are open five days a week in Ballina and Castlebar, three days a week in Westport and two days a week in Belmullet. My understanding from the notes I have been given is that intra-county clients can, where practical, be accommodated in neighbouring counties. That must be teased out.

The Deputy asked about making home visits and I will read out the note I have been given. It states:

If a face-to-face meeting is still necessary and the customer is unable to travel to the public clinic, arrangements can be made for an officer to visit the customer's home.

We need to tease that out too to ensure clients and people in the Department are aware of what the Minister has said in reply to this debate. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter and I hope we have clarified some of the issues to which he has referred. If a further meeting is required between the Minister and her staff, we can organise that.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.20 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 25 March 2014.