



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 20 Eanáir 2015

Tuesday, 20 January 2015

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Child Care Services Provision

106. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if he will provide the details of his proposed child care plan; the way it will make child care more affordable; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2371/15]

Deputy Robert Troy: Last week's front page of the *Irish Independent* had a story following a leak from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs that the Government would introduce tax credits to help families crippled by the costs of child care. Subsequently, we learned this was in fact not the case and that, instead, the Government was bringing forward a plan in this regard. Will the Minister inform the Dáil what the Government will do after four years in power to help families crippled by the costs of child care?

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy James Reilly): I am tempted to say we did more than Fianna Fáil did in 14 years in power but then that would be unfair.

There is clear evidence that investing in child care services which provide quality care and education for children in their early years pays significant dividends for both the children themselves and for society as a whole. Ensuring the best possible outcomes for children in their early years is, therefore, an important element in future economic planning.

The case for investing in children and young people on both social and economic grounds is supported by a body of international evidence. As the Minister with responsibility for this key area, I propose to establish a cross-departmental group at senior level to develop a whole-

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of-government approach to future investment in early childhood care and education and after-school care.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Another committee.

Deputy James Reilly: The group will undertake an economic and cost-benefit analysis of policies and future options for increasing the supply, accessibility and affordability of quality childhood care and education services.

It is clear accessibility, affordability and high-quality child care can play a critical role in achieving several Government priorities, including improving educational outcome for children, reducing poverty and increasing parents' participation in the labour market. The importance of this area is reinforced by continuing economic improvement and job growth and an increased focus on activation for those currently outside the labour market. To ensure that all the potential benefits can be realised, future public investment in child care must be evidence based and strategically co-ordinated. It must look at the provision right across the nought to six age group as well as consider the after-school needs of school-going children. It is crucial, therefore, that we develop a coherent cross-Government approach to investment in child care services.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thought the whole purpose of having a new Department of Children and Youth Affairs was to co-ordinate all this. The Minister has had four years in office and I remind him of what the Government has done in those four years regarding the cost of child care. It has reduced child benefit, taxed maternity benefit and reduced the capitation rates that are paid to the child care providers. The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Burton, promised a Scandinavian model and what we got was 6,000 after-school places. After 18 months of that scheme being in operation, fewer than 100 places have been taken up. In November 2013 the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Fitzgerald, promised a review of the community child care scheme and the community education and training support scheme. That review has yet to take place. If the Minister wants to talk about the previous Government's record on child care, we created 65,000 places and ensured there was a proper infrastructure in place for the sector. We introduced a fee preschool year. In the last two budgets, my party put forward fully costed proposals on how we could look at dealing with the crippling costs of child care facing so many families.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Robert Troy: If this Government was serious about dealing with this issue it would have used budget 2015 to deal with it, instead of announcing two weeks after that budget came into effect that it was going to establish yet another committee to look into a problem we already know is there.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Dead right, hear, hear.

Deputy James Reilly: Indeed, as the Deputy works himself up into a lather, we know that problem is there, and that one of the main reasons it is there is the state of the economy as we found it. There is no escaping that, although Deputy Troy might not want to be reminded of it. He personally, as opposed to the party he purports to represent here, may very well not have been in government then. The bottom line is that child care has become like a second mortgage for families and the costs around it, and this Government wants to put in place a coherent, properly-costed approach to support parents and children and to get the best outcomes. We

know every euro spent in the early years gives the biggest dividend, but we also know families are struggling with the cost of after-school care for children who go to school and that there are concerns about what is available to teenage schoolgoers after school. Clearly, one of the underlying principles that we will be seeking to address will be to use our influence as a State to ensure that parents have choice, that it is affordable, but that we have some control over standards and the quality of care that their children receive. People want to be assured that when their child is in a facility, he or she is not just safe but is flourishing.

Deputy Robert Troy: We all support quality child care provision and no one is questioning that. Anybody who is in receipt of State support should be fully tax-compliant and should meet the standards set out by the Department. That is fact and taken as a given. What we saw last week, however, was more spin by this Government, aided and abetted by the *Irish Independent* as it is so capable of doing in recent years. The fact of the matter is that the current Government is four years in power. We do not need another committee or another report. We have report after report highlighting and confirming that child care costs in Ireland are now among the highest in the OECD. An average family with two children is paying 40% of its net income. We have produced suggestions and solutions if this Government was of a mind to support them. Every budget that is introduced involves political choices and in the last four budgets this Government introduced, it did not do anything to support affordable child care. When will this Government act to ensure that we will have quality, affordable child care for the tens of thousands of families out there that are crippled with the cost now?

Deputy James Reilly: What the Deputy says is utterly untrue. In the last budget there was an increase in children's allowance and extra money was made available to my Department to could support the Child and Family Agency. There was also a reduction in the marginal rate of tax, an increase in the threshold at which people moved into the higher rate of tax and reductions in the universal social charge. A further 80,000 were taken out of the net of the Fianna Fáil tax, the universal social charge. Much has been done by the Government, despite the ferocious challenges it faced when it took power and had to deal with the unprecedented financial mess in which Fianna Fáil had left the country.

Deputy Robert Troy: The question is about the cost of child care.

Deputy James Reilly: It was an unprecedented financial mess in which Fianna Fáil had left not only parents and children but the entire country. Furthermore, our international reputation was in tatters. It is very easy for the Deputy to come into the Chamber and advert to the fact that we have been in power for four years and pick a specific area, in which, in fact, much has been done, but he is seeking for more to be done. To paraphrase Mr. Bill Clinton, the problem for those in Fianna Fáil is that it has taken us so long to clean up their mess.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

107. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if he will provide details of all homes and institutions that were excluded from the proposed inquiry into mother and baby homes, including the Magdalene laundries and Westbank, County Wicklow; the grounds on which they were excluded; the measures being put in place to ensure that survivors of these excluded institutions, now all in their senior years, will be heard, acknowledged and entitled to redress; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2373/15]

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Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I want to establish the number of mother and baby homes and similar institutions that have not been included in the terms of reference of the new commission of investigation. I am keen to receive the full list from the Minister. I would like to know why certain institutions have been excluded. Moreover, I would like to receive an assurance that those who have gone through the harrowing experience of placement in excluded entities will have the opportunity to be heard in the course of commission of inquiry sittings, that their hurt and pain will be acknowledged and that they will not be excluded from any redress scheme that may arise at the conclusion of the inquiry.

Deputy James Reilly: I thank the Members who engaged on this issue as their contributions were very helpful. In particular, I thank all those involved who consulted me during the course of the setting of the terms of reference, many of whom were affected directly by the mother and baby homes.

I announced the proposed terms of reference for the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes and certain related matters on Friday, 9 January. Relevant details are available on the Department's website, www.dcy.gov.ie. Since the announcement there has been a general acknowledgement of the comprehensive scope of the proposed investigative framework which reflects the range of matters the Government was asked to consider by the House and is a fair and balanced response to the many requests for related issues to be included.

During the course of consultations with those most centrally affected by these issues, as well as political colleagues across the spectrum, a clear consensus emerged on the need to thoroughly examine the experience of those who had spent time in mother and baby homes. These institutions have not been the central focus of previous statutory investigations. The approach taken, therefore, places a deliberate emphasis on the experiences of women and children who spent time in mother and baby homes during the period 1922 to 1998, over three quarters of a century. Accordingly, the terms of reference focus on institutions that can be identified as having both the primary function of providing sheltered and supervised ante and post-natal facilities for single mothers and their children, as well as an ethos which those running the institutions considered as one promoting a regime of work, training or education as part of an overall approach to either rehabilitating single mothers before they left the institution or giving them training to live independently. The commission will also investigate a representative sample of those county homes which had a considerable focus on these services.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

On the basis of the information available I am satisfied that the institutions included in schedule 1 to the draft order meet these criteria, whereas the institutions referred to by the Deputy do not, as they did not provide this specific range of services. However, it is not accurate to describe these institutions as being excluded from the commission's work. The commission is tasked with examining the extent to which other institutions were part of the entry or exit pathways for single mothers and children into or leaving these mother and baby homes. It is certainly open to the commission to give consideration to the role of the institutions referred to by the Deputy as part of the pathways and, in particular, the practices and procedures for the placement of children outside mother and baby homes. This will be a significant strand of the investigations of the commission. The issues to be examined in the social history module also explicitly cite adoption societies, homes for infants or children and Magdalen laundries.

It is important to be clear and realistic about our expectations. The commission is not

intended to investigate every type of institution where it is considered there might have been past deficits or failings, nor could it; rather, my objective is to establish a focused commission with all of the necessary powers capable of establishing effectively relevant facts in a reasonable time frame. This specificity is required under the enabling legislation. Moreover, other inquiries have examined concerns about a wide range of settings, including children's homes and Magdalen laundries.

The proposed arrangements, in particular, Article 6 of the terms of reference, ensure the commission will have sufficient opportunities to identify additional matters it considers may warrant investigation. It is specifically tasked with reporting to me recommendations necessary in this regard.

The commission will be critical in coming to terms with our history. Some of what we learn will be painful, but the commission will establish how we, as a society, responded to single women and their children who needed support and assistance, rather than judgment.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I acknowledge the effort invested in preparation for the launch of the commission of inquiry, but the Minister has not replied to the question asked and I am keen to establish the reason. The Minister's answer does not in any way shed light on it. I am deeply concerned about the exclusion of Avoca House in County Wicklow; Braemor House in County Cork; St. Gerard's, Herbert Avenue; St. Philomena's, Leeson Street and later Northbrook Road; St. Joseph's baby home, Stamullen; St. Kevin's Institution, James' Street; St. Patrick's Infant Hospital, Temple Hill, Blackrock; St. Rita's Nursing Home, Sandford Road; the Nursery Rescue Society, Fermoy; the Westbank or Mayil orphanage, County Wicklow and many other institutions that should be addressed in the course of the at least three-year inquiry that lies ahead. Since the public launch on Friday week last, I have met people who have gone through a number of these institutions. I think back to the commentary of one woman who went through the Westbank entity in County Wicklow. She spoke about being robbed of her identity and of all that was precious. She is no longer a young woman and said she was being robbed yet again. She is not one of those to be properly included. I have always outlined to the Minister and his predecessors that inclusivity is the critical factor by which we should gauge this particular undertaking. On the basis of her evidence and the evidence of others I have met who have been through the Westbank experience, there is absolutely no question but that it ticks the box as having performed a role as a mother and baby home. That was a distinct and integral part of its work.

Deputy James Reilly: The Deputy's question relates to the Magdalen laundries and Westbank, County Wicklow. On the basis of the information available, I am satisfied that the institutions included in Schedule 1 to the draft order meet the criteria, whereas the institutions referred to by the Deputy do not, as they did not provide the specific range of services. However, it is not accurate to describe them as being excluded from the commission's work. The commission is tasked with examining the extent to which other institutions were part of the entry or exit pathways for single mothers and children into or leaving these mother and baby homes. It is certainly open to it to give consideration to the role of the institutions referred to by the Deputy as being part of the pathways and, in particular, the practices and procedures for the placement of children outside mother and baby homes. This will form a significant strand of its investigations. The issues to be examined in the social history module also explicitly cite adoption societies, homes for infants or children and Magdalen laundries.

It is important to be clear and realistic as to our expectations. The commission is not in-

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tended to, nor could it, investigate every type of institution where it is considered there might have been past deficits or failings; rather, my objective is to establish a focused commission with all of the necessary powers that will be capable of establishing effectively relevant facts in a reasonable timeframe. This specificity is required under the enabling legislation. It is also the case that other inquiries have examined concerns about a wide range of settings, including children's homes and Magdalen laundries.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I have to try my best and take the positives from what the Minister said, namely, that people are not being excluded if an entity has not been named. I hope that will prove to be the case. I ask the Minister to make his response and wishes in that regard patently and abundantly clear to the commission of investigation membership.

Child trafficking is not a new phenomenon. We know from the evidence that children were moved back and forth across the Border without proper or prior approval or recording. They were moved back and forth by individuals and entities with specific religious outlooks. It is critically important that the commission of investigation properly recognise this fact. Any advertising to inform people of the opportunities the commission will present must include advertising north of the Border, as well as in other settings in Britain, the United States and elsewhere. That is very important. Will the Minister confirm the Northern dimension to this issue, including in respect of the entities which operated in the manner I described?

The Minister may not be able to answer my next question but I am flagging the issue now because we will have an opportunity to address it more substantively tomorrow. Is he in a position to advise if researchers will have access to the Clandillon index card file, which contains information on boarded out children? Does he have any idea where the file is held? Will it be among the documentation that will be required, sought and secured by the commission of inquiry in the course of its work?

Deputy James Reilly: The proposed arrangements, in particular Article 6 of the terms of reference, ensure the commission will have sufficient opportunity to identify any additional matters it considers may warrant investigation. The commission is specifically tasked with reporting to me any recommendations necessary in that regard. It will be critically important in coming to terms with our history and I have no doubt that some of what we learn will be painful.

The commission will establish how we, as a society, responded to single women and their children, who needed support and assistance rather than judgment. The confidential committee is a vitally important aspect of this work. It will be under the control of the commission and will operate under the direction of and be accountable to the commission. Its procedures provide for individuals who wish to have their identity remain confidential during the conduct of the commission and its subsequent reporting. It will produce a report of a general nature on the experiences of the single women and children which the commission may, to the extent it considers appropriate, rely upon to inform the investigation set out in Article 1.

The social history element of this process is also critical. The commission allows us to investigate a wide range of issues. It is not simply an exercise in information gathering *per se* as the commission also has the power to compel people to produce documents and give evidence.

Dáil Éireann
Child Poverty

108. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs his plans to deal with child poverty in 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2324/15]

Deputy Finian McGrath: I ask the Minister to outline his plans to address child poverty this year. He will be aware that Ireland ranks 37th out of 41 OECD countries, ahead of Croatia, Latvia, Greece and Iceland, in a league table measuring relative changes in child poverty. Approximately 130,000 children in the State are living in dire poverty, which means their families do not have enough food on the table and they do not have breakfast before leaving for school each morning. Many of them rely on school completion programmes to feed them before the school day begins. I do not want to hear the Minister engage in a blame game or allude to committees that are examining this issue. What is he doing to address child poverty?

Deputy James Reilly: Child poverty is a serious issue which is being considered by the Government. Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020, which was published and launched by the Government in 2014, provides the overarching framework for the development and implementation of policy and services for children and young people. As provided for in the framework, the Department of Social Protection is the lead Department on child poverty and has lead responsibility for the commitment to lift more than 70,000 children out of consistent poverty by 2020. This would deliver a reduction of at least two thirds on the 2011 level. The Department of Social Protection also has lead responsibility for the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion.

The outcomes of the recent national seminar under the auspices of the European Commission and Departments of Social Protection and Children and Youth Affairs will inform the development of an implementation plan for tackling child poverty.

My Department is working on a number of initiatives which are relevant in addressing issues related to child poverty. For example, in terms of other provision, my Department is spending €260 million annually on child care support programmes which provide child care to 100,000 children. A number of these programmes are targeted at those on lowest incomes. The community child care scheme programme provides subvention support to parents on low incomes and parents in receipt of certain social welfare payments whose children are enrolled in community child care facilities. Additionally, the three training and employment child care, TEC, programmes - the child care education and training programme, the community employment child care programme and the after-school child care programme - provide child care supports to eligible parents returning to work or to education.

The Department is leading the implementation of the area based childhood, ABC, programme. The ABC programme is being co-funded by Atlantic Philanthropies and will have total funding of up to €29.7 million. The ABC programme draws on best international practice to break the cycle of child poverty where it is most deeply entrenched and improve the outcomes for children and young people and existing services.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The outcomes of the recent European Commission-Department of Social Protection-Department of Children and Youth Affairs national seminar will inform the development of an implementation plan for tackling child poverty.

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Deputy Finian McGrath: The Minister used the buzz-words “lead Department” and spoke about plans for 2020. What I am interested in is what he is going to do in 2015. It is important that the Minister and the Government acknowledge there is a huge problem in regard to poverty in this State. Yesterday was an example that proved how out of touch the Government is, when we had the Taoiseach, Ministers and the IMF prancing around Dublin Castle and patronising the Irish people about having to put up with austerity for the last number of years.

I would like to remind the Minister of a couple of things. Eighteen OECD countries recorded a reduction in child poverty during the same period, including Chile, Australia and Poland. Is the Minister aware that UNICEF has said the impact of the financial crisis saw a disproportionate decline in children’s well-being? In other words, its report disputes the “blame it on the recession” or “blame it on Fianna Fáil” syndrome. The fact is that out of the 41 countries, 18 managed to reduce child poverty despite the economic downturn whereas Ireland managed to increase it.

The Minister should answer those questions and stop distracting people with his other comments. His job is to try to get children out of poverty. He should get on and do it.

Deputy James Reilly: My job, as Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, is to secure better outcomes and brighter futures for children, and that includes getting them out of poverty and also includes supporting their parents. As I was saying in my initial reply, my Department also provides targeted support for disadvantaged, marginalised and at-risk young people. This is provided through the special projects for youth scheme, the young people’s facilities and services fund - rounds 1 and 2 - and the local drugs task force projects. In addition, some 31 national and major regional youth work organisations are supported under my Department’s youth service grant scheme and other schemes include the local youth club grant scheme and the youth information centres. In 2015, current funding of €49.93 million will be provided to my Department for these schemes.

I again take the opportunity to record my gratitude and thanks to the tens of thousands of volunteers who support our young people through these clubs. Their volunteerism is extraordinary and is among the best in the world. In fact, we have information showing that this country has the greatest amount of engagement of young people in this sort of organisation.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I would like the Minister to develop the point further. Would he agree that countries should place the well-being of children at the top of their priorities during an economic recession? My second point is that children who live in poverty are more likely to become poor adults and continue this cycle. It is sad to see that it takes a report from an outside agency like UNICEF to highlight the poverty of our own children. We need to stop this short-termism and look at interventions to prevent long-term problems of child poverty. This is not being addressed and we need to be more inclusive and creative. I said earlier we have 130,000 children in severe poverty and we need to do something about it.

Poland, which I mentioned earlier, has reduced child poverty by 30%. Perhaps the Minister should look at how it did it and perhaps he should visit Poland for advice, because there has been an increase in child poverty in this country while Poland and other countries have reduced it by 30%. I suggest the Minister should look at examples of good practice across Europe and get on with the job.

Deputy James Reilly: I assure the Deputy that children and child poverty are a priority for

the Government. This was the first Government to create a full Cabinet level post for a Minister for Children. Our commitment to improving outcomes for children is clear and I make it clear that our children are our future. I am privileged to have been the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs for several months and I have found nothing but enthusiasm and energy from our younger people. I feel secure about the country's future when I see the young people who will lead us into the future.

My Department has a critical role in regard to child poverty, but the lead Department is the Department of Social Protection. We look to other jurisdictions to see what they do well and what they do not do so well. The idea behind the setting up of the interdepartmental group is to look at affordability and access and, as it says in its title, to look at future investment in childhood and how we invest in our children. It seeks to look at the entire investment we make. While my Department spends €260 million in this area, the Department of Social Protection spends a lot more. Other areas also spend significant sums. We are seeking coherence and understanding of how all of this money is spent so as to be able to get best value for money before we invest further money.

I believe we will need to invest further money and believe the interdepartmental group will come forward with a coherent policy that will cover all of the age groups. It will look at different ways of supporting all age groups to help children and parents and achieve better outcomes for children.

Child Care Services Regulation

109. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs his plans to address the concerns regarding the conditions of those who work in the childcare sector in view of those who are concerned that the sector is facing more regulation and extra requirements for qualifications and training without any corresponding increase in capitation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2372/15]

Deputy Robert Troy: What are the Minister's and the Department's plans to address the concerns about conditions for professionals working in the early childhood care and education sector? Many concerns have been raised in the sector concerning increasing regulation and extra requirements for qualifications and training without any provision for increased capitation or support from the Department. This sector faces serious challenges, but how does the Minister plan to address these?

Deputy James Reilly: It is estimated by Pobal, from information provided by respondents to its 2013 annual survey, that there are approximately 24,000 staff employed in the child care sector.

Child care services in this country are provided by private commercial and community child care services and the level of remuneration provided to child care workers and the conditions of employment are matters for the management of these services. I appreciate the considerable contribution of child care staff to the provision of quality child care services and to the delivery of the child care support programmes which are implemented by my Department. Funding in the region of €260 million is provided annually by my Department directly to child care services to provide for the delivery of these support programmes. This funding is a major source of support to participating child care services and has, at a time of economic difficulty, ensured

the sustainability of many of these services and also helped significantly to maintain employment levels in the sector.

The early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme for example is provided by almost 4,300 preschool services, which is almost all of the preschool services in the country. Funding totalling almost €175 million is allocated annually to these services for the provision of the free preschool year under the ECCE programme. Despite the budgetary situation that prevailed in recent years, the Government maintained this investment and thereby ensured that participating child care services had a guaranteed source of income. This funding also ensures that many parents who would otherwise not be able to avail of preschool care and education for their children are able to enrol their children for the preschool provision.

The ECCE programme also provides a higher rate of capitation to participating child care providers who wish to employ staff that hold a higher level of child care qualifications. This higher rate of funding enables child care providers to provide employment opportunities to child care staff who have obtained professional child care qualifications. This is an important incentive for child care providers to improve the quality of the child care provision. In the school year 2013-14, more than 1,400 child care services received sanction from this Department for the higher capitation rate in accordance with the terms and conditions of the programme.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister has outlined nothing new. He has quoted statistics about which we are aware. He referred to service providers, which are fulfilling a role the State is failing to fulfil. We need to support the early childhood care and education sector, which has expanded at a rapid pace over the past decade. There have been many positive developments, including the provision of 65,000 new places and the introduction of the free preschool year. When it was introduced, it was the first time minimum qualifications were required. Síolta, Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework and the workforce development plan are great programmes but they are not being implemented. Does the Minister acknowledge that the sector is on its knees? The evidence for this is that for the first time ever the sector plans to hold a protest rally in front of the gates of Leinster House in a few weeks because more and more regulations and standards, as is proper, are being introduced but the Department is not matching their requirements with the necessary supports.

Quality, educated and professional staff working in this sector earn little more than the minimum wage and they have to apply for social welfare benefits when early childhood centres close for the summer, which is not right.

Deputy James Reilly: I utterly reject the Deputy's contention that the programmes are not being implemented. While new qualification requirements are being introduced as part of the ongoing progression of the early years quality agenda, my Department has made €3 million available over two years under the learner fund to assist child care staff to obtain the higher qualification levels. I am aware of the significant impact co-ordinated Government investment can have on developments in the child care sector and, for this reason, I propose to establish a cross-departmental group at senior level to develop a whole-of-Government approach to future investment in early childhood care and education and after school care. This group will undertake an economic and cost benefit analysis of policies and future options for increasing the supply, accessibility and affordability of quality childhood care and education services and will also consider workforce development issue as they relate to quality and sustainability.

Deputy Robert Troy: I acknowledge the Minister made €3 million available; that is not

in question. However, in a sector that employs 24,000 people, that equates to €125 per head. That would not buy the books to study at FETAC level 5 or 6. The staff in the sector feel they are undervalued and under resourced for the pivotal role they play in society and they are right. If they did not feel that, they would not travel to the gates of Leinster House in February. The Minister is correct but *Síolta* and *Aistear* are being fragmentarily implemented. They are not being implemented across the country because the resources are not available.

New regulations are on the way with no consultation whatsoever with the sector. They are being foisted on staff. Following the “Prime Time” exposé, new regulations were to be implemented. We still do not know what they will be. We were also promised inspectors would be employed from the early childhood sector. Only a few weeks ago, it was announced that the new inspectors have to be public health nurses, which is a reneging on the commitment. The Department is pursuing an agenda and implementing change without consultation and without giving staff and service providers the necessary supports and resources to implement the change that is needed.

Deputy James Reilly: The Department and I are acutely aware of the difficulties being experienced in the retention of staff. The ECCE programme is for but three hours a day and it only covers 38 weeks annually, which presents challenges. That is what the interdepartmental group is about. There will be engagement with the sector to address that issue so that we can ensure we have high-quality staff with the right qualifications to secure the best sort of care and outcomes for our children. I know that they are committed to it and I thank them for their commitment to our children. We will look at further ways of addressing the issues that have become apparent. I am aware of the unrest in the sector and we will seek to address it through this group in an approach that will be well-informed so that we get the best outcome primarily for our children but also one that permits a sustainable service.

Children in Care

110. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if he will provide details of the revelations that a care home run by Tusla for teenagers was found to contain drug paraphernalia; his plans to ensure that teenagers in such homes may be guaranteed safe environments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2374/15]

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I raise a disturbing report prepared by HIQA following an investigation into an unnamed centre in the Cork area providing high care, ostensibly, to a small number of children. The report shows that the young people concerned are involved in daily illegal drug use and other criminal activity. I would like to know what assurances the Minister can give that the situation has been properly addressed in that specific instance.

Deputy James Reilly: In order to protect the identity of the young people involved, I cannot comment on the particular care home in question. I will say, however, that I take the safety of all children and young people in care very seriously, as do all of the staff in the Child and Family Agency. The latest figures I have received from the agency show that in October 2014, there were 6,454 children in care. The majority of these children - 93% - are placed in foster care - 6,001 of 6,454 - but when a foster care placement is not suitable, children, often older teenagers, are placed in children’s residential centres. Residential care accounts for a very small percentage of children in care at less than 5%. This is 317 children of the 6,454 children in care.

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Ireland is somewhat unusual in that we have quite a number of 16 and 17-year-olds coming into care. Latest figures from the agency indicate over 14% of young people coming into care in 2013 were over the age of 16. My officials are in discussions with the agency about this trend, including earlier and alternative care responses. Some of these teenagers had very difficult lives before coming into care, including histories of emotional and behavioural difficulties and substance misuse. Staff in the agency, including residential care staff and social workers and indeed other agencies across the education and health sectors, have to work together to ensure the best possible outcomes for the young people involved. School attendance is vital for good outcomes, as is attendance at specialist services that they need, including substance misuse or child and adolescent mental health services. Figures I have received from the agency show that at the end of September 2014, 98% of children in care under 16 years and 92% of 16 and 17-year-old children were in full-time education. Some children's residential centres, such as the one in the south referred to in the HIQA inspection report published on 12 January 2015, have psychology services provided on-site for the young people.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The inspection of residential and foster care services is integral to ensuring safe and good quality care. I assure the Deputy that the residential care home in question is currently the subject of a review by the agency and the action plan required is currently at an advanced stage with completion due in the coming weeks. I have instructed my Department to work with the agency and ensure that all recommendations made by inspectors have been implemented to the highest degree.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: It is important that the Minister comments. We are not here to identify the specific setting but it is a HIQA report into an entity that is run by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, which is now directly under the Minister's departmental control. Children at this care centre in the southern region routinely engaged in illegal drug use and criminal activity during frequent absences from the facility. That is what the HIQA report stated following a visit to the setting last July. The report is very critical. Inspectors found that all three children were engaged in the use of illegal substances on a daily basis outside the centre. Highlighting a number of deficiencies, inspectors paid particular attention to a contributory factor to the anti-social behaviour of the teenagers, namely, the high rate of absenteeism at the facility. In the 24 month period prior to the inspection, more than 300 absences without authority were recorded, of which 87 were classed as "missing from care" episodes. This is a very serious matter. I am concerned in the first instance that we get an assurance the circumstances described in the HIQA report published this month have been properly addressed and that the findings from its visit last July no longer apply in respect of the oversight and management of the centre and those who are employed to care for and support the children concerned.

Deputy James Reilly: I welcome that we have independent inspections and reports because they are essential elements of quality improvement alongside our internal processes. HIQA has statutory responsibility for inspecting Tusla residential centres for children. It focused its inspections in residential care in 2014 on how staff manage children, usually older teenagers, some of whom can present with challenging or difficult behaviour. It found that three of the children living in the centre in question at the time of the inspection were taking risks with illegal substances while outside of the centre. I remind the Deputy these are not detention centres. The staff tried to ensure the children were safe but were unable to prevent this behaviour. Managers were aware of the situation and made efforts to stop the young people but without success. The inspectors also found that staff worked hard to ensure children were treated well,

were listened to and had their needs met. The report found that children's rights were met with written policies and information available. I assure the Deputy that the internal review is ongoing and we will shortly have the plan for how this is to be further redressed. At present, there is only one child in that centre.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I accept the Minister's assurance that every effort is being employed to ensure the deficiencies highlighted will be properly addressed. I do not think the fact that the number of children has been reduced to one is in itself indicative of everything being addressed. Removing problem children from a setting does not necessarily mean that all measures have been implemented. Leaving aside the specific case of this southern area location, I am aware of cases comparable with that described in this report which emerged prior to the establishment of Tusla, while the oversight of these matters still rested in the Department of Health through the HSE. This is not an aberration or something that happened out of the blue; there is a long record of difficulties in respect of such facilities. Can the Minister give us an assurance that every measure has been employed and that they continue to be reviewed, and strengthened if necessary, across all of the care settings in this State under Tusla's remit?

Deputy James Reilly: I do not suggest for a moment that the situation in this centre is unique. I know that all avenues are being explored and that the plans have to address all eventualities, but I equally understand that one of the problems arising may pertain to the suitability of the child concerned to be placed in such a residential home. A higher and more secure detention centre might be more appropriate in certain instances. Clearly that is a last resort, and children are given every opportunity to avail of a residential centre. These are not detention centres, and there is a limit to the extent to which managers can deal with difficult or challenging behaviour. That is not to say more innovative and different ways to address these issues cannot be found; in fact, they will. Sometimes, however, the issue also lies with the setting itself, which is to say it might be more appropriate to have the child in a more secure location.

Other Questions

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

111. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the details of all homes and institutions that were excluded from the proposed inquiry into mother and baby homes, including the Magdalene laundries and Westbank; the grounds on which these were excluded; the measures being put in place to ensure survivors of these excluded institutions, now all in their senior years, will be heard, acknowledged and entitled to redress; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2199/15]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have moved on to Other Questions and I ask Deputies to watch the clock.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I tabled my priority question as part of the lottery system and, strange to relate, have been seeking the first position for a long time and here we are.

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An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Deputy complaining?

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: It allows me the opportunity to once again address the issues we addressed during the priority question moment and the focus is again, of course, on those entities and people - that is what this is about - who consider they are currently excluded from the terms of reference for the upcoming work of the commission of investigation. I would like to explore this issue further with the Minister.

(Deputy James Reilly): The proposed terms of reference for the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes and certain related matters were announced on Friday, 9 January 2015. Since the announcement, there has been a general acknowledgement of the comprehensive scope of the proposed investigative framework which reflects the range of matters the Government was asked to consider by the House and is a fair and balanced response to the many requests for related issues to be included.

During the course of consultations with those most centrally affected by these issues and political colleagues across the spectrum a clear consensus emerged on the need to thoroughly examine the experiences of those who had spent time in mother and baby homes. These institutions have not been the central focus of previous statutory investigations. The approach taken, therefore, places a deliberate emphasis on the experiences of women and children who spent time in mother and baby homes in the period 1922 to 1998. Accordingly, the terms of reference focus on institutions which can be identified as having both the primary function of providing sheltered and supervised ante and post-natal facilities for single mothers and their children and an ethos which those running the institutions considered to promote a regime of work, training or education as part of an overall approach to either rehabilitating single mothers before they left the institution or giving them training to live independently. The commission will also investigate a representative sample of those county homes which had a considerable focus on these services.

On the basis of the information available, I am satisfied that the institutions included in Schedule 1 to the draft order meet the above-mentioned criteria, whereas the institutions referred to by the Deputy do not as they did not provide this specific range of services. However, it is not accurate to describe these institutions as being excluded from the commission's work. The commission is tasked with examining the extent to which other institutions were part of the entry or exit pathways for single mothers and children entering or leaving these mother and baby homes. It is certainly open to it to give consideration to the role of the institutions referred to by the Deputy as part of the pathways and, in particular, the practices and procedures for the placement of children outside mother and baby homes.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

This will be a significant strand of its investigations. The issues to be examined in the social history module also explicitly cite adoption societies, homes for infants or children and Magdalen laundries.

It is important to be clear and realistic as to our expectations. The commission is not intended to, nor could it, investigate every type of institution where it is considered there might have been past deficits or failings; rather, my objective is to establish a focused commission with all of the necessary powers which is capable of establishing effectively relevant facts in a reasonable timeframe. This specificity is required under the enabling legislation. It is also

the case that other inquiries have examined concerns about a wide range of settings, including children's homes and Magdalen laundries. The proposed arrangements, in particular, Article 6 of the terms of reference, ensure the commission will have sufficient opportunities to identify additional matters which it considers may warrant investigation. It is specifically tasked with reporting to me recommendations necessary in this regard.

The commission will be critically important in coming to terms with our history. Some of what we learn will be painful, but the commission will establish how we, as a society, responded to single women and their children who needed support and assistance, rather than judgement. Details of the commission are available on my Department's website, including a number of explanatory documents.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I was hoping my anticipation that the Minister would give the same answer would be wrong, but there we are. Given the reference to institutions that were not the subject of previous State address, it is more than sad that the Magdalen laundries will be excluded because of the McAleese report which was a huge disappointment for those who had gone through the Magdalen laundry experience. The Minister cannot be unaware of its failings, how it failed those who had gone through that experience and the need to include the Magdalen laundries in the list of those institutions that should be in the address of the commission of investigation to get under way.

I emphasise to the Minister that there are a number of Protestant related entities that are not included and that there is great disquiet among that community and the cohort of people directly affected. I have already spoken about Westbank Orphanage and also want to speak about the Nursery Rescue Society which was linked with the Church of Ireland Magdalen Home and Braemar House, all of which have been excluded. I use the word again and invite the Minister to give an assurance that that is not the case. Given that they are not on the list of entities, there is a great degree of concern and real, compounded hurt for those who feel they have, once again, been ignored and marginalised.

Deputy James Reilly: Although I do not have the full list, the Protestant Magdalen Home which was a mother and baby home is included and named. It is open to the commission to give consideration to the role of the institutions referred to by the Deputy as part of the pathways and particularly the practices and procedures for the placement of children outside mother and baby homes. This will be a significant strand of its investigations. The issues to be examined in the social history module explicitly include adoption societies, homes for infants or children and Magdalen laundries. It is important to be clear and realistic as to our expectations. The commission cannot investigate every type of institution where it is considered there might have been past deficits or failings - God knows, there were many - rather, my objective is to establish a focused commission with all of the necessary powers capable of establishing effectively the relevant facts in a reasonable timeframe. The timeframe involved is critically important to many people involved who do not want it to go on for years. That is why I have set a limit of 36 months, with an interim report to be provided at 18 months and a facility for the commission to issue earlier reports if it so desires and a right retained by the Minister to seek earlier interim reports, if desired.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Minister will agree, as he has done previously, that this is a last opportunity for many. In his response to me, Deputies Sandra McLellan and Robert Troy who are present he was specific when he afforded us a briefing in advance of the media briefing on Friday a week ago. Those who went through the experience of being in any of the

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institutions or locations not listed in the terms of reference should be able to seek an opportunity to come before the commission of investigation, either through the confidential committee or any other mechanism the commission will provide. This must happen in order that they can be heard, have their pain acknowledged and, I hope, the commission can recommend to the Minister that they not be excluded from any subsequent redress scheme. Will the Minister, please, confirm that this was the answer he gave us on Friday a week ago? Having asked the question earlier about the trafficking of children throughout the country by various interests, mainly religious, how does he expect the commission of investigation to notify all potential witnesses? How widely will the net be cast? Does he expect all means of media communication and others to be employed? Will it apply across the entire island of Ireland and in all of the other international settings where the possible illegal adoption practices resulted in the placement of children?

Deputy James Reilly: I have just found the list of institutions to be examined and No. 6 is Denny House, Eglinton Road, Dublin 4, originally the Church of Ireland Magdalen Home, 8 Lower Leeson Street, Dublin 2.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I understand, but the Nursery Rescue Society linked with it is not on the list.

Deputy James Reilly: The issue of the trafficking of children is open to being considered by the commission which will decide how it is to be examined and how the media will be used to contact people. It will be open to the commission to recommend redress or otherwise. For me to do so now would be to prejudge the outcome of the commission's inquiries, which would be utterly wrong and would undermine it.

3 o'clock

I take this opportunity to thank Judge Yvonne Murphy, Dr. William Duncan and Professor Mary Daly of UCD for taking up this onerous task. I am sure they will do a good job. They will have nothing but the well-being of the people concerned to the fore and I have no doubt but that they will be comprehensive and open in their dealings, except where it comes to the confidential committee where people's right to privacy will be respected. It will be important that people have the right to speak in private when obliged to relive the horrors they had to endure many years ago. Equally, it will be open to anybody from these institutions, including those mentioned by the Deputy, to approach the commission for a hearing and it will be open to the commission to hear them.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

112. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the reason the terms of reference for the commission of investigation into mothers and baby homes and certain related matters do not cover former Magdalen institutions and adoptions which occurred at State hospitals during the relevant periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2201/15]

Deputy Catherine Murphy: This question is on the same topic and seeks to find out why classes or categories of people were excluded. That said, there are a great number of positive aspects both to the commission that has been set up and its terms of reference. However, I my

question focuses specifically on the Magdalen institutions and the adoptions that occurred in State hospitals because it is to be hoped that during this process, there will be the prospect of people being reconnected. This is an obvious aspect of the matter about which one would hope for a good outcome for some people.

Deputy James Reilly: As the Deputy has just come into the Chamber, I will reiterate what I have said already, even though Deputies Troy and Ó Caoláin may now have heard it twice. To put it in context, as the Deputy is aware, I announced the proposed terms of reference for the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes and certain related matters last week. In developing the terms of reference, due regard has been given to the emphasis on mother and baby homes in the motion approved by Dáil Éireann on 11 June 2014. I believe the terms of reference reflect the range of matters the Government was asked to consider by this House, as well by those most centrally affected by the issues, and are a fair and balanced response to the many requests for related issues to be included. In particular, the investigation will examine thoroughly the experiences of the many mothers and children who were resident in a mother and baby home over the period from 1922 to 1998.

Since the decision to establish this investigation was announced, there have been calls for the inclusion of a wide range of institutions. The approach taken to ensuring the requisite level of specificity has been to identify mother and baby homes for the purposes of this investigation. The criteria used include having the main function of providing sheltered and supervised ante and postnatal facilities to single mothers and their children, including both board and lodgings, and an ethos which those running the institutions considered to promote a regime of work, training or education as part of an overall approach to either rehabilitating single mothers or giving them training for living independently. On the basis of the available information, it would not be appropriate to consider the institutions raised by the Deputy as mother and baby homes in this same context. They did not provide this specific range of services.

However, where such institutions had a relationship or relationships with a mother and baby home, the role played by these institutions can be examined within the commission's work. In particular, the commission is tasked with examining the extent to which other institutions were part of the entry or exit pathways for single mothers and children into or leaving these homes. Linked to this examination, the commission will consider the practices and procedures relating to the placement of children outside of mother and baby homes.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

This will examine where there was co-operation with another person or persons in arranging this placement, including where an intermediary organisation arranged a subsequent placement. It will also examine the procedures that were in place to obtain consent from mothers in respect of adoption and whether these procedures were adequate for the purpose of ensuring such consent was full, free and informed.

As I have outlined to the House in response to earlier questions from Deputy Ó Caoláin, the proposed arrangements also ensure the commission has sufficient opportunity to bring any additional matter which it considers may warrant investigation to my attention. I am confident that the appointment of Judge Yvonne Murphy as chair, together with historian Professor Mary Daly and international legal expert on child protection and adoption, Dr. William Duncan, to this commission will allow for a comprehensive assessment of the issues and for well-grounded reports and recommendations in due course.

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Deputy Catherine Murphy: Is this likely to happen in parallel or is there a sequence in which this additional work will be done? Is it likely to fall into the second part of the inquiry, where there will be an interim report? If the scope is to be extended to other institutions, how is it likely that such work will take place? The second aspect on which I wish to ask a question is that I do not believe Members would be in the Chamber talking about the inclusion of the Magdalen laundries had there been a satisfactory outcome or had it been seen to have been a satisfactory outcome to the redress scheme. The compellability aspect of this inquiry is welcome. It is incredibly important to the people who were in Magdalen laundries given information provision, depending on who was running the laundries, has been patchy. I accept some orders of nuns have been more forthcoming than others. This deficiency of information provision forms part of what could be redressed in the context of this inquiry and its powers of compellability in relation to the giving of evidence.

Deputy James Reilly: In response to the Deputy's first question, much of the work will be done in parallel during the first phase. An interim report will be provided after 18 months. However, the Minister of the day can seek an interim report prior to that and it is also open to the commission to provide an earlier interim report. It is important to point out that the commission has the discretion to seek a specific change in its terms of reference. For example, it may decide that it does not need to examine further one or more of the institutions but be of the view that other institutions should form part of its examination. It is open to the commission to request of me that I bring a recommendation to Government to allow that to happen. There is a great deal of flexibility provided for.

Linked to the examination around the entry and exit pathways the commission will consider the practices and procedures relating to the placement of children outside of the mother and baby homes. This will examine where there was co-operation with another person or persons in arranging this placement, including where an intermediary organisation arranged a subsequent placement. It will also examine the procedures that were in place to obtain consent from mothers in respect of adoption and whether these procedures were adequate for the purpose of ensuring such consent was full, free and informed. It will also look at the role of the mother in decision-making and how she might have arrived in a place like the Magdalen laundry or elsewhere.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The Minister said that it is open to the commission to come back to him for a variation or change in the terms of reference. Is such a request likely to go beyond Government and come before the Dáil? What is the process in relation to such amendment or change? I agree with the Minister that it is likely that could happen. In other words, the commission could exhaust a particular approach and there may well be a more meaningful avenue that could be explored. It is only when one gets into such matters that one can appreciate what is possible.

Deputy James Reilly: On that specific issue, it is important to point out that the commission would have to come back to me as Minister and I would then have to take up the matter with Cabinet. Beyond that, we are into the realms of conjecture. I believe we can afford the commission this flexibility. We do not know whether it will do that or deem that necessary. It is important to bear in mind the Dáil motion. This is about mother and baby homes and not orphanages, the Magdalen laundries or other institutions. None the less, we have done our best to be as expansive as possible to allow the commission look into these areas as part of the exit pathways and what happened to these mothers and babies.

Child and Family Agency Staff

113. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the action he will take to deal with the shortage of social workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2204/15]

Deputy Robert Troy: We are all aware of the current high turnover of social work staff, which staff cite as arising because of high workloads and a lack of administrative supports. What is the Minister and his Department doing to deal with this high turnover and shortage of social workers?

(Deputy James Reilly): The Child and Family Agency, Tusla, has advised there were 1,403.46 whole-time equivalent social workers employed at the end of November 2014 and it is recruiting an additional 193 social workers to meet existing vacancies. It has also advised 155 social workers have already been recruited during 2014 while 102 social workers left employment due to retirement and for other reasons such as maternity leave.

Stability, experience and capacity of staff working in the area of child protection and child welfare are extremely important. The agency is committed to producing a workforce development strategy by end of second quarter 2015. This is to ensure strategic and operational workforce development plans and processes are established as key activities in the agency. This development presents the agency with a significant opportunity to improve resource deployment, skill and grade mix, as well as staff motivation to the benefit of the children and families. The workforce development plan will consider issues around recruitment, retention and turnover of key staff. This will also include further developing supports through structured professional and career development.

While I prefer to have a zero rate of vacancies in this specialised area of work, it is important to acknowledge staffing vacancies arise for a variety of reasons, including retirements, career breaks, paid and unpaid leave, such as maternity and other family related leave, and resignations. In that context, there will always be gaps in timing around the filling of posts.

The turnover rate of social workers at the agency for 2014 is running at 6.7% which compares favourably with experience in other countries. Every effort is being made by the agency to speed up recruitment and develop a comprehensive workforce development plan in 2015 which will assist in addressing staff turnover rates and lower them further.

Deputy Robert Troy: If the Minister compares the turnover of social workers with other health professionals such as nurses, it is quite high. One social worker recently said:

I started to feel that instead of helping these children and families I was now part of a system that was causing them further harm and stress. Every social worker I speak to has an exit strategy because it is impossible. It is not something you can stay in beyond a certain length of time.

Tomorrow, the House will debate the mother and baby homes issue and how we as a society and the State failed vulnerable people in the past. Today, we are standing over a system that was designed to help and support vulnerable families but which is failing them miserably. The Irish Association of Social Workers recently said:

It is widely acknowledged that the current numbers of social workers employed by Tusla

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is 30% below the recommended levels. This is causing Tusla to become a reactionary and crisis-driven service, with children at risk and their families receiving only a minimal service or no service at all, resulting in poorer outcomes for children.

That is what the new agency, Tusla, is doing today.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Answer that.

Deputy James Reilly: The Deputy made some statements that do not stand up to scrutiny. The first mistake the Deputy made was to compare the turnover in social workers and child care workers with nurses, two entirely different professions. Both of them would tell the Deputy that very clearly too.

No one doubts that social work and child care work are extremely stressful, not just in Ireland but in developed countries around the world. I already pointed out in my reply that our turnover rate last year was 6.7%. In the state of Victoria, Australia, an inquiry found that one in four entry level case-carrying child protection social workers leaves each year, a turnover rate of 25%. In the USA, while the turnover rate for child welfare employees varies significantly across each state, an average annual turnover of over 20% in front-line child care workers has been reported. In England, the reported turnover rate is 15%. It is not fair to compare the turnover or stress of social workers with nurses. Many social workers are younger people under 40. It is highly stressful work and across the world there is a significant turnover in this area. It is a credit to our social workers. I thank them on the floor of the House for the work they do, the commitment they have and the fact the turnover rate, despite the pressure they are under, is one of the lowest.

Deputy Robert Troy: I am sure social workers will be delighted to receive the Minister's thanks but what they actually want is support which they are not getting. If they got support, there would not be the high level of turnover there is. Neither would there be social workers saying that instead of feeling they were helping children or their families, they were part of a system that was causing further harm and stress. Respectfully, it is the Minister who has it wrong, not me. We have a ludicrous situation where the position of a social worker who gives six months notice for maternity leave will not come before the control group to see if it will be filled until the social worker actually takes leave. Then it will take another four months to fill that position. The Minister should not take my word for it but talk to those social workers who are at the coalface and front line and who are at breaking point.

Deputy James Reilly: Again, I have to point out to the Deputy that he is reiterating an inaccuracy. Turnover in social workers here is far better than in many other jurisdictions. I pointed to turnover rates of 25% in Victoria, 20% in the USA and 15% in England. I can quote many more.

Deputy Robert Troy: We are in Ireland now.

Deputy James Reilly: I thank the Deputy for reminding me. We are all acutely aware of that. I am sure the Member beside the Deputy, Deputy Martin, is equally aware we are in Ireland.

The bottom line is much work has been done in this area. Social workers continue to be recruited. Turnover here is lower than in many other jurisdictions. Other initiatives are being put in place. A caseload management system, which is near completion, is being rolled out

across the country. It will allow for temporary staff, where necessary, to cover vacancies until they are filled.

Deputy Robert Troy: That is not true.

Deputy James Reilly: It is true. I am sorry the truth hurts the Deputy. Monthly performance reports on unallocated cases and other service pressures are also reported to the agency's board and the Department. In addition, the agency works with other statutory and non-statutory agencies providing family supports to ensure the agency's social work teams can focus on the children and families in greatest need of their specific skills.

Child Care Services Provision

114. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs his plans for addressing the current shortage of social workers for children in care. [2125/15]

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Will the Minister indicate what percentage of children in care have a written care plan? Following on from the issues Deputy Troy raised, is it not about resources? Before Christmas when the Minister launched the Know Your Rights guide, he gave the commitment that every child in care would have a social worker. He has not delivered on that. Is that not the problem?

(Deputy James Reilly): The Child and Family Agency publishes monthly statistics on its website which include statistics for children in care. They show the majority of children in care have an allocated social worker. Latest figures for October 2014 show that 93% of children in care had an allocated worker, 5,982 of 6,454. I am pleased to report there are several areas where all children in care have an allocated social worker including Carlow, Kilkenny, south Tipperary, Cavan, Monaghan, Donegal and Kerry. However, some areas need to do better as the statistics also showed that 78% of children in care in Dublin south west, Kildare west, Wicklow had an allocated social worker. The fact this was an improvement on 75% quoted in the monthly report for September means the agency is working to address shortfalls in this area.

It is a statutory requirement that all children in care have an allocated social worker. I must stress, however, that if a child in care does not have an allocated social worker, it does not mean there is no oversight from social work professionals. These cases are reviewed regularly by the principal social worker and are often managed by duty social work teams while waiting for a social worker to be allocated.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

A rigorous system of risk analysis is in place in each area to ensure that staffing numbers do not fall to an unsafe level. The gaps that are identified through this process are addressed with the additional resources of temporary staff as required. The vacancies that are then identified are the subject of a recruitment process to ensure they are filled at the earliest opportunity.

I am advised that the fact that 93% of children in care in Ireland are in foster care, 6,001 of 6,454, compares very favourably internationally. Social work support is also provided for foster carers in the form of a link worker. The link worker is a professionally qualified social worker and meets regularly with foster carers to provide training, information and whatever other support that may be required. The very small number of children in residential care, 316

of 6,454, are also supported by residential care staff and other staff who provide specialist services as needed.

Additionally, my Department is overseeing an ongoing programme of recruitment of social workers. Since establishment 12 months ago, the agency has recruited 155 social workers and a further 193 are at various stages of recruitment. This will help the agency to meet its statutory obligation to ensure that all children in care have an allocated social worker.

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 Joan Collins - the need to confirm when the proposed night café for the homeless will open; (2) Deputy Seán Kyne - the need to consider the extension of Scoil Mhuire, Moycullen, County Galway, roll No. 19529C, with permanent classrooms to replace the eight prefabs currently being used for many of the 400 and more pupils; (3) Deputies Michael McNamara, Timmy Dooley, Joe Carey and Kieran O'Donnell - the need to maintain the Aer Lingus Heathrow slots to ensure balanced regional development; (4) Deputy Regina Doherty - emergency funding for the life-saving drug, Soliris, eculizumab, for the urgent and immediate treatment of all patients living with paroxysmal nocturnal hemoglobinuria, PNH; (5) Deputy Jim Daly - the need for a dedicated stream of funding to progress construction of greenways, blueways and other outdoor trails; (6) Deputy Mattie McGrath - the need for the Government to clearly outline its response to the escalating home repossession crisis; (7) Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy - the delay in decision-making around energy generation which could give shovel-ready gas-fired Lumcloon energy power plant, County Offaly the go ahead; (8) Deputy Billy Timmins - to ask the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government what the implications are, if any, following the recent Supreme Court judgment with respect to the Mahon-Flood tribunal and if he will make a statement on the matter; (9) Deputy Catherine Murphy - the urgent need for a review of school enrolment options in the north Kildare area with particular regard to the extreme shortage of appropriate Gaelscoil places; (10) Deputy Thomas P. Broughan - the urgent need for the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation to address the discontinuation of funding for business development managers under the community enterprise centre scheme with a resulting serious impact for small business and employment; (11) Deputy Seán Kenny - the need to commence the Fines (Payment and Recovery) Act 2014 which was passed by the Oireachtas early last year; (12) Deputy Mick Wallace - to discuss the recent senior Garda promotions and how these positions are allocated; (13) Deputy Brendan Griffin - the withdrawal of €4.35 million from the N86 Tralee to Dingle road improvement project in 2015; (14) Deputy Clare Daly - to discuss the latest batch of senior Garda promotions in the context of complaints against Garda management in several divisions; (15) Deputy Willie O'Dea - the need to revise the changes to the one-parent family payment; (16) Deputy Eamonn Maloney - housing and the need for democratic control; (17) Deputy Billy Kelleher - the need to adapt the home renovation incentive scheme so that family caregivers funding adaptation renovations in the home of a person with dementia can avail of it; (18) Deputy Sean Fleming - the need to ensure the provision of Soliris, eculizumab, medica-

tion for all patients in need of it; (19) Deputy Michael Moynihan - the need for the Minister for Health to outline what measures he will be taking to upgrade public nursing homes to the appropriate standards; (20) Deputy Paul Murphy - the use of JobBridge interns to operate Jobs Club schemes; (21) Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - the Environmental Protection Agency report on water quality and the implications for Irish Water's investment programme; (22) Deputy Brendan Smith - the need for the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government to outline the actions that will be taken to deal with pollution of waterways in the north east, including Lough Muckno, due to the activities of those engaged in diesel laundering and illegal trading of fuel; (23) Deputy Ruth Coppinger - the Oxfam research on global wealth that indicates the most wealthy 1% of the globe will own more than the remaining 99% by 2016; and (24) Deputy Charlie McConalogue - to ask the Minister for Justice and Equality's response to an emergency measure being taken by Garda authorities in Donegal to withdraw some Garda members from rural stations to address manpower shortages in Letterkenny and the shortage of Garda resources in the county.

The matters raised by Deputies Joan Collins, Michael McNamara, Timmy Dooley, Joe Carey and Kieran O'Donnell, Jim Daly and Willie O'Dea have been selected for discussion.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am seeking some clarity and transparency regarding the future of publicly-run nursing homes. There was a very strong article in last Sunday's *Sunday Business Post* on what is an impending crisis in terms of publicly-run nursing homes not meeting the standards set down by the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA. Some 21 of the biggest publicly-run nursing homes are now at risk of closure due to lack of investment by the State in enabling those institutions to become compliant with HIQA standards. The alarming aspect of this is that no funding has been provided in the 2015 Estimates to bring those 21 homes up to standard. They span 14 counties, six in County Cork alone. We are talking about institutions such as Peamount, Leopardstown Park, Gorey district hospital, Tralee, Monaghan, Nenagh and many others, and of course St. Finbarr's in Cork city, Castletownbere, Bandon, St. Joseph's in Bantry, and St. Joseph's in Millstreet. The bottom line is that unless the standards are met by July, or unless there is some indication of a real commitment to meet those standards, the options are closure of the institutions, a significant reduction in beds, or closure of high-acute or high-dependency units.

The director of the HSE has warned that there is not enough funding there to sort this out. I want to know whether there is a creeping policy of privatisation by stealth. In other words, is it the Taoiseach's view that these institutions will wither on the vine and will close naturally through lack of investment on his part, and that HIQA will have to intervene? HIQA has been very clear in saying that if a centre is not in compliance by July 2015, and if no realistic time-bound, costed, funded plan has been agreed with the authority, then appropriate conditions will be attached to any renewal of registration. We need a bit of honesty from the Government now about what is going to happen.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: That would be a first.

The Taoiseach: I do not know what the Deputy is implying by that last remark.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Taoiseach should go to Balbriggan.

The Taoiseach: It is only right and proper that there should be quality nursing home services available for people who have to avail of them, underpinned by a proper system of registration and inspection. Deputy Martin is well aware of the age and structure of many of the older public homes around the country, which have evolved from county homes into other structures such as we have today.

There is no privatisation by stealth going on here. The nurses and personnel who worked in the public homes for so many years gave wonderful service in systems that are inadequate today but served a purpose over many years. HIQA has clearly said that the discussions going on between the HSE and itself arise from public units around the country that are currently registered but due for de-registration in 2015 or 2016. HIQA has indicated that a number of these facilities do not fully meet the standards one would expect in a modern nursing home. That is not surprising given that the age of some of them is in excess of 100 years. There are 119 public nursing homes, as Deputy Martin is well aware.

Over the last years, the capital programme of the HSE has, within the resources available to it, brought a number of the public long-stay units to full infrastructural standards as required by HIQA, and it will continue to invest in long-stay units over the time ahead. Last year, €36 million was allocated in the capital plan for the continued upgrade of public residential facilities and €122.34 million has been allocated for the period ahead. I also understand from the Department of Health and the HSE that there is adequate flexibility for solutions to be found, both within the terms of the existing legislative proposals and through discussions currently going on between the HSE and HIQA, and between HIQA and the Minister of State, Deputy Lynch. The HSE has been working with HIQA over the last months to meet the de-registration requirements of the units involved, and the Department of Health is in regular contact with the HSE on this issue.

It is true to say that the fabric and structure of many of the public nursing homes is very old in the sense that some of them are 100 years old. Efforts have been made over the last years to bring some of them up to the standards HIQA requires. It is true to say they are not all up to standard now. They have been identified by HIQA, discussions are going on between HIQA, the HSE and the Minister of State, and €122 million has been allocated from this year to bring them up to full infrastructural standards. The flexibility within the existing system will hopefully allow for a service to be provided and continue to be provided until the facilities can be brought up to full HIQA standards in the time ahead and the law can allow for that to happen.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is not a straightforward, honest answer. We just want facts.

The Taoiseach: Is it dishonest?

Deputy Micheál Martin: People would like to know.

The Taoiseach: Is it dishonest?

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is not telling the truth to the public concerned. These are very important centres in the communities. I know that questions were asked last week by the *Sunday Business Post* and others. I have named 21 long-stay facilities. Can the Taoiseach answer a simple question? Have plans been submitted in respect of each one of those 21 hospitals, including Castletownbere, Bandon, Bantry, Peamount, Leopardstown? Has funding been

matched to the plans that have been submitted? It is simple, and no-one could give the answer at the weekend. It is all fudged and “discussions going on” and this, that and the other. HIQA had to dismiss any suggestion that there was an amnesty, which the Minister of State had said at the time. The Minister of State herself, to be fair, dealt with this issue in a written reply 12 months ago and said the money was not going to be provided - “Bearing in mind their age and structure, public nursing homes face real challenges and require investment in excess of the funding that will be available in the short to medium term.” That was January 2014. Move to November 2014, and we have the Minister of State saying “my Department and the HSE are working to establish the options that may be available in this regard and how we can ensure that older people continue to be looked after.” That is the kind of meaningless stuff one gets when no-one has an answer to the problem. We are getting more of it today, with respect to the Taoiseach.

I think the people in those communities, the staff and the communities that depend on the long-stay beds would like to know a very basic answer. Is it policy to upgrade these units? Is the money going to be provided? It has not actually been provided in this year’s Estimates. Some €7.3 million has been provided for the upgrade of the nursing homes, while €300 million was asked for by the Director General of the HSE, Mr. Tony O’Brien. He is saying that is what it will take. There has been no publication of a three- or four-year plan, and it has been known for five years that July 2015 was to be the date. There is no public plan that we are going to do X, Y and Z over the next three years in terms of the long-stay beds in these institutions. I think it is a legitimate question - what is really going on behind the scenes?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Give Leo a ring.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy’s sense of righteousness is extraordinary. He wanted to know answers to some questions. I cannot answer the question for him as to whether every one of the 21 facilities he has mentioned have submitted plans for planning permission, whether planning permission has been approved for them, or whether funding has been provided in the budget for each of these 21. I cannot answer that question now but I will find the answer for the Deputy.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach should have that answer now. This has been public knowledge for a long time. That is the problem. He should have it now. There is too much fudging.

The Taoiseach: The Minister for Health and the Minister of State have all the details about these things.

I said to Deputy Martin that €36 million was allocated in the 2014 programme. I will give Deputy Martin the extent of the works carried out, completed and brought up to standard for that €36 million in order that we will have it not, as Deputy Martin has suggested, in a dishonest fashion but straight upfront. I will also give Deputy Martin the extent of applications that have been lodged and, in respect of the 21 cases to which he referred, whether planning permission has been granted and whether they are considered to be up to the standard required by HIQA as well as what moneys will be spent on them in 2015. I will give Deputy Martin this in detail so that he will not be able to come to the House and say that anything is being fudged. Everyone understands that of the 119 public nursing homes we have-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have been asking for 12 months.

The Taoiseach: Some of these are 100 years old.

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Deputy Micheál Martin: We know that.

The Taoiseach: If so, Deputy Martin does not seem to remember it. The fact is that a number of these are not up to modern-day standard.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Tell us which ones.

The Taoiseach: The Government publicly supports and will continue to support a public nursing home service provided in public homes for people who avail of this service.

They has never been enough money, nor is there enough now. What we must do is decide on the flexibility within the law, which homes can continue to give service for the time ahead----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Will the Taoiseach tell us which ones will close?

The Taoiseach: -----and how best we can bring the other facilities up to the standard of modern nursing homes such that the people who use them can be comfortable and secure.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Will the Taoiseach tell us which ones the Government is going to close?

The Taoiseach: The standards that applied years ago when Deputy Martin was Minister do not apply any longer.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have been looking for the list for two years.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Taoiseach might add St. Joseph's Hospital, Ardee to that list. I have been trying to get clarity on that for the past 18 months.

Yesterday at the IMF conference the Taoiseach and his Ministers lined up to be patted on the head for the austerity targets that they have achieved but which have inflicted widespread damage to our society and our people.

Deputy Michael Noonan: What about the damage of the bombs?

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, is reported as saying that the troika did not consider the effects its policies would have on the people. This begs the question: did the Government not tell the troika this? Did the Government not care about the effects it would have on our communities and people? Perhaps the Government did not see this as its responsibility. Madame Lagarde said that it was up to each individual government to decide on the mix of measures. Those in government will remember that Sinn Féin has told them as much many times.

It is also reported that the Governor of the Central Bank acknowledged that it was a mistake for the Government to recapitalise the banks. He is reported as saying that to avoid unsustainable pressure on the Sovereign, the capital should have come from an external source. Again, Sinn Féin told those in government this arís is arís.

What did the Taoiseach say? He said that for his part he would not have “defaulter” stamped on his forehead. Since then, the Taoiseach has surrendered on the issue of retrospective recapitalisation and has committed to repaying every cent of the Anglo Irish Bank debt. The conference yesterday was a disturbing reminder of how the Government has failed to deal with these crucial issues in the past and, perhaps more important, how it continues meekly to serve the

interests of the elites.

Meanwhile, the Taoiseach may wish to know that there is support - it is growing rapidly - for the Greek demand for a European debt conference. Neither the Taoiseach nor his Minister for Finance has called for a debt conference. Neither the Taoiseach nor the Minister for Finance has supported that call. Why not? Will the Taoiseach now rectify that situation? Will the Taoiseach now support the call for a European debt conference, which is so clearly in the interests of this State and all our citizens?

The Taoiseach: First, I was not at the IMF conference yesterday. Deputy Adams's intelligence sources are slightly off.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Then the Taoiseach got his pat somewhere else.

The Taoiseach: When the troika took over the country after the Government removed itself from the press conference centre some years ago, the main Opposition party said that nothing could be changed from the programme that the troika had set out.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Did that include Sinn Féin?

The Taoiseach: This Government made arrangements to face up to the challenge with the people. It did so by building a programme which, through the tax system, would allow for jobs to be created and sustained and for our economy to grow. The challenge was accepted and, as was pointed out at the conference yesterday, the real winners and heroes of that challenge are the people.

Deputy Gerry Adams: They are the real losers.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is astonishing condescension.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Adams made a point about what he told everyone years ago. He said that those in Europe should go and get stuffed and take back their money with them as well. Deputy Adams said that we had surrendered - an unusual term - the possibility of retrospective payout in respect of the decision made on 20 June 2012. For the information of Deputy Adams, the Minister for Finance has made it perfectly clear that the Government is examining all the options to determine the best option and to get the best result for the taxpayer. This Government did not put any money into Anglo Irish Bank. The previous Administration did, and that is dead money.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It did. What about the promissory note?

The Taoiseach: What we have tried to do and what we are trying to do is make choices in the best interests of the taxpayer to recover all the money that has been paid into the banks by this Government since it came to office. Deputy Adams will be aware that the State has earned returns of €10 billion from the banking sector. A total of €5.4 billion in income has come from the guarantees, fees and capital investment, while €5 billion has come from the sale of investments in Bank of Ireland preference shares and the sale of Irish Life. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, has carried out an examination on the potential in respect of receipt of income back to the taxpayer from AIB. As Deputy Adams is aware, from a process of interested competent people, Goldman Sachs, on a pro bono basis, is carrying out that initial survey.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: The State's holding in AIB, Bank of Ireland and Permanent tsb is currently valued at €15 billion. That valuation can be broken down as follows: €13.3 billion in AIB, Bank of Ireland equity stands at €1.4 billion and Permanent tsb at €400 million. Therefore, it is not true to say that the Government has abandoned the decision of 20 June 2012.

Deputy Finian McGrath: It rolled over.

The Taoiseach: The Government will decide on the best choice to make in respect of getting back the most money for the taxpayer. That is the main interest of this Government, unlike its predecessor.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I note the Taoiseach has studiously avoided answering my question, which was very simple and straightforward. I will repeat it so that the Taoiseach will get an understanding of it. Will the Taoiseach now support the call for a European debt conference, which is so clearly in the interests of this State and all our citizens? That is what I asked the Taoiseach.

Once again, the Taoiseach attributed a remark to me that I did not make. The Taoiseach has simply refused to negotiate with our European partners. Every time the Taoiseach went there, he prefaced his visit by saying that we will not default. He tugged the forelock. He said we will not have “defaulter” stamped on our foreheads. This was totally contrary to the declarations of “Not an inch”, “Frankfurt’s way or Labour’s way” and “Not a red cent to the banks”.

Taxpayers’ money has been put into these bad banks and the so-called debt, but it is not debt, it is greedy speculators, financiers and some politicians who created the situation. The Government has amalgamated this private debt with sovereign debt. Now, we have the Commissioner saying this and we have the Minister claiming that the troika did not take account or consideration of how this would affect the people here.

Once again, we have to wait until the Greek people vote. We should not have to wait until the outcome of an election in another state for the Taoiseach to stand up for the interests of the people or indeed for working people throughout the European Union. Regardless of what government Greek citizens elect, the Taoiseach needs to put a debt conference on the agenda of the European Union.

Obviously, the Taoiseach is not blind to the effects, the impact or the social inequality which the Government’s policies have inflicted on communities, families and citizens nor to how our social protections have been destroyed. A European debt conference opens up a very real prospect of this State’s debt being significantly reduced. It would free up money for health and other public services as well as stimulus for the economy. It is a straight question for the Taoiseach. Will he support, call for or endorse the call for a European debt conference?

The Taoiseach: No.

Deputy Gerry Adams: No. Will the Taoiseach explain why?

The Taoiseach: It is not for Ireland to interfere in the issues that are raised in the context of a general election in another country.

Deputy Joe Higgins: These are issues here.

The Taoiseach: Gabh mo leithscéal.

Deputy Joe Higgins: These are issues here.

The Taoiseach: Is that a sound of reception or what do I hear?

Deputy Gerry Adams: That was the sound of despair. I had hoped that the Taoiseach would make some sense - stupidly.

The Taoiseach: The point is, Deputy Adams, that Ireland's position is very different than Greece-----

Deputy Gerry Adams: What about the Taoiseach's remarks regarding Prime Minister Cameron?

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: The point we have arrived at now, because of negotiations between the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the troika, is that Ireland is in a very different place than Greece.

Deputy Gerry Adams: We were always in a different place - that is a matter of geography.

The Taoiseach: While we respect the challenges that face the Greek people in the time ahead, with 25% unemployment, it is their decision who to elect in the forthcoming election. Ireland is now in a position where our capacity to borrow is at unprecedentedly low levels and our growth rate is the fastest in western Europe. That does not mean that the Government is by any means happy, despite the fact that unemployment has fallen for 30 months in a row. We must continue providing stability because stability brings investment, confidence and jobs. The answer to the problems of unemployment, recession, disillusionment and despair is to have an economy that is functioning strongly and where jobs can be created-----

Deputy Gerry Adams: And a government that stands up for its people.

The Taoiseach: In the context of Greece, Ireland is in a very different position.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: They have much less emigration than we have. They have half of our emigration levels.

The Taoiseach: We now have a strategy and a plan that has been proven to work and that will continue to work in the time ahead. We want to see the country in three to five years' time with an economy that is strong and powering ahead and where jobs can be created for our people.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: What about the debt?

The Taoiseach: Finally, Deputy Adams is wrong again in that the Government here was well able to negotiate with our European colleagues in respect of reducing the level of debt imposed upon us because of the catastrophe arising from the banking debacle. We have had evidence of what happened there from the recent comments coming from the banking inquiry.

Deputy Peter Mathews: Those comments are incorrect.

The Taoiseach: Of course, Deputy Adams has always put forward the view that everything

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is positive and rosy from a Sinn Féin perspective. Did I hear somebody say today that Sinn Féin is now a party to removing 20,000 public servants from work in Northern Ireland over the period ahead?

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Deputies. Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan please.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: Yesterday afternoon I attended a press conference organised by Justice for Magdalenes Research, supported by Amnesty International, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and the National Women’s Council. They all acknowledged the Taoiseach’s apology, its integrity, that it was heartfelt and gave so much hope to the women. That apology led to the work of Mr. Justice Quirke and the recommendations he made in his report which were accepted here in June 2013. The ladies of the Magdalen laundries expected that all of those recommendations and proposals would be put into action.

The Redress for Women Resident in Certain Institutions Bill 2014 is not honouring all that was recommended by Mr. Justice Quirke. For example, he found that a significant number of women faced difficulties managing their affairs, many of whom are living in institutions or nursing homes and he recommended certain things for those women who were lacking full capacity so that the payments would be for their benefit. The Bill, however, makes no provision for the appointment of care representatives to ensure that this happens. Mr. Justice Quirke was very clear in his first recommendation that the Magdalen women would have access to the full range of services currently enjoyed by holders of the HAA, Health Amendment Act, card. A range of services provided by that card are being denied to the ladies from the Magdalen laundries. Such cards are known as enhanced cards. I heard last night, after the press conference, that enhanced cards will be made available but I would like the Taoiseach to confirm today that this is the case for the ladies from the Magdalen laundries because it might require a policy order from the Taoiseach to ensure that this happens.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy O’Sullivan for her comments and I can confirm that for her. I should remind the House that this was a matter that was neglected for over 60 years. This Government listened very carefully to those women who were in the Magdalen laundries. We asked Mr. Martin McAleese to prepare a report on this and subsequently appointed Mr. Justice Quirke to draw up an appropriate scheme for the Magdalen women. The Government is fully committed to implementing in full the Quirke report. Under the scheme, women are entitled to a payment of €11,500 to €100,000, depending on their length of stay. In addition, they receive top-up payments of €100 weekly if they are under pension age and up to €230.30 when aged 66 or over, depending on other State payments. To date, a decision has been made in 87% of cases and 495 applicants have received payments totalling €18 million.

Mr. Justice Quirke also recommended that the women should have access to an enhanced medical card, as Deputy O’ Sullivan pointed out. He also specifically recommended that legislation be introduced to give effect to that recommendation. The new Bill to be introduced will provide an enhanced medical card. The legislation is modelled on the Health Amendment Act of 1996. The Bill was published in December and is expected to be introduced in the Dáil later this month.

I note the statements to which Deputy O’Sullivan referred, attributed to the Justice for

Magdalenes group, suggesting that the Redress for Women Resident in Certain Institutions Bill 2014 only provides regular medical cards to the women as opposed to the HAA card recommended by Mr. Justice Quirke. To be clear, Mr. Justice Quirke in his report recommended that the women receive medical services equivalent to those provided to the holders of HAA cards. He also pointed out that not all of the services described in the guide may be directly relevant to the Magdalen women and any comparable guide for the Magdalen women would require suitable adaptation. The new Bill is similar to the 1996 Act and specifically provides for GP and surgical services; payment for drugs, medicines and medical and surgical appliances; nursing services; home help; dental, ophthalmic and aural services; counselling services; and chiropody and physiotherapy services. There will also be no requirement to pay the statutory charge for public acute hospital in-patient services.

The 2014 scheme is focused on the medical needs of the women under the scheme. Many of the services are accessible through referral by a doctor or nurse. The only substantive services that are not included under the new scheme are non-conventional therapies. The HSE funding of expenditure by Positive Action on complimentary therapies such as angel healing, emotional freedom techniques and dancing the spiral led to severe criticism and Positive Action itself was wound up in May 2014. The Minister does not wish to see the important medical supports that will be provided by the enhanced medical card undermined in any way by the inclusion of controversial, unconventional therapies. I hope that answers Deputy O'Sullivan's question.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: It is good that the Taoiseach has confirmed that the enhanced card will be available to the ladies from the Magdalen laundries but it is a shame that once again, stress and tension was brought into their lives because of the fact that they were not clear on that point. They have acknowledged what has been done to date and progress has been made, there is no doubt about that. Why can we not get it 100% right instead of 60% or 70%, so that all of the outstanding issues are addressed?

The McAleese report was disappointing because it had a very narrow remit. I listened yesterday to many stories from the ladies from the Magdalen laundries which were not covered by the McAleese report, which was also pointed out by the UN Committee Against Torture. There are issues outstanding and as the Government is making progress, it should go for 100% progress instead of falling short. Those ladies deserve much more.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for her comments. In many cases, this information was already in the public domain but I hope I have clarified it for the Deputy and the women who were concerned now.

In respect of the last portion of the Deputy's question concerning other women in Magdalen homes, elements of that are being addressed under the mother and baby homes commission of investigation that was set up by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, particularly in respect of women who were in Magdalen homes who were exiting State services or State support.

In respect of the Deputy's question about the enhanced medical card and the services provided, I hope the position will be absolutely clear for those women who were the subject of the report on Magdalen homes and in respect of whom the State wanted to be as generous and flexible as possible in providing a wide range of services. These women are getting on in years and deserve recognition and support from the State.

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Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

1. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he has met church leaders recently; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37620/14]

2. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on meetings he has held with religious leaders. [39838/14]

3. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his structured dialogue with religious and faith organisations. [39839/14]

4. **Deputy Joe Higgins** asked the Taoiseach if he has had meetings recently with religious leaders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41693/14]

5. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he has met leaders of the Islamic faith in Dublin recently; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2176/15]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 5, inclusive, together.

Like public representatives generally, I often meet church and other religious and non-religious leaders, on an informal basis, in the course of attending official or public events. In addition, I meet representatives of religious and other philosophical bodies through a formal structured dialogue process which provides a channel for consultation and communication between the State and such bodies on matters of mutual concern. These meetings take place at both ministerial and official level and may be sought by either side on the basis of a proposed agenda, agreed in advance of the meeting. The arrangements for such meetings are made by my Department. This process does not displace arrangements for the conduct of policy and administration by Departments and agencies in their functional responsibilities.

Since taking office, I have attended a plenary meeting with all of the partners in the structured dialogue process. I also met representatives of the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland. I also met an ecumenical delegation of European churches to discuss the priorities of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. I previously outlined for the House the matters discussed at these meetings.

I will meet representatives of the Humanist Association of Ireland and Atheist Ireland in the coming weeks. I will also meet representatives of both the Islamic and Jewish faiths in the coming weeks. I intend to continue to hold meetings with the dialogue partners, including from other faiths and philosophical traditions.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. Did he indicate that he had met representatives of the churches recently?

The Taoiseach: I intend to meet representatives of the Islamic and Jewish faiths, as well as humanist and atheist organisations.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Perhaps the Taoiseach might revert to me on his meetings with representatives of other faiths.

The Taoiseach: Yes.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Has the Taoiseach met representatives of the Catholic Church recently?

The Taoiseach: I have met representatives of the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland, as well as an ecumenical delegation from the European churches.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Did these meetings take place recently?

The Taoiseach: No; they were held before the Presidency.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I ask the Taoiseach to revert to me on when he last met representatives of the churches as part of a structured dialogue. Will he also indicate the philosophical bodies to which he referred?

It is clear from my discussions with many parents and school representatives that resources, rather than patronage, are their main concern. Early in the lifetime of the Government an announcement was made that 50% of schools would change from religious patronage to other models of patronage. Of the 1,500 schools affected by this issue, only one, a Church of Ireland school in the Taoiseach's constituency, has changed its model of patronage. A great deal of time has been wasted and much doubt created on this issue. We would have greater diversity if the previous Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Ruairí Quinn, had not taken such a confrontational and non-consultative approach to patronage, which was never a boiling issue on the ground. The issues continue to be resources, the viability of schools and the provision of supports for schools in terms of teacher numbers, curriculum development and so forth. Will the Taoiseach engage with the patrons of a significant number of schools in his dialogue with the churches in terms of outlining his priorities *vis-à-vis* schools and education? Is the introduction of tax cuts for the highest earners a greater priority for the Government than the provision of resources for schools and the education of children from the earliest age?

On structured dialogue with representatives of the various faiths, the Paris attack on *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and demonstrations in Germany on similar issues have brought to a head a public debate about Islam in Europe and the idea of a clash of cultures and civilisations. As I stated last week, it is unacceptable to blame Muslims in general for the actions of an extreme minority group, as certain movements are trying to do. We must stand united against attempts to blame an entire religion or group for the actions of extremists. We must also be vigilant in condemning such extremists who must not be given any quarter by some who may be sneaking regards or provide some rationale for the base and unacceptable murder of innocent citizens across Europe and the globe. The threat posed by ISIS and returned jihadis has created significant concern among the general population in many European countries. We need to increase our vigilance against extremist violence, while reasserting our belief in a diverse and inclusive society in which all religions are respected.

The Government has been sending mixed messages on the blasphemy laws. The Taoiseach has indicated that he will meet leaders of the Islamic faith. Many people were concerned by the suggestion made by an Imam that newspapers would be sued if certain articles were written or certain cartoons reprinted. The Constitution needs to be amended to remove the provision on blasphemy. However, the Government appears to have made a decision not to hold a referendum on blasphemy. This is the only conclusion one can reach, given the timelines of the Government. The Taoiseach stated in the House that a referendum on blasphemy would not be

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held in 2015. Speaking on Newstalk last week, the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, stated that while the Government had taken a decision to hold a referendum on blasphemy, it had not yet decided on the timing. We must be honest about this. If a referendum is not held in 2015, none will be held during the lifetime of the Government as it will go to the country in early 2016. Clearly, there will not be the wherewithal or capacity to hold such a referendum in 2016. Will the Taoiseach confirm that is the position? This is a mistake and the matter should be reviewed and reconsidered. The question of whether a referendum on blasphemy will be held in the lifetime of the Government is a fair one which deserves a transparent answer.

While I realise this will be a difficult challenge, will the Taoiseach outline his proposals to ensure a fundamentalist minority is not allowed to develop here? We must guard against intolerance towards a religious minority.

The Taoiseach: I take the Deputy's point about the education system and schools. When I next meet the school patron, I will be happy to engage on this matter. I will also bring the Deputy's point to the attention of the Minister for Education and Skills who may meet the patron before I do.

The atrocities in Paris were atrocious and shocked the world. I was privileged to represent the Irish people in Paris where the leaders of the countries of Europe and beyond walked in demonstration of the right to liberty and freedom of speech. It was a demonstration of the "Why?" of the European Union.

4 o'clock

I agree with the Deputy. To equate what happened in Paris with the Islamic faith or the Muslim religion is the same as blaming Rome for the atrocities of the IRA or the Church of England for loyalist atrocities. The Islamic faith is one of compassion and peace. What more evidence can we obtain of terrorism than when a policeman - a Muslim - is shot in cold blood and murdered on the street?

It is true to say there is a great need for vigilance and very careful monitoring of absolute terrorism as distinct from anything to do with religious beliefs. Clearly, the authorities here - the Minister for Justice and Equality, the security committee and the Garda - are constantly monitoring the situation. The Deputy is aware that the Minister pointed out that 30 people from Ireland had travelled to Syria and other places in that region. I understand three of them were killed, although I cannot speak about what the other 27 were up to. This is an issue that concerns us in a non-aggressive, non-militarised country. Let me assure Deputy Micheál Martin that, in terms of the security of the people and the State, this is something that is monitored very closely. Obviously, if it is necessary to talk to the Deputy about it, we will do so.

On the question of blasphemy, the Constitutional Convention made quite a number of recommendations and the Government has accepted that there should be a referendum on removing blasphemy from the Constitution. In the month of May there will be two referendums, one on marriage equality and other on changes to the constitutional age limit for eligibility to stand for the Presidency. In respect of Carlow-Kilkenny where a by-election is pending, it will be held on the same day. To be honest with the Deputy, I do not expect another referendum in the lifetime of the Government. I said last week that there would not be and while there has not been a final decision by the Government, I do not expect that there will be. What we did

say was that when the Constitutional Convention issued its reports, if the Government accepted the recommendations of the convention, it would indicate its intention to hold a referendum on whatever the issue might be. That stands; it was not the intention to have an indicative timeline for all of these issues. I think six referendums have been held in the course of the term of office of the Government to date, with some being approved by the people. The position is that the intention is to remove blasphemy from the-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: But not in the lifetime of the Government.

The Taoiseach: I do not see it, although, to be quite honest with the Deputy, the Government has not made a final decision to say: “That is it for the lifetime of this Government.” I do not think there will be another referendum, but I will put it to my colleagues in due course in the Cabinet. We have a lot of work to do. However, that does not mean that we are not very clear on accepting the recommendation of the Constitutional Convention that a referendum will have to be held to remove blasphemy from the Constitution. Nonetheless, as I said, we did not indicate any indicative timeline as to when that would actually happen.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Perhaps I missed it, but the Taoiseach did not say when was the last time he had met the leaders of the Christian churches or the Jewish faith. He might want to make this clear.

I consider it very welcome that the Taoiseach will meet representatives of the Islamic faith in the time ahead; he has committed to so doing. I met Muslims from the new mosque at Galway a month or two ago. They are people who have come to Ireland; this is their home and they want to play a role as citizens. They actually add to who we are as a people. Some of them are native Irish people, as well as those who have come from other parts of the world. In particular after the horrific attacks in Paris, it is crucial that we try to deepen our understanding of each other, what motivates people and their different values. Even though all of the great religions in the world have generally the same core values, it is a question of how they can divide and create divisions as opposed to tolerance and respect for differences. It was interesting to hear Pope Francis warn about the risks and dangers of mocking anyone’s religion. A good piece of work could be done in illustrating the fact that we can have a pluralist society; that no matter what the faith, whether it be Protestant, Catholic, Dissenter or others, everybody is welcome and that this is upheld by the State, namely, the right to religious belief but as a personal matter of conscience for everyone.

Tá sé tábhachtach fosta go bhfuil cairdeas maith ann idir an Rialtas agus na heaglaisí eagsúla. Tá gá le hidirphlé eatarthu chun fadhbanna a réiteach agus chun rudaí a chur i gceart.

In regard to the Christian churches, while the Government has brought forward the terms of reference for a commission of investigation, there is the scandal of the mother and baby homes. The Taoiseach will know that various reports have revealed that thousands of babies and many adults died in the most desperate of circumstances in institutions run in the main by Catholic religious orders but with the agreement and support of the Government. The Protestant churches also played a role, although much less significant, for example, in the Bethany Home. I say it was much less significant in so far as they were a minority as opposed to making any judgment on the awfulness inflicted on people, including children, who were in these homes.

Did the Taoiseach have discussions with any church leader about this issue? Does he intend to discuss the terms of reference with church leaders? In addition, when will we have the

opportunity to debate this serious matter? While the terms of reference may be a good start, the fact is that they are inadequate because they fail to ensure, for example, that the commission's terms of reference will include the Westbank Orphanage and some of the other Protestant institutions, as well as the Magdalen laundries. There is clearly a view among the survivors, for example, the Magdalenes, that what the Government has put in place does not match the Taoiseach's very clear apology in this Chamber. There is then the issue of the transportation of children to and from institutions on both sides of the Border which is now a public fact. Even in today's edition of *The Irish Times* there is a letter from some of the survivors which alludes to this and asks for them to be included in the investigations because they feel they are outside their scope and that, therefore, their experiences will not be recognised, investigated, validated or acknowledged. Have these issues been discussed with church leaders?

On the issue of homelessness, I commend the initiative taken in this city by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin when he made premises available and took action in concert with the Government and the Lord Mayor to deal with this issue following the untimely death of Jonathan Corrie in the run-up to Christmas. There is sense that we are dealing with the crisis instead of dealing with the issue in an strategic way. Trying to focus on and engage with civic society, including the churches, could be a useful way of avoiding or at least reducing the levels of homelessness and poverty. I am sure the Taoiseach and others will join me in commending the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which has spent 170 years working with the poor and disadvantaged. That society faces huge pressure at this time and reports that professionals, such as nurses, gardaí and teachers, are now using its services in greater numbers and seeking help to pay bills and feed their families. In both west Belfast and Louth, I have referred citizens, privately and confidentially, to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Society for help. It is reported that since 2008, the financial value of offers of help from the society to citizens has doubled and now amounts to more than €42 million. The biggest outlay is on food, but a further €10 million goes to help people pay their gas, electricity and oil bills. People who want to have heat in their homes have had to seek charity from the society.

These are the stark statistics and religious leaders have expressed grave concerns about the rising levels of poverty. The budget brought forward for 2015 is considered regressive by the ESRI, because it ingrains social divisions and poverty in this State. Yesterday, Oxfam put forward the consideration that 1% of the world's population now owns more wealth than the other 99% combined. Has the Taoiseach spoken to leaders of faith groups on this issue?

The Taoiseach: I did not catch what Deputy Adams said at the beginning. He made some comment about the Jewish faith.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I was making a general point, trying to be inclusive of all the faith communities on the island.

The Taoiseach: I did not hear the Deputy clearly and thought he might have said I was making a division between the Islamic and Jewish faiths.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Not at all.

The Taoiseach: I intend to meet both groups shortly.

In respect of the budget for 2015, in any country, the answer to poverty is to have an economy that can deliver jobs. Social protection is an important element in bolstering the economy of this country and the Tánaiste has made an extraordinary effort towards this through changing

the nature of social protection and the way it is perceived. What used to be the dole or social welfare office, where people on the list went in and claimed their money from other taxpayers has now changed to the Intreo offices, where the experience, capability, talent and aspirations of everybody are taken into account and profiled. Hopefully, as time goes on, more and more people will be given the opportunity to give vent to their capabilities and potential. It is evident from this mix that the level of unemployment has dropped consistently over the past 13 months. While unemployment is now reduced from just over 15% to just over 10%, this is still too high. As the Deputy knows, in difficult circumstances, a good, well-paying job is a passport to better prospects and is the route out of poverty, disillusionment and despair.

I commend the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and other charitable organisations on the work they have done over many years. Unfortunately, given the recession here a number of years ago and the scale of the collapse, where 250,000 people lost their jobs and every house in the country was in negative equity and people's ambitions, livelihoods and savings were decimated and destroyed, we are only pulling back from the brink of that disaster now to a point where after all the sacrifices made, there are now brighter days ahead. Hopefully, the economy will continue to be well managed and jobs will be created that will provide a passport out of that situation. When I have met with the church leaders of the Islamic and Jewish faiths, I will report to the House on those meetings but I look forward to engaging again with the other leaders of the Christian churches also.

The Deputy raised the issue of mother and baby homes. This is an issue of great concern for the Government and at its meeting of 8 January this year, it agreed the process to establish the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes and certain related matters. As the Deputy is aware, this issue is being handled by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Reilly. This is a significant development in delivering on the Government's commitment to establish a statutory investigation with all of the necessary powers to provide a full proper and timely account of what happened to vulnerable women, babies and children in these homes.

The House is aware the commission will be established under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004. It will be chaired by Judge Yvonne Murphy and she will be assisted by the eminent historian, Professor Mary Daly, who has great insight into these issues, and by the international legal expert on child protection and adoption, Dr. William Duncan. The Minister published the terms of reference on 9 January, in the presence of former residents of some of these homes and the groups that represent them. The terms of reference provide for a comprehensive investigative framework that involves interlinked and concurrent lines of inquiry.

The primary focus of the investigation is on the experiences of women and children who lived in mother and baby homes from 1922 until 1998. The main areas to be investigated include the entry arrangements and exit pathways of single women; living conditions and care arrangements in those institutions; mortality among mothers and children - given the circumstances such as disease, etc., mortality was very high in some institutions; the causes, circumstances and rates of mortality; post mortem practices and procedures; reporting of deaths; burial arrangements and the transfer of remains for anatomical examination; the compliance with the relevant or regulatory and ethical standards in regard to systemic vaccine trials identified by the commission as being conducted on children in these homes; entry arrangements and exit pathways for mothers and children leaving those institutions; patterns of referral; relevant relationships with other entities; and the extent to which any group of residents may have systematically been treated differently on grounds including race, disability or religion.

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It is accepted this is the right approach to take, although it may not be perfect. The commission is critically important in regard to coming to terms with our history as a people. During the 76 years from 1922 to 1998, significant social, economic, political and other changes took place. I believe some of what we will learn will be very painful and that what is termed the “good old days” will be seen not to have been such good old days at all. The commission will allow the experience of individuals to be understood, not just as their personal stories, but as part of a broader, social and cultural context of how we as a society, and those who went before us, responded to single women and their children who needed support and assistance rather than judgment. I understand the Minister will bring the resolution for debate to the House tomorrow, 21 January, and will seek time for it in the Seanad thereafter. Subject to Oireachtas approval of the resolution, the Minister will, on behalf of the Government, sign the order to establish the commission to conduct its inquiry.

Some 14 mother and baby homes were included on the list and that list has been published and is available. The terms of reference are important. The issue of Bethany homes and Westbank Orphanage has been raised and dealt with. The Magdalen laundries were not specified in the terms of reference in regard to mother and baby homes. However, clear criteria were used to define them, including having the main function of providing sheltered and supervised ante and post-natal facilities for mothers and their children. The Magdalen laundries did not come within that definition.

With regard to the terms of reference, the Minister has been asked to ask the commission to examine the extent to which the laundries were part of the entry or exit pathways of single mothers into or leaving mother and baby homes. The issues to be examined in the social history module of the commission will also explicitly cite the laundries in this regard. The report of the interdepartmental committee to establish the facts of State involvement in the Magdalen laundries has been fully accepted by the Government. It was a comprehensive and objective report on the factual position prepared under the supervision of an independent chairperson.

I appreciate that while some women continue to be dissatisfied with the process to date, those concerned received an apology on behalf of the State, had the opportunity to relate their stories to Mr. McAleese and Mr. Justice Quirke and are entitled to receive a capital sum, as well as a lifelong pension top-up payment and access to medical services.

I have been asked a few times whether it is the intention to set up a redress scheme such as that set up in other cases. Given that the matters within the scope of the investigation have not been central to a previous inquiry, it would be premature to consider the issue of redress in these matters. The commission has to have the opportunity to conclude its investigation and establish the facts of what happened in and around these homes and, in the absence of these facts, it would be difficult at this stage to make appropriate determinations on issues such as redress or apologies. I expect the Minister to set up the commission. It has its terms of reference and financing in place. Let it do its job and us see what are the results.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Taoiseach said the issue of the Westbank Orphanage had been dealt with. My certain conviction and knowledge is that it has not been and I ask him to clarify this. If it has not been included in the commission’s terms of reference, as is my belief, it should be.

With regard to the Magdalen laundries, as the Taoiseach said, the women concerned were held in horrific conditions. They were slaves. They should be part of this important investiga-

tion in their own right and treated as a module and not because the laundries may have been an exit or entry point to another institution. It is an accepted fact that children were transported on both sides of the Border. I cited the letter in today's edition of *The Irish Times* because it happened to be on this day. Survivors are saying they are not part of the investigation. This should be rectified and I appeal to the Taoiseach to do so. I acknowledge that the Government has done some good work in looking at all of these matters, but we should not leave anybody out; we should be as inclusive as possible. I ask the Taoiseach to reflect on what I have said and, more important than what he and I have said, on what the survivors have said and rectify the matter by amending the terms of reference accordingly.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: In all of these matters we have to be led by the people who went through the experience. The voices of the victims and those campaigning on their behalf have to be respected. As I understand it, the Westbank Orphanage and other Protestant institutions have not been included. They need to be included. Similarly, I support the calls regarding the Magdalen laundries. The Taoiseach should heed these calls. While I accept the point about the commission looking at the overall picture before moving on to the issue of redress and so on, there has to be a clear commitment that there will be redress. There is no doubt whatsoever that the people who passed through these institutions were wronged and robbed of their identities in many cases and there has to be a clear commitment that there will be redress and that people will have the right to recover identities stolen from them.

I refer to the issues the Taoiseach plans to raise when he meets religious leaders from the Muslim community. While decent, moral, sentient human beings were outraged and condemned the appalling killings in the *Charlie Hebdo* offices in Paris, we are witnessing a worrying reaction - I am glad to say for the most part not in this country - in much of Europe where there has been a rise in Islamophobia with the Muslim community as a whole being demonised for the actions of a tiny group of extremists who happen to be Muslims as if there is some connection between Islam in general and the unspeakable actions that took place in the *Charlie Hebdo* offices. We have to absolutely nail that Islamophobia because if it is allowed to gain currency, it will make more likely atrocities such as the ones we witnessed and fuel the growth of extremist groups.

I read the personal story of one of the people involved in France. She comes from an Algerian background and at one stage changed her name to make it sound more French but then switched in the other direction to become an ultra-Islamist. There has been serious growth on the far right, in racism and Islamophobia in France and one action, as misguided and stupid as it was, means that people faced with such racism may embrace extreme forms of what they consider to be their religious identity which may lead to similar carnage to that seen in the *Charlie Hebdo* offices. It is vitally important that we in Ireland are a voice in Europe to say, however we react to and deal with the causes of the attacks on these offices, it must not be by demonising in a racist way or generalising about the Muslim community. It makes as much sense to blame Muslims in general for what happened in these offices as it does to blame all Christians for the shooting of John Lennon or some of the atrocities that have taken place in the United States at the hands of fringe, right-wing and ultra-Christian groups. We would not blame all Christians for them or even make a connection with Christianity as a whole, but Islamophobia and the demonisation of the Muslim community are gaining currency in an alarming way in Europe.

When the Taoiseach has met leaders of the Muslim community, I would like to receive a report. They have expressed concerns about this issue and it is important that we in Ireland take a clear and principled stand against the worrying rise of Islamophobia which is not the answer

to the awful episode in Paris.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I would like to follow up on a number of the questions I asked. Will the Taoiseach name the other philosophical bodies he said he would meet? When did he last meet in structured dialogue format representatives of the Christian churches or any other church?

The Taoiseach: I will send the Deputy the details.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach indicated that he was due to meet the leaders of the Islamic and Jewish churches, but I am not clear on when he last met representatives of the main churches in the structured dialogue format established between them and the Department of the Taoiseach by the former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. I think Bertie Ahern started the idea of a structured dialogue between the Department of the Taoiseach and the main churches. It is important because it has been said that depending on how the churches are constituted, very often it is the fringe elements who set up the church and become quasi-leaders of a unit of that church and in the case of the Islamic situation, there are huge distortions of the Koran, all with a view to recruit jihadis and getting young people to commit horrendous acts. Could the Taoiseach check that for me?

In respect of patronage, do I take it that this is now off the agenda in the manner in which the former Minister, Deputy Quinn, put it on the agenda, namely that the patronage of 50% of the 1,500 schools out there would change? I take it that this is now off the agenda. Can the Taoiseach confirm this?

The Taoiseach indicated that there would be no referendum on removing blasphemy from the Constitution during the lifetime of this Government. I think this is a pity because it would be one concrete response by the Government and the Oireachtas to what has happened and the concept of freedom of speech, particularly the plurality of media opinion on that. It something the Government should give serious consideration to and review its decision not to have a referendum in the lifetime of the Government.

The Taoiseach: Deputies Adams and Boyd Barrett raised the question of Westbank Orphanage and Bethany Home. I note that there is a letter in today's edition of The Irish Times regarding the terms of reference of the commission of investigation into the mother and baby homes that was signed by survivors of the Westbank Orphanage and Bethany Home. The Westbank Orphanage is not included in the investigation while Bethany Home is included. Very clear criteria were used to identify these homes. The survivor group in question is seeking to add additional institutions which were primarily children's homes and orphanages to the list of specified mother and baby homes. No children's home or orphanage has been listed. Rather, the commission is tasked with examining the arrangements and pathways between the specified homes and all such entities which had a relationship with these homes. These entities include children's homes, orphanages and adoption societies. The terms of reference of the commission will be to investigate the exit pathways of children when they left those homes and, in particular, the nature of the relationship between the mother and baby homes and those other entities. That will include identifying patterns of referral, practices and arrangements for placing children, including where an intermediary organisation was involved in arranging a subsequent placement. That also means that the terms of reference also require consideration of the extent to which mothers consented to such placements in the first place. Was their consent full, free and informed? It will examine the degree to which children's welfare and protection was

considered in the first place in making such placements. However, children's homes, orphanages and similar institutions are clearly not mother and baby homes. They did not provide the specific range of services, in particular, supervised antenatal and postnatal facilities to single mothers and children, which are the central focus of the investigation here. When that investigation goes ahead, these lines will become clearer in respect of the referral practices, exit, aftercare and the consent of the mothers.

Deputy Boyd Barrett raised the question of the Islamic faith and the question of terrorism. I completely share his view. It is not often that we agree on issues but this is clearly a case of absolute terror epitomised by the murder in cold blood of a policeman who happened to be a Muslim by one of the terrorists involved. I think it was Voltaire who said that to hold a pen is to be at war. Clearly, the editors of *Charlie Hebdo* know that, as do journalists in many other locations around the world. It is a fact that great writers from this country like Joyce, Beckett and Yeats all went to Paris many years ago because it was the place of free expression where artists and writers went. It is important that we understand this. I share the Deputy's view about vigilance in understanding that the Islamic and Jewish faiths have no connection with what was witnessed on the streets and supermarkets in Paris.

There is an obvious response internationally to what is now a global phenomenon of terrorism in different countries. I note that President Obama has organised a conference dealing with international terrorism in Washington for the not too distant future. I understand that 25 or 30 Irish citizens travelled to various conflicts in north Africa and the Middle East since the start of the Arab Spring in 2010. Some travelled for humanitarian and family reasons, however, some are known to have participated in conflicts and at least three have died. A number of individuals have returned to Ireland from these conflict zones. The gardaí have engaged with those who have returned from conflict areas in line with best practice internationally.

There is also a small number of people in this country who support extremism and would try to facilitate it. These people have no part in the building up of our society or a society anywhere else with views like that. The activities of these people are closely monitored by an Garda Síochána and there is very close co-operation between the security forces here and in other jurisdictions. The gardaí are keeping the level of threat of terrorism from international terrorists under constant review as things develop. In this, they have the full support of the Government and the Opposition parties which are determined that all practical steps are taken to deal with any threat that might arise. It is essential that at times like this that entire communities do not get stigmatised because of the actions of a few. We must always bear in mind that the threat does not come from particular communities or religions. It comes from terrorists who must alone bear the full responsibility for these atrocious actions. The vast majority of people in our communities wish to go about their daily lives in peace. I take this opportunity to say that I greatly welcome the statement issued by the religious leaders in respect of their communities and faiths but this is an issue that concerns us all.

I must come back to Deputy Martin with the list of dates and groups. I will send him all of that. I understand that discussions in respect of the question of patronage are still ongoing although I think the former Minister, Deputy Quinn, made it perfectly clear that one would never get anywhere near 50% changeover when he announced the intent in the beginning.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Why did he announce it at all?

The Taoiseach: When the Archbishop of Dublin called to see me, he told me that the church

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had too many schools under its wing and that he wished to divest it of a number of those while clearly keeping in mind that the church would require schools with a Catholic ethos. I will give Deputy Martin the dates of the full engagement we had, the issues discussed and the philosophical bodies that are involved.

I think Deputy Adams raised a point about global wealth. This country has one of the progressive taxation systems in the developed world. The top 1% of earners pay 21% of all income tax and USC, the top 24% of earners pay 80% of all income tax and USC and the bottom 76% of earners pay 20% of all income tax and USC. In addition, the Government has ensured that 410,000 people do not have to pay USC and we intend to increase that number to 500,000 in 2015.

Appointments to State Boards

6. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if there is an agreed process in his Department for statutory board appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37625/14]

7. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach if there are protocols in his Department for appointments to State boards; the details of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40963/14]

8. **Deputy Joe Higgins** asked the Taoiseach the process in place in his Department for appointments to the boards of State agencies and organisations. [43817/14]

9. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach the processes and protocols in his Department for appointments to State boards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47831/14]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 6 to 9, inclusive, together.

The National Economic and Social Development Office, NESDO, is the body corporate for the National Economic and Social Council, NESC, and the only State agency under the aegis of my Department. The board of the NESDO comprises the chair and deputy chair of the NESC, both of whom are civil servants from my Department serving in an *ex-officio* capacity. Appointments to the National Economic and Social Council are made under section 14 of the National Economic and Social Development Office Act 2006, as amended by the National Economic and Social Council (Alteration of Composition) Order 2010. The NESC consists of 34 members, of whom 20 are appointed on the basis of nominations of other groups and organisations and six are civil servants - five Secretaries General and one assistant secretary - appointed in an *ex-officio* capacity on the basis of functional responsibility. As Taoiseach, I have discretion over eight appointments to the board.

In respect of the National Statistics Board, section 18 of the Statistics Act 1993 sets out the composition of the board and the procedures for appointing members to it. The board consists of eight members, comprising the following seven persons appointed by the Taoiseach: five persons of proven ability and experience in the relevant fields, two of whom are nominated by the Taoiseach and three by such organisation or organisations as the Taoiseach considers to be representative of the users of official statistics and providers of information under the Act; an assistant secretary or equivalent or higher grade in the Department of the Taoiseach; an assistant

secretary or equivalent or higher grade in the Department of Finance; and the director general of the CSO in an *ex-officio* capacity.

Following a recent Government decision, all State board vacancies must be advertised openly on the State boards portal, *www.stateboards.ie*, which is operated by the Public Appointments Service. Appointees must meet specific and detailed criteria necessary for the effective performance of the relevant roles and will be processed by way of a transparent system designed and implemented by the Public Appointments Service.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The last part of the Taoiseach's answer was the most relevant to the questions asked, which were about whether there was an agreed process in the Department of the Taoiseach for statutory board appointments. As we discovered during the Seanad by-election last year, the Taoiseach and his staff take a very active role in board appointments across the Government. That came out sharply during the aforementioned episode. I draw the Taoiseach's attention to a book written recently by Mr. John Walshe who was an adviser to the former Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Ruairí Quinn. Mr. Walshe was very specific about appointments to State boards. In his book which was a memoir of his experiences in the past four years he explained that Fine Gael advisers in Government Buildings were almost obsessed with Fine Gael getting its full share of people on State boards. The main interest of the Taoiseach's office in discussions with the Department of Education and Skills was not education but rather the number of board appointments Fine Gael could secure. I ask the Taoiseach to comment on this. The main engagement between his officials and advisers in Fine Gael and the Department of Education and Skills was not on education; rather, it was concerned with the number of Fine Gael appointments that could be made to State boards under the Department's aegis.

Will the Taoiseach explain why he thinks he has now radically reformed State appointments? He has been telling the House for the past three years that he has radically changed how people are appointed, but we know from Mr. Walshe's memoir and the McNulty affair that that is not the case. Is it not the truth that the overwhelming majority of appointments have involved people who were chosen for political reasons and then told to submit their applications? The Taoiseach created a new system but got around it to meet his need to appoint affiliates to boards. Will the new system put an end to the so-called two-for-one arrangement between Fine Gael and the Labour Party? I understand that for every appointment the Labour Party makes, Fine Gael gets to make two. According to Mr. Walshe, that is how appointments have been made since the Government came to power.

Deputy Gerry Adams: All of us will at least support the broad principle that holding a position on these boards is an honour and an act of public service. The people on boards are there to serve citizens who depend on good governance. The controversy in which the Taoiseach was involved in the appointment of Mr. John McNulty to the board of the Irish Museum of Modern Art undermined this principle. Apart from the bad practice this cronyism represents, it also shows the Government's total disregard for the arts. The Taoiseach does not need me to tell him about the importance of promoting, defending and respecting the arts community. After dodging the issue of the appointment of Mr. McNulty, he eventually took full responsibility for the mess. The establishment of Uisce Éireann and its board and the millions of euro given to consultants further strengthened the belief cronyism and patronage were at the heart of the Government's appointments. Will the Taoiseach confirm that his Department is in compliance with the new guidelines? Have the rules been tightened and measures been introduced in order that a Minister can remove a board member who is failing to perform his or her duty or where

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a conflict of interest arises subsequent to his or her appointment? It is a question of citizens having confidence in how we discharge our responsibilities to them. Is the Taoiseach satisfied that the objectives set out are being met by the new guidelines in their implementation by the Government and, in particular, his Department?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is rich to hear Fianna Fáil raising issues about the stacking of State boards.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is not.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: If memory serves me correctly - perhaps the Taoiseach can help my recollection - just before the last general election Fianna Fáil made 110 appointments to State boards in its last act.

Deputy Tom Hayes: There were a few more.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It was an extraordinary two fingers to the country as it left office. It will take a while before I can be convinced that the leopard has changed its spots in that regard.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It would be interesting to see what leopard the Deputy would bring with his totalitarian approach.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We are in favour of elections to State boards.

Deputy Micheál Martin: You are in your backside.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The only way to have real transparency and accountability in these matters is by having elections to State boards. The McNulty affair indicates that political appointments continue to be made. While that power rests with Ministers or senior civil servants, there is an irresistible temptation for any party or Government to pack boards with people with whom they have a connection. The abysmal record of the last Government compared to more recent cases suggests things have not changed much. In Dún Laoghaire recently we witnessed an appointment to the harbour board. It happened out of the blue. Announcements are made and nobody is quite sure who makes the decision. Who are the members of the Public Appointments Service? I ask the Taoiseach to provide the names of the people concerned and explain the relationship between them and politicians. If we are to move towards the transparency and accountability that most people want, should we not have elections to State boards?

The Taoiseach: The questions are irrelevant. We are in a very different space now and all appointments to any State board are first advertised on *www.stateboards.ie*. Any person anywhere in the country who wishes to apply for any of these positions must apply through that website, meet the criteria set out there, be vetted, and have his or her credentials verified as suitable for appointment to the relevant State board before anything further can happen. I refer Deputies to the guidelines on appointments to State boards which were published in November last year by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. They set out a very different position for the future for all of these appointments. They require that while *www.stateboards.ie* becomes a one-stop-shop for all of these appointments, candidates must specify relevant experience, educational and other qualifications, particular personal attributes and a range of skills they will bring to board membership. The portal also contains definitive current information on all statutory boards including legal basis, membership, terms of appointment, current

vacancies, gender balance and other diversity indicators. For the information of Deputies, the guidance on appointments to State boards sets out all of these things.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Did the Taoiseach read John Walshe's book?

The Taoiseach: I did not see the whole programme either. I saw a bit of it and I saw enough as I was here at the time.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach would have a unique insight into it. He would not have to watch it at all.

The Taoiseach: I was around for all of what happened except the demolition of the bird and the delights that took place under the tablecloth over the man's head. I do not know if that happened in reality or not.

Far be it for me to comment on the memoirs of the eminent Mr. Walshe who wrote and wrote well on educational matters from the other side of the fence for a very long time. I would not deign to comment on his memoirs.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach should have a look at it. It lays matters bare.

The Taoiseach: They are his personal views and we are now in a very different space. Thanks be to God, it is all vetted now by the Public Appointments Service the way that it should be.

Deputy Micheál Martin: They were inundated with calls from the Taoiseach's office to put people on boards.

Order of Business

The Taoiseach: It is proposed to take No. 46, statements on Northern Ireland and the Stormont House Agreement. It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that: the Dáil shall sit later than 9 p.m. tonight and shall adjourn on the adjournment of Private Members' business which shall be No. 187, motion re junior certificate exam structures, shall take place on the conclusion of Topical Issues and shall, if not previously concluded, adjourn after 90 minutes; the proceedings in relation to No. 46 shall be taken immediately after the Order of Business and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after two hours and the following arrangements shall apply: the statement of the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and of the leaders of Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Technical Group, or a person nominated in their stead, who shall be called upon in that order, shall not exceed 15 minutes in each case; and such Members may share their time; the statement of a Minister or Minister of State and of the main spokespersons for Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Technical Group, who shall be called in that order, shall not exceed ten minutes in each case; and such Members may share their time; a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed five minutes; and the order shall resume thereafter with Topical Issues; tomorrow's business after Oral Questions shall be: No. a17 - motion re Draft Oder for the Commission of

the Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes.

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the proceedings in relation to No. *a17* shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 5.30 p.m. tomorrow evening and the following arrangements shall apply: the speech of a Minister or Minister of State and of the main spokespersons for Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Technical Group, who shall be called upon in that order, shall not exceed 15 minutes in each case, and such Members may share their time; the speech of each other Member called upon shall not exceed ten minutes in each case, and such Members may share their time; and a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply, which shall not exceed ten minutes.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three proposals to put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with the late sitting agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with No. 46 agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with No. *a17* agreed to? Agreed.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There have been reports lately referring to the commitments of the Government to cut taxes at the top and lower levels. There are new reports about negotiations and the beginning of a new social dialogue or partnership. The Taoiseach may not be aware that the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, said today that the Government intends to amend the FEMPI legislation and to reverse cuts to the pension levy and pay reductions for the public sector. Can the Taoiseach outline to the House when the amended FEMPI Bill as well as the amending industrial relations legislation will come before it?

When can we expect the child and family relationships Bill? The Taoiseach and Government plan to meet tomorrow to discuss the wording of the two planned referendums for May, but can he confirm when the Bill will finally be debated by the House? When does the Taoiseach propose to establish the referendum commission so that people will be in possession of the full facts well before the referendums are held?

In terms of health legislation, the Taoiseach might clarify for me the relationship between the programme for Government on health and the legislative programme we got at the start of this session. There is no relationship between the legislative commitments in the programme for Government and what is contained in sections A, B and C of the legislative programme. For example, the integrated care agency Bill is not included as a Bill which is approved or whose heads have been approved or are yet to be approved. There is a long list of health Bills in section C, but none of them have anything to do with an integrated agency, hospital insurance fund, patient safety authority or any of a whole raft of commitments in the programme for Government in terms of universal hospital care insurance, the GP contract, and the legislative basis for universal primary care, a universal primary care Act. I respectfully suggest that in the interests of realism or honesty pages 3 to 6, inclusive, of the programme for Government should be deleted or reviewed. The Government can tell fairy tales for three and a half or four years, but it is taking matters to the cleaners altogether in terms of the health agenda. The Taoiseach might indicate when the health information Bill is due.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: Deputy Martin would like to delete a lot of things, but he will not be able to.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I would like to see a lot of this brought to fruition, including for example the programme for Government commitment on investment in the supply of more and

better care for older people in the community. I have just asked about it during Leaders' Questions, but there is no money for it. The programme refers to additional funding each year for the care of older people, residential places, more home care packages, and the delivery of more home help and other professional community care services. They have all been cut back and the fair deal system of financing is under review. We have not heard about the review yet and it is being cut back. The programme for Government contains *Alice in Wonderland* stuff. It tears its credibility to shreds when none of it corresponds to the legislative agenda in health. None of this is going to happen.

The Taoiseach: In respect of Deputy Martin's comment on taxes, that is clearly a matter for consideration as we move into preparation of the budget and I will not comment on it now. It is important to say that the Government has set out the fact that it wants to have an economic statement towards the end of spring which sets out the challenges on the road ahead. I would like to think the House would have an opportunity to have a real input and discussion into that.

We are not going back to social partnership the way it was. What I found wrong with social partnership was that all of those meetings took place in secret away from this institution. Given the primacy of Government and the Oireachtas, those who are elected here should have the right and the opportunity to consider, debate and reflect on the challenges that lie ahead for our country economically and in every other way. That will be the position.

5 o'clock

The Minister, Deputy Howlin, has referred to the FEMPI legislation on a number of occasions. The Haddington Road agreement will run until July 2016 and Deputy Howlin is making preparations for a pay and reform structure that will follow it. In respect of the work the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan and Deputy Howlin are undertaking, I like to think they are discussing the structure and options by which people can engage with issues about which we have to make decisions in the future. I want to see the Oireachtas committee dealing with finance and this House having the opportunity to debate and discuss these important matters. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, made a proposal to me which we should very carefully consider. He proposed that we establish a budgetary committee here so that Members could have their proposals costed in a way that would allow for a better, more focused debate on the challenges that lie ahead. It would reform the process by which we prepare for the future and the budget so Members would have the opportunity to be better prepared and better able to participate.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We made that proposal three years ago.

The Taoiseach: The children and family relationship Bill will come before the Dáil in February.

Deputy Micheál Martin: And FEMPI?

The Taoiseach: I said the Minister, Deputy Howlin, was starting the process. There will not be a Bill dealing with FEMPI here. He is beginning the process of preparing to have a pay and reform structure to follow the Haddington Road agreement, which will run until July 2016. The Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Fitzgerald, hopes to pass the children and family relationship Bill soon after it comes before the Dáil in February. The Deputy mentioned the patient safety agency, integrated care agency, hospital care purchase agency, the structural reform of the health sector and universal health insurance. Many of these issues are contingent

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on preparations being made for universal health insurance, which will happen in the lifetime of the next Government.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach says.

The Taoiseach: Yes, absolutely. I heard some remarks about Deputy Martin in that regard today and I do not believe them at all.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach has some neck. Get off the stage. “The money follows the patient.”

The Taoiseach: These areas are part of the discussion with the Minister for Health.

Deputy Micheál Martin: What about the election after that?

Deputy Patrick O’Donovan: What about the HSE?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Government said it would get rid of it.

The Taoiseach: Assuming the Government signs off on this tomorrow with the Minister for Justice and Equality, we will be able to appoint a Referendum Commission and give it plenty of time to do its work. The Government will meet on the question of the wording tomorrow.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Will the Taoiseach rewrite the programme for Government now that it will not happen in the lifetime of this Government? Is the Dutch model gone?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is banjaxed.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Martin had a fair innings.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Dutch model is gone.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Adams without interruption.

Deputy Micheál Martin: “The money follows the patient.” It was a fair old election slogan.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am just reliving old times.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: That would be dangerous for Deputy Martin.

An Ceann Comhairle: Do not encourage him, please. Deputy Adams, please ask your question.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: Deputy Martin will continue to relive them over there.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Tá ceist agam faoin Redress for Women Resident in Certain Institutions Bill agus Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Bill. Although I raised elements of this during Taoiseach’s questions, I was unsatisfied with the answers he gave. I am reflecting on the fact that in 2013 the Taoiseach apologised unreservedly to the survivors of the Magdalen laundries, said it was a national disgrace and said he had put in place a process to help and support the women. The Bill to facilitate this was published before Christmas and it has been

a focus of extensive criticism from survivors, particularly the Justice for Magdalenes Research group, which described it as a massive clawback from what was promised in the redress scheme as proposed by Mr. Justice John Quirke. The advocacy groups said the Bill was unacceptable, unfair and full of broken promises. Will the Taoiseach withdraw the Bill and facilitate the speedy drafting of new legislation to implement the commitments which he and the Government made two years ago? If he is determined to proceed, when will the Bill be ordered for Second Stage?

According to a scientific report, 2014 was the warmest year on record and the economic and human cost of climate change is evident in the damage caused by extreme weather conditions, particularly increased insurance costs and lives lost. We have seen this in our communities and have debated it here. The Government's climate action and low carbon development Bill is three years behind schedule, has been widely criticised for its lack of ambition and fails to set out any long-term target for reducing Irish greenhouse gas emissions. While it talks grandly about making a transition to a low-carbon economy by 2015, it contains no specific definition of what a low-carbon economy is. It does not guarantee the independence needed for the expert advisory council. When will the Bill be brought before the Dáil?

The Taoiseach: I cannot believe the Deputy is asking me to withdraw a Bill which we have awaited for 60 years.

Deputy Gerry Adams: It is inadequate.

The Taoiseach: I disagree.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: What Deputy Adams said is wrong.

The Taoiseach: The Magdalen Bill published before Christmas will be taken here in the next few weeks. It has been very well accepted and supported by the vast majority of the women who went through the Magdalen laundries. As I said earlier, the Government is fully committed to implementing all Mr. Justice Quirke's recommendations. The relief and acceptance on the part of those women of the State's response following Mr. Justice Quirke's report is evidence of the measure of support they have given it.

The climate change Bill will be discussed here in the second week of February. It has taken a long time to get to this point, and it has probably been worth the wait in that the nature of the debate has changed from Lima towards a conference in Paris later this year. The European Council gave Ireland a specific understanding of the very difficult position the country was in because of the method of setting targets for Ireland to 2020 and beyond to 2030. We are now in a much better position to negotiate far more realistic and achievable targets.

Deputy Joe O'Reilly: What is the progress of the public health (alcohol) Bill? We have a changing pattern of alcohol consumption bringing particular challenges in health and social life. The traditional Irish pub, which is so important for our tourism product and social life, is under threat.

The Taoiseach: A great deal of work is being done on it. Measures on aspects such as advertising and minimum unit pricing will be dealt with by regulation. Sponsorship, marketing and advertising are receiving much attention and we discussed the issues on Monday at a Cabinet sub-committee. We will make a decision on that element of it in the near future.

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Deputy Noel Grealish: I refer to a situation in Galway in which Bam Contractors Limited altered and falsified a subcontractor's document for its own benefit while a case between the contractor and subcontractor was going through the adjudication process and only admitted it afterwards. When will the contractors' Bill come before the Dáil to protect subcontractors and prevent their blatant abuse by major construction companies such as Bam Contractors limited?

The Taoiseach: Does the Deputy refer to the Construction Contracts Act 2013? It has been enacted already.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I will come back to the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Is the Deputy talking about the building control Bill?

Deputy Noel Grealish: Yes.

The Taoiseach: It is due later this year.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: At long last.

Deputy John Halligan: I am deeply disappointed that in the forthcoming legislative programme I noticed that the noise nuisance Bill might not be reached in this session. All the indications are that the heads of the Bill have not been approved and that it may not be brought before the Dáil. The Bill could enhance greatly the quality of life of the many thousands of people who suffer from anti-social behaviour and the terrible effects it has on them. The Garda and many community groups have stated the vast majority of anti-social behaviour is created by noise pollution from parties that continue until 3 a.m., 4 a.m. or 5 a.m. As Members are now, if one likes, into the last session of the Dáil and in spite of promises made by successive Governments that the Bill would be brought forward to deal with anti-social behaviour, the indications are that it may not be reached. Ireland is out of step with many other countries in Europe. Is there anything that can be done to bring this important Bill to deal with anti-social behaviour to the House before this Dáil finishes?

The Taoiseach: Deputy McGrath had a deep intake of breath when Deputy John Halligan stated this was the last session of the Dáil.

Deputy John Halligan: It is not; I am sorry.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Is the Taoiseach referring to me?

The Taoiseach: Deputy John Halligan gave the Deputy a fright.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: While the man sitting beside the Taoiseach might be, I am not too worried.

The Taoiseach: Deputy John Halligan gave the Deputy a touch of anxiety. I note that there are 41 Bills in the programme for this session. They are all priority Bills, many of which have a degree of urgency attached, and the Government must try to work its time in a way that - without the use of the guillotine - will still allow adequate time for Members to discuss these important issues. While the noise nuisance Bill is not in the programme, as the Deputy is aware, there are facilities under the existing system to build evidence of anti-social behaviour whereby local authorities can take action. However, I regret to state it has not been possible to get the noise pollution Bill into the House. The Deputy has raised the issue a number of times.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: When will the promised legislation on Government appointments to State boards be brought before Members? Second, will the Taoiseach have a specific look at the Western Development Commission? Of the nine board members, three are former Fine Gael councillors, while another was a failed Labour Party election candidate. Another member may also be a member of the Taoiseach's party.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not a matter for the Order of Business.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: That gives a majority of board members who are former councillors, candidates or party members. Will the Taoiseach examine the issue?

The Taoiseach: I will. The Deputy was not present when I answered this question earlier-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is all changed now.

The Taoiseach: -----albeit not about the Western Development Commission. We are in a new space in which they all must apply under the Public Appointments Service.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There is more space for the boys on board.

The Taoiseach: They are vetted and accredited independently entirely by the Public Appointments Service and I am glad that this is the position. I hope those members who are serving on the board of the Western Development Commission are doing a really good job.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is a two-for-one strategy.

Deputy Seamus Kirk: On the water services Bill, the Taoiseach will be aware of the considerable fear and anxiety in north County Louth, particularly in the Dundalk area, where approximately 50,000 people are seriously worried about the quality of water coming through the system because of pollution leaking into the source of supply at Lough Muckno, Castleblayney, County Monaghan. This is a particularly serious hazard and certainly should not be pretended to be a minor issue. It is a serious matter in a large conurbation of approximately 50,000 people.

An Ceann Comhairle: That sounds like a Topical Issue.

Deputy Seamus Kirk: Perhaps the Taoiseach might make contact with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government about this matter in order that an investigation could get under way about the problems there.

The Taoiseach: I will respond to the Deputy on that issue. I have seen the reports on the dangers and, obviously, the concerns of many that their water systems might be being poisoned by toxic fluids either being dumped deliberately or leaking into the system. Obviously, it is a matter for the EPA, the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and the Garda, where necessary.

Deputy James Bannon: The issue of farm safety must be tackled by necessary incentives and legislation because if countries such as Denmark can record zero fatalities from farm accidents, it is clear that Ireland's approach to farm safety and health is not working. When is the environmental liability Bill expected to be brought forward? Perhaps this legislation might go some way towards addressing the issue because there was a feature on the "Late Late Show"

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broadcast last weekend on which the catastrophe for several families because of farm accidents could be seen. It is still a very serious problem in Ireland.

The Taoiseach: The Minister of State may wish to make a comment on this matter.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Tom Hayes): Yes, this is a serious concern for many people right across the-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is completely out of order.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Will he answer a question from me?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, this is not-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is out of order.

Deputy Noel Grealish: Is this the Taoiseach's appointed successor?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach cannot play fast and loose with the Order of Business.

Deputy Noel Grealish: Deputy Mattie McGrath is getting worried now.

The Taoiseach: The environmental liability Bill is not part of the farm safety programme, but I take the point raised by Deputy James Bannon. It is a personal tragedy in a number of cases in which accidents have happened and, unfortunately, continue to happen. I note that the farming organisations have been clear about having guidelines for farmers, particularly when working alone in paddocks or on farmyards where, unfortunately, these accidents happen on an all-too-frequent basis.

Deputy Frank Feighan: There is an ongoing issue where people with severe disabilities cannot access public transport, in rural areas in particular. A Bill is required to ensure an individual payment would go towards contributing to transport costs. When will the health (transport support) Bill be brought before the House?

The Taoiseach: I cannot give the Deputy a date for publication of the legislation. I will let him have a report on the progress being made in the discussions taking place in that regard.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I am enraged and disgusted at the dumping of illegal diesel fuel waste in the River Fane, County Louth. The River Fane supplies water to the local Cavan Hill treatment plant which, in turn, supplies drinking water to most of the vicinity around Dundalk. This dumping of waste is causing pollution and has been ongoing for years in Dundalk and the surrounding areas and is a threat to both the countryside and human life. I ask the Taoiseach to please, once and for all, sort out the issue of fuel-laundering north and south of the Border.

An Ceann Comhairle: About what Bill is the Deputy talking?

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: This waste must be in containers. There must be some way to find out who is supplying it in the area. Will the Taoiseach, please, help?

The Taoiseach: I have already stated I will advise Deputy Seamus Kirk about this matter. I can advise Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick and everybody else of the investigations taking place to establish whether the source can be determined and its cause and discover those responsible for

dumping toxic fluids into water systems or in areas where they leak into water systems, thereby causing fear, anxiety and concern for the people of County Louth.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wish to ask the Taoiseach about two items of legislation, the first of which is the scrap and precious metals Bill. It has been promised twice by the former Minister, Deputy Alan Shatter, and the current Minister, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, and it is important that it be enacted to give some strength to the Garda in tracing precious gold and scrap metal.

On the second item, given that the Cabinet will meet tomorrow to discuss the referendum, perhaps it might get time to discuss the judgment of the Supreme Court on the manner in which the money appropriated by the House to run the children's rights referendum was mishandled. A sum of €1.1 million was misappropriated and it was never debated or discussed here in the House. There is never any recognition-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should table a question.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I have done so, but I get no answers. The Cabinet might get a chance to make sure the commission it will appoint will not be interfered with this time and will be let do the job it will be appointed to do and not be interfered with by the Government.

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

Deputy Mattie McGrath: No, the Taoiseach might consider it tomorrow; it is highly appropriate. Alternatively, he might pass it to his Minister of State.

The Taoiseach: I can assure the Ceann Comhairle that the Government will act strictly in accordance with the decision and findings of the Supreme Court.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It did not do so the last time. Will the Taoiseach answer my other question?

An Ceann Comhairle: On the precious metals Bill.

The Taoiseach: It was a Private Members' Bill introduced by Deputy Mattie McGrath.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Yes, but the Government promised to bring forward its own Bill.

The Taoiseach: I am not sure where it ended up.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On the scrap heap, like everything else here. The Government promised to publish own Bill.

The Taoiseach: It seems to have been smelted somewhere along the way.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What happened to the Government's Bill?

The Taoiseach: I will advise the Deputy.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: While I inquired about this item of legislation last week, I missed out on the reply. The control and sale of alcohol Bill is awaited eagerly by many interest groups nationwide. I am not certain on what whether progress can be reported at this stage and ask the Taoiseach whether it is possible to move ahead with this important Bill. While, allegedly, it is dependent on a court case in an adjoining jurisdiction, the time surely has come when

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Members should be able to proceed using their own strength.

The Taoiseach: I already have answered this question. The legislation is close to being finalised. There are questions about what can be dealt with by way of regulations, while sponsorship is a particular issue that has been the subject of discussions between a number of Ministers with a particular interest in it. This is not as confined an issue as one might imagine, but there is agreement on the area which needs to be regulated. Consequently, the Deputy should note that the legislation is not far away.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Taoiseach.

Northern Ireland and the Stormont House Agreement: Statements

The Taoiseach: I welcome the opportunity to open this debate on Northern Ireland and the outcome of the political talks in Belfast, which concluded on 23 December last with the Stormont House Agreement.

Since the 1990s, successive Governments have played their parts in supporting and facilitating a series of agreements to establish and underpin the Northern Ireland peace process. The first of these, in 1998, was the Good Friday Agreement, which provided a template for greatly improved relationships across these islands. The St. Andrews Agreement of 2006 and the Hillborough Agreement of 2010 were critical further steps along this journey.

I am pleased that the Government and I, working closely with our British counterparts, and, of course, with the Northern Ireland parties, have played an important role in helping to broker the latest in this series, with the successful conclusion of the Stormont House Agreement on 23 December 2014. This represents the culmination of many months of negotiation, but also many years of close relationship building. I am proud of the role that I, my Ministerial colleagues, our officials and all concerned have played in helping to deliver it. I would like to record my gratitude, in particular, to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Flanagan and Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock for their hard work over recent months. I believe this agreement lays a firm foundation for Northern Ireland, its politicians and its people, to look forward and outward and, more important, to move forward together. Yes, the process will need to deal with the challenges of the past, there will be a need for continuous attention on reconciliation and tough decisions have had to be taken on the budget and the economy, but important as these are in their own right, they are also important steps towards securing a better future, a shared society and greater prosperity.

I recall our last debate in this House on Northern Ireland when I referred to our interdependence on this island. The history, interests and futures of the people across both parts of this island are intricately interwoven. Equally, the lives of all the people on both parts of this island are increasingly influenced by events beyond our shores, be they events in our nearest neighbour, Great Britain, or the continued evolution of the European Union or wider international and geopolitical developments. On both parts of this island, we need to continually look outwards, to pay more attention to events beyond our shores, both to the challenges and to the opportunities. We must collectively be aware of, and be able to respond to, external developments and challenges beyond our direct control. In many instances, we can do this together. Co-operation

and collaboration are not just desirable but essential in the reality of the world economy today. We need look no further than across the water to our nearest neighbouring island to understand the dramatic impact that developments beyond this island can have. The recent Referendum on Scotland and the consequent debate about devolution of powers within the United Kingdom, Britain's position in the European Union and the prospect of a referendum on EU membership are all issues that can have a profound impact for Northern Ireland and indeed across this island.

I have already made clear that we want the UK to remain a full, integral member of the Union. I believe this to be in Britain's best interest and in Ireland's best interest, but I am also absolutely convinced that it is in Northern Ireland's best interest. We should also remember that the European Union has been an active political and financial supporter of the Northern Ireland peace process. This support continues through EU peace and INTERREG funding programmes, which will see almost €500 million invested in the region for the period to 2020.

In regard to relationships on this island, when the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was concluded, it was described as an historic template for the mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands. Looking back over the intervening period, I think it is fair to say that it has contributed enormously to a transformation in relationships between the two great traditions of this island. That agreement opened up opportunities for us North and South, east and west, to get to know one another in new ways. Our commitment to that agreement and to partnership, equality and mutual respect, today stands more firm than ever. Ireland and Northern Ireland now work closely together through the North-South Ministerial Council and beyond in areas of common interest that are beneficial to both parts of the island, including the economy, society, peace, reconciliation and prosperity. The Government's commitment to North-South and all-island co-operation remains a priority.

A recent example of how we can co-operate and collaborate more closely is the joint bid to host the Rugby World Cup in 2023. Last month in Armagh, together with the Tánaiste, First Minister Robinson and Deputy First Minister McGuinness, I was particularly pleased to launch and pledge our full, joint support for the IRFU's tournament bid. We have co-operated before to hold cross-Border sporting events but I firmly believe that working together to bring the Rugby World Cup to Ireland can bring North-South co-operation to a whole new level. Ministers in both jurisdictions will be working closely together to ensure the strongest possible bid is submitted.

Looking outwards, the Good Friday Agreement has enabled the development of ever closer relations across these islands, perhaps best symbolised by the highly successful reciprocal State visits of Queen Elizabeth to Ireland in 2011 and President Higgins to the United Kingdom last April. In March 2012, the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, and I signed a Joint Statement which sought to take our relationship further by setting out a vision of what closer co-operation might look like over the next decade. It also mapped out a unique, structured process of engagement, activity and outcomes between our two governments, including annual review summits by both of us and underpinned by a programme of engagement by our most senior civil servants. All of this work and ongoing close relations matter deeply. Beyond producing practical outcomes that can benefit both jurisdictions it also helps to build trust and understanding. Oireachtas Members of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and the North-South Inter-Parliamentary Association, are also helping to rebuild trust by continuing to promote and nurture co-operation in British-Irish and North-South relations for the benefit of all the people on these islands. I attended the first Plenary British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly in Westminster in February 1990

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and I look forward to opening the 50th plenary and marking the 25th anniversary of BIPA here in the Oireachtas next month.

In the context of the peace process and as co-guarantors of the agreements put in place, the British and Irish Governments worked closely together to support and encourage the Northern Executive in its efforts to overcome the political impasse which appeared to be taking hold in recent times, including through the talks chaired by Dr. Richard Haass and the subsequent attempt to make progress under talks involving the Party Leaders. The UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, and I have maintained close contact on Northern Ireland over this time and our respective officials have also been in continuous engagement. As a consequence, we and our Governments were in a position to respond quickly, and in unison, last September when it became increasingly clear that intervention and involvement by both Governments was required to avoid the possible collapse of the power-sharing institutions. This led to the announcement on 28 September of the intention to convene a new round of political talks in Northern Ireland, with the direct involvement of both Governments. Our objective in the talks was to ensure that the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement not only continue to function but work to the benefit of all and to conclude a broad agreement that provided a framework for both economic renewal and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Flanagan, together with the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, represented the Irish Government at the weekly sessions of the talks over a period of 11 weeks and co-chaired all-party round table talks with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Theresa Villiers. I would like to thank the Minister, Deputy Flanagan and Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, for their tireless efforts on behalf of the Irish Government over those three months. I acknowledge the commitment of officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and my own Department, and indeed other Departments and agencies, in supporting the talks process and more generally in working continually to support and promote the peace process and the North-South agenda. I wish also to record my appreciation for the very close co-operation we have had with the British Government throughout the process.

Finally, I acknowledge the leadership shown by the Northern Ireland parties themselves in reaching consensus on an agreement. I am glad they found it within themselves to reach an agreement in the final analysis. The final text, based on the draft agreement tabled when the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, and I travelled to Belfast to participate directly in the talks last month, deals with the key issues comprehensively. The agreement itself covers a broad range of political, economic and social issues.

In particular, it sets out a plan for financial and budgetary reform while proposing a way forward on flags, identity, culture and tradition through the establishment of a commission. It envisages the devolution of responsibility for parades to the Northern Ireland Assembly, with proposals on parading to be brought to the Northern Ireland Executive by June 2015. It will establish a programme of institutional reform at Stormont and progress several outstanding aspects from the Good Friday and St. Andrews Agreements, including the establishment of a civic advisory panel by June 2015. It has a commitment to reporting on new sectorial priorities for North-South co-operation by the end of February 2015 and the further development of the North-West gateway initiative. Significantly, the agreement also establishes a new comprehensive framework and broad ranging structures for dealing with the legacy of the past. These include a new historical investigations unit to examine the deaths that occurred as a result of the troubles, an independent commission for information retrieval and an oral history archive.

What people lost through the Troubles no one can return. Nor can we forget the pain and

suffering inflicted on victims and their families. However, the new structures can help in some way to lessen the impact of the legacy of the past on everyday politics. The challenge now is to use the opportunity presented to bring a collective effort and focus to bear on building a shared and prosperous future. It is also different to previous agreements, in particular because of the prominence of sound management of budgetary matters and the economy - the cornerstone of government.

Tough choices and tough decisions had to be taken. This is by no means unique to Northern Ireland or to its Executive, however. The recent economic crisis has required tough decisions to be taken right around the globe, across the European Union, in Britain and, as we all know only too well in this House, here in Ireland. None of this is easy. Little of it is popular but we know it is necessary. The Stormont House Agreement sets a roadmap for the Northern Executive to put its finances on a sustainable footing for the future and to move forward with the necessary rebalancing of its economy to promote growth and create jobs. The package of significant financial support amounting to nearly £2 billion of additional spending power will support this process.

Since the conclusion of the agreement last December, legislation to provide for the devolution of responsibility for corporation tax has now been published, a new speaker to the Northern Assembly has been elected and the Executive's budget has been formally adopted for the next financial year. These confidence-building measures represent progress in their own right and will also contribute to a more stable political environment. More importantly, they also show that politics does matter and can make a difference.

The Irish Government will continue to play its part. We will work with the Northern Executive to deliver even closer political, economic and social co-operation. We are committed to working for even greater cross-Border economic co-operation to accelerate growth and secure the creation of jobs on this island. We will continue our close engagement with the British Government, both to promote and develop our wider bilateral interests but also to pursue our common custodianship of the agreements in support of the Northern Ireland peace process, and, above all, in the interests of peaceful, prosperous and harmonious future for all of the peoples of these islands.

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the agreement reached at Stormont House in Belfast before Christmas between the Irish and British Governments and the political parties in Northern Ireland. When I became Tánaiste last July and when the Taoiseach and I agreed the Government's statement of priorities for the next two years, we included securing and enhancing peace in the North as one of our six key objectives. We did so in the context of a potentially difficult marching and parading season last summer and against the backdrop of political stalemate that had existed since the end of the talks chaired by Dr. Richard Haass last January.

Thankfully, the marching season passed off relatively peacefully. Subsequently, the political parties engaged in ten weeks of political negotiations during the autumn that ultimately concluded with this agreement. The Irish Government was an active participant in those negotiations. For this, thanks are due in part to my party colleague Deputy Eamon Gilmore, who, in his final weeks as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade last June, engaged in a series of meetings to encourage all parties and the British Government to enter into discussions. Thankfully, this came to fruition during the autumn. In this respect, the fact an agreement is now in place is no small part due to the efforts Deputy Eamon Gilmore made, often behind the scenes, during his

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time in office. All parties and the two Governments are grateful to him for that.

The Irish Government's efforts to achieve a successful outcome were further boosted by the work of Deputy Eamon Gilmore's successor, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan, and by the appointment of the first Minister of State with responsibility for North-South co-operation, my party colleague Deputy Sean Sherlock. Their work over recent months with their officials was also central to this agreement.

Along with the Taoiseach and the two Ministers, I joined the Irish Government negotiating team towards the conclusion of these negotiations in December. I believe the combined presence of the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and two Ministers demonstrated the Government's commitment to achieving an agreement and ending the political deadlock. That was my motivation in attending the talks. I will continue to make myself available for any matters relating to Northern Ireland for the remainder of the Government's term in office.

The peace and progress achieved since the darkest days of the Troubles has been hard won. All of us who remember that terrible period in our recent history have a responsibility to ensure those days never return. As to the details of the Stormont House Agreement itself, the Irish Government's primary interests lay in building to the greatest extent possible on the proposals contained in the Haass package on flags, parades and dealing with the past. Further, we also sought to develop the role of the North-South institutions, conscious of the potential of all-island economic development to boost employment and investment. I am glad the package of measures agreed on the past largely reflects what was contained in the Haass proposals. Rather than dwell on their details, it is more important to concentrate on implementing them as quickly as possible.

Victims and survivors in Northern Ireland have had several false dawns in terms of processes for dealing with the past. The Eames-Bradley report of January 2009 laid out a comprehensive set of proposals and recommendations which were regrettably not acted on following publication. Hopes were raised once again during the Haass negotiations but these were dashed when the parties failed to reach a final agreement. Now we have a clear set of measures to be implemented that include the establishment of a new historical investigations unit to review Troubles-related deaths, a new independent commission on information retrieval and an implementation and reconciliation group. These developments are a step forward for families who have long sought processes for achieving truth and accountability for what happened to their loved ones.

There is also a subsequent onus on both paramilitary organisations and Governments to step up to the mark and meet the obligations required of them in these new structures. Success in what has been agreed on the past will ultimately be judged on whether or not it meets the needs of victims and survivors. Only when searches for the disappeared have successfully concluded, when we have full disclosure on collusion between paramilitaries and the State and when families are satisfied they have achieved a measure of justice, will we know these processes have worked.

On the issue of flags, I hope that progress can be made through the new commission that has been established. This has proven an extremely difficult issue to resolve, and I believe the commission is the best possible compromise in current circumstances.

While there is some uncertainty regarding the process for determining parades, I do wel-

come the fact that the Northern Ireland Parades Commission is to remain in place. The commission has done excellent work in extremely challenging circumstances in determining that the rule of law must be upheld. Parades will remain a difficult issue in Northern Ireland for some time to come. While the overwhelming majority of these parades pass off peacefully, the public must have confidence in the rulings that are made on contentious parades. The Parades Commission is vital to this process.

On question of North-South co-operation, I welcome the commitments made to expediting the review of relevant North-South issues that was agreed some time ago. However, I am concerned that we are not fully realising the potential of all-island economic development. The SDLP, in particular, has consistently argued that rather than compete for investment, there are numerous opportunities for expanding North-South co-operation particularly in the Border region. I would hope that Sinn Féin will use its position in the Northern Ireland Executive to argue for the North-South agenda. In his role as Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade with responsibility for development, trade promotion and North-South co-operation, Deputy Sean Sherlock will continue his work in this regard, as I believe that both economies can benefit from shared resources and greater co-operation in the years ahead. It is very important that we get communities in all parts of the island in communication and co-operation with each other. It is absolutely the best way of promoting a shared understanding of what is a very difficult past for people on both sides.

On the subject of Sinn Féin, I am aware that Sinn Féin has constantly railed against the difficult decisions the Government here in the South has had to take to correct our public finances, get the country back on its feet, and get people back to employment. Spokespersons from Sinn Féin have been trenchant in their comments on that. It was interesting in the context of the Northern discussion how the rhetoric here was matched with an equivalent campaign against what I think was called “Tory cuts” in Northern Ireland, some time before these negotiations began. When the budget deal was done - it involves very challenging and difficult budgetary issues around a £700 million package - the Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, described this package as the best deal possible. It will be challenging, particularly for Sinn Féin to reconcile its previous opposition to cuts on such a scale with its current support for the package of budget and welfare changes and reductions that have been signed up to as part of the Stormont House Agreement.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I thank the Tánaiste - she was a great help during negotiations.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Brian Walsh): The Tánaiste without interruption please. The Deputy’s leader will have ample opportunity to respond.

The Tánaiste: In fairness to the Sinn Féin Deputies, their party was the first to sign up to the Stormont House Agreement and I am welcoming that.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The cynicism just drips off the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: I want to recognise that the agreement lays down a demanding financial template for all the parties and people in Northern Ireland. We have sought here again and again, the Labour Party and Government, to ensure that the people who are most vulnerable, particularly in regard to social welfare and their weekly payments, have been protected, and that has been a very difficult thing to do. I know how difficult these financial adjustments are and that

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is definitely going to face the parties in Northern Ireland.

The Irish Government was not party to this part of the negotiations as they are an internal Northern Ireland matter, and we do not yet know the full details of where some of the reductions and the axe might fall. However, we do know from the global figures that its impact may be severe. We know there are proposals in regard to education funding, spending on vital services in the Department of the Environment, and potentially a reduction of up to 10% in the budget of the Northern Ireland Department of Social Development. Families, schoolchildren, and jobseekers will probably be impacted. Further, the statement this week by the North's Minister for Finance and Personnel, Mr. Simon Hamilton, that there will be 20,000 public sector redundancies over the coming years demonstrates the scale of the adjustment, and indeed the scale of borrowing that is implicit in the agreement to support those adjustments. Indeed, proportionately, as Members will know, this far outweighs the reduction in public service numbers that has been implemented in the South by voluntary retirement and early retirement packages.

In conclusion, the Stormont House Agreement offers an opportunity for politics in Northern Ireland to move on. Some issues that were outstanding for many years have been resolved. More work is required on other matters. Northern Ireland also faces significant challenges in meeting all that has been laid down in the agreement. In particular, the economy has moved to the centre of the political debate, and while we have made significant progress on that front in the South, difficult days and difficult decisions lie ahead in the North. The immediate threat to the institutions in the North has been removed and there is now a basis for all parties to work together to overcome shared challenges. It is not a perfect agreement but we must move now to implement what was agreed at Stormont House, develop the North-South economy, and build a prosperous and peaceful island for people on both sides of the Border. That is the shared aspiration not just of the Labour Party but of all parties in the South.

While we have an employment challenge in the North, I am conscious that we have many similar challenges in the South. If our experience in the South can be of value in terms of implementing the agreement in the North, we will certainly be ready to offer any advice, information or experience that would be helpful as the parties and the government in the North deal with the quite difficult adjustments that have been signed up to by all the parties.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The great achievements of the peace process were a triumph for democrats on this island who were willing to invest enormous time and patience into bringing a murderous minority to abandon violence. The overwhelming majority of people believed and still believe that we have a duty to work for a shared future for everybody who lives on this island. The breakthroughs of achieving ceasefires, a new constitutional blueprint, active cross-border engagement, decommissioning and devolved authority did not happen by accident and they did not happen because any individual or party imposed its will – they happened because of the will of people which demanded a better future.

By every means available to measure public sentiment, the last few years have seen a growing disillusionment, unfortunately, and a sense of drift which has, at times, threatened to engulf the peace process. People have lost the sense of a process which was about building a better future for them, as they looked at institutions which spent their time on partisan gridlock and increasingly sectarian posturing. On the streets, a process which promised reconciliation was seen to feed isolation and identity politics. A combination of party self-interest and governmental neglect led to a crisis which was entirely avoidable. Thankfully the governments decided to reverse their policy of disengagement and we finally got serious round-table negotiations.

What has emerged does not provide answers to most of the problems which were being discussed but it does represent a step forward and hopefully a beginning to tackling damaging behaviour of recent years.

Fianna Fáil welcomes the Stormont House agreement as a positive one. For the first time in several years there has been some level of agreement between the largest parties in Northern Ireland to acknowledge and begin addressing deep and growing problems. The Irish and British Governments have also acknowledged the error of disengagement and returned to an understanding of their roles as active facilitators of the process.

The Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly have been given a new opportunity to work in a spirit of cross-community co-operation. The largest parties have promised to end the exclusion of smaller parties and the public from key discussions. There has been a new commitment to address issues of identity and history in an inclusive and tolerant way.

The agreement is, however, somewhat flawed since its main positive feature is the commitment to agree things in the future rather than actually finding agreement now. As yesterday's budget revealed, the financial impact of the deal is minor and primarily enables a smokescreen to cover the implementation of policies which the parties said they would never implement. In spite of this, the agreement should, on balance, be welcomed. It is in stark contrast to the cycle of complacency and growing division which has defined recent years.

The reality is that this happened because of two rather damaging developments, both of which marked significant moves away from the dynamics behind all progress to date. The first issue was that the Governments agreed on a policy which assumed that all the hard work was done. Their explicit policy was that the time had come to force the parties to take responsibility and that the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin would understand the need to deliver. This policy was a complete failure. As sectarian conflict rose, as the executive grew ever more dysfunctional and as fewer policies were agreed the Governments kept maintaining that everything would be fine. Worst of all, they enabled a second damaging move away from past practice, that is, the growing exclusion by the DUP and Sinn Féin of others. At every stage they have shown an iron commitment to securing advantage for their parties. This is what Deputy Adams calls the electoralism strategy. Rather than embracing the idea of trying to deliver an inclusive government they have focused on the fight to become the dominant representatives of their parts of the community. Both parties have shown a highly selective commitment to the institutions of the Government to which they belong. Whether it was threatening to withdraw from policing when a member of Sinn Féin was arrested or by refusing to condemn sectarian lawlessness, the parties have sought to have it all ways at once.

When Fianna Fáil started pointing to an impending crisis three years ago the DUP and Sinn Féin did find a unity in attacking us and claiming that things had never been better. Within the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly they have actively marginalised all other voices. Ministers from other parties have been denied basic information about matters before the executive to which they belong. Both large parties supported the continued breaking of legal agreements to establish a civic forum because - they actually admitted this - they preferred people and groups to come to them directly. This strategy worked for them electorally but it has been incredibly damaging for public faith in the institutions of the peace process. In 1998 they won 35% of the vote combined. Now, both main parties have 55% and see themselves as the leaders of their communities. Unfortunately, this has primarily come from pushing people away from politics. Election turnout is at the lowest ever level. The electorate is growing but

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160,000 fewer people are voting. The Community Relations Council has shown that the majority no longer believe that the devolved institutions are delivering.

The combination of governmental disengagement and party game-playing gave us this crisis. Only by ending these permanently will we return to the type of progress for peace and reconciliation which had been seen previously. While Fianna Fáil welcomes the agreement we do not welcome the financial arrangements which have enabled it. They suggest that the Cameron-led Government continues to have no real understanding of the precious and fragile nature of the peace in Northern Ireland.

I put it to the Tánaiste that economic development in Northern Ireland is not an internal matter for Northern Ireland. It is part and parcel of the all-island economy and it is a matter for both Governments and for all on the island of Ireland.

London's policy has been one of seeking to end the idea of Northern Ireland as a special case for investment. This is an appalling attitude and I regret that our Government decided it was unable to make the case, at least publicly, that it was wrong to endanger progress for the sake of amounts which are minuscule in United Kingdom terms. The people of Northern Ireland have enough challenges on their plate without the addition of dramatic job cuts and service cuts. I mean this sincerely and this has been an issue for me for a considerable length of time. Let us consider the health index, social indices and school completion indices. There are significant and large marginalised communities in Northern Ireland on both sides of the political and committee divide. We need a Marshall-type plan to deal once and for all with these problems in a programmatic way but that is not happening. Rather than cuts, discreet ring-fenced funding should be put aside under a clear programme along the lines of the RAPID or CLÁR programmes we implemented to deal with similar challenges. I know that in his time in the Áras Martin McAleese worked hard on this informally. There was some resistance within the executive because people wanted a slice of the action and so on. We need a comprehensive approach to underpin the agreement and to ensure a real dividend on the social side. That should have been at the centre of discussions and negotiations on the financial dimension of the agreement. On top of a minor amount of money, the executive is being allowed to divert investment spending and borrow to cover short-term budget holes. These decisions do not show a significant commitment to the long-term future of Northern Ireland.

The claim by Deputy McDonald yesterday that Sinn Féin held out and got what it wanted on welfare reform is manifestly untrue. Welfare cuts will proceed as will education cuts, though both at a slightly lower level than first proposed. Most seriously, 20,000 jobs are to be cut but we have no idea where these cuts will come from or what services they will hit. The rhetoric of the DUP and Sinn Féin yesterday about minimal impact fooled no one.

That the issues of flags and parades are bigger today than in the past shows a great lack of leadership by many at different levels. They have provided the outlet for many of the worst sectarian flashpoints and there is no doubt that the enemies of progress have exploited various situations. I have great reservations about what the agreement says about parades and I have said as much before in the House during Leaders' Questions as far back as May 2013.

Unionists have pushed for many years for the disbandment of the Parades Commission and the development of a new architecture. To coincide with this the British Government has undermined the stature of the commission over time. The Unionists were keen to move the parades issue into the political sphere, a risky and premature strategy and not a good move if we stand

back and examine it objectively. It has the potential to cause even further political instability in future. I believe we need a strong mechanism that is objective and independent. The Parades Commission had these characteristics at the outset as well as the ability to make rules that had to be abided by. I hope I am wrong but I do not believe there will be much progress on parades if it is left solely to the members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Assembly has yet to illustrate how it is capable of facing down intense communal pressures. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of this happening in the short or medium term. The core issue is not how decisions on parades are taken; it is a question of showing respect for a process which can sometimes recommend something that one does not agree with. In concrete terms, the statement in the agreement concerning parades does little beyond reaffirming current principles.

A bill of rights is a basic document for a society trying to overcome conflict. It sets out common basic rights which can serve as a foundation for a shared politics. It should not be a political football and it is long past time for it to be delivered. The failure of the parties to honour this commitment is a serious weakness of the agreement, as is the approach to other clear legal commitments under past agreements. The Civic Forum for Northern Ireland is part of an agreement ratified by the people of this island in free referendums. It is not an option, it is an obligation. When the DUP and Sinn Féin closed it down they said it was too big, cost too much and that they would propose something better. The convening of a small group, hand-picked by those parties, continues to ignore the obligation to have a genuinely independent forum. History shows that it is marginal groups with limited electoral appeal which can lead to the worst violence and division. The forum is a way of reaching out to all communities.

Is droch an scéal é nach bhfuil Acht teanga fós againn agus tá an dealramh ar an scéal nach mbeidh ceann againn le fada an lá. Is deacair é seo a thuiscint. Bhí ról faoi leith ag údarás na bProstastúnaigh i dtosach na haoise seo caite maidir le chaomhnú agus le hathbheochan na Gaeilge. Is deacair é a thuiscint nach bhfuil an thoil ann chun Acht teanga a chur i bhfeidhm.

6 o'clock

The passage of a language Act is also, in our view, not an option and the lack of progress is unacceptable. The Irish language is a language preserved and promoted by people of all traditions, most notably the Church of Ireland tradition. At the beginning of the last century, some very notable leaders of that community did some great work on the Irish language but today the language has less legal recognition than its sister languages in Wales and Scotland.

The commission on flags, identity, culture and tradition is another outcome which is about establishing a willingness to engage rather than achieving anything specific. However, even a willingness to engage represents important progress. In practice, the centrality of the parties in the commission will mean it will need substantial governmental engagement to succeed. It is a bad sign that it requires an agreement such as this to force the office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to share basic information with members of the Executive who are not members of the DUP or Sinn Féin.

The agreement's proposals relating to the past are also welcome. They are modest but they do represent potentially significant progress. As others have said, too often in recent years the real war of the past has been replaced by a war of narratives. Each side has worked hard to impose its version of history rather than working on finding common ground and a respect for difference. In a manner which has many fewer repercussions, we have seen this here in recent years with the Sinn Féin project to falsify Irish republican history by claiming ownership of a

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movement which has nothing to do with the Provisional IRA movement created in the 1970s. Equally we see it in the fact that certain parties are only ever interested in investigating the crimes of others.

To date, the Irish Government is the only party to the process which has been fully open and honest about its actions and failings during the decades of the Provisional IRA's campaign. The proposal for the independent commission on information retrieval may address one aspect of the issue. I think it is wrong that the DUP and Sinn Féin effectively have been given a privileged right over all other Northern parties to a role in nominating members to the commission and I trust our Government will insist that the members have the confidence of those who represent parties who never condoned, encouraged or participated in the crimes involved.

The failure of the British Government to commit to a proper investigation and transparency relating to the Finucane murder and the Dublin/Monaghan bombings is a huge and unacceptable omission. Regarding North/South engagement, the commitment to finally move ahead with the obligation to review and develop cross-Border institutions is a step forward and I would welcome a special debate on this matter in the near future.

On behalf of Fianna Fáil I would like to commend the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Flanagan for his personal commitment. In his few months in office he has chosen to directly re-engage in Northern issues and this has been very helpful. I believe some of the Government's statements about this jurisdiction's right in Northern discussions have been wrong but the Minister's actions have been very positive. I also commend the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, on his engagement and activity.

If this agreement marks a moment where the parties genuinely commit themselves to working across communal divisions in the common interest then it will be a very positive footnote in the process of building peace and reconciliation. However, if all it does is represent a further kicking down the road of deep problems and if the parties and Governments return to their recent habits of complacency and disengagement, it will be seen as a dangerous missed opportunity. For everyone's sake I hope the procedures and discussions which the Stormont House agreement has created can turn a crisis into a new moment of hope.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil le achan duine a bhí páirteach sna comhchainteanna, go háirithe an Aire, an Teachta Charles Flanagan, agus an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Sherlock; na páirtithe uilig; Gary Hart agus ardhonsal na Stáit Aontaithe sa Tuaisceart; agus na daoine a lean ar aghaidh go stuama nuair a bhí cúrsaí deacair go leor agus faoi dheireadh a tháinig ar chomhréiteach ag an Nollaig. I want to especially thank Martin McGuinness and the excellent team of experienced Sinn Féin negotiators who provided consistent, clear and unwavering leadership, who refused to be discouraged and who worked very hard to chart a positive path to a successful conclusion. Sinn Féin was very clear about its objectives. These were: to agree a deal that would protect the most vulnerable in society; to safeguard the rights and entitlements of citizens; to deliver on outstanding agreements; to grow the economy; and to enhance the workings of the institutions.

The failure, principally of the Irish and British Governments, to implement outstanding agreements and the failure of the Irish Government especially to act as a co-equal guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement and other agreements, as well as tensions between the Executive and the British Government - most notably around British demands for welfare cuts which were blatantly supported by the Irish Government - was the context of the latest crisis. The ability of

the five Executive parties to defend front-line public services, the poor, people with disabilities, the elderly and disadvantaged and to create jobs was significantly undermined by British Tory demands for welfare cuts, as well as by the £1.5 billion cut to the block grant since 2011. This austerity policy is similar to the Irish Government's and was actively endorsed by the Taoiseach. Sinn Féin was steadfast in its opposition to this agenda.

The British Government's failure to honour its commitments made in the Good Friday Agreement and other agreements, such as an inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane, was another important factor in the crisis. The London Government's refusal to back the Haass proposals to deal with the vexed issues of identity, parading and the legacy of the past had only succeeded in emboldening unionist hostility to the power-sharing arrangements. There is never any real incentive for political unionism to move forward in a consistent and progressive way if a British or Irish Government is not giving clear and unambiguous leadership and implementing commitments.

It took between 18 months and two years for Sinn Féin to persuade the two Governments to be part of a talks process. This included the failure by the Taoiseach to meet me and the Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, over the summer, as he had promised to do as far back as last spring. By the time the Taoiseach, the British Prime Minister and the Tánaiste arrived in Belfast on 11 December, there was no great optimism that progress could be achieved. The presentation by the two Governments - through the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister - of a deeply flawed paper, on a take-it-or-leave-it basis and the approach of both principals during the talks was amateurish and ham fisted. The departure of Mr. Cameron and Teachta Kenny 24 hours later led many to believe that the negotiations were over and that the political institutions were at real risk of collapsing. The intervention amounted to little more than a charade. It was not, in my humble opinion, a serious endeavour.

The paper from the Irish Government and from Mr. Cameron sought to nationalise austerity, with the Irish Government supporting British Tory efforts to hurt the most vulnerable citizens in the North. Ní raibh Acht na Gaeilge ná Bille Cearta luaite sa phaipéar a chuir siad isteach sna cainteanna. Mar eolas do Teachta Martin, beidh Acht na Gaeilge curtha amach ag an Aire, Carál Ní Chuilín, roimh i bhfad. Feicimid cad a tharlóidh ansin. The Irish Government also acquiesced to the British Government's use of "national security" to deny information to victims and to the British demand to end the rights of families of victims to an inquest in the Coroner's Court. If this proposal had been accepted - it was rejected forthrightly by Sinn Féin - this would have left victim's families, including the Ballymurphy families - whom the Taoiseach has met and who have campaigned for decades for the right to Article 2-compliant inquests - with no access to the crucial inquest system. Without consulting victim's families and contrary to those families' wishes, the Government signed up to ending this system. This was totally at odds with the Taoiseach's promise made in this House to seek an all-party Oireachtas motion - which he has never brought forward - to support the Ballymurphy families. Nor was there any guarantee in the paper tabled initially by the two Governments that the Dublin and Monaghan bombings - also the subject of an Oireachtas all-party motion - would be considered under the proposed civil inquisitorial process under the new historical investigations unit.

On 12 December David Cameron returned to London and the Taoiseach returned to Dublin leaving the process in a worse state than it was in when they arrived. The spin from the Governments at that point was that more than £1 billion was available and that this was the best deal possible but that quickly evaporated under scrutiny. As one British journalist put it, the British cheque book "was all stubbs and no cheques". "The €1 billion in spending power offered by

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the prime minister is”, he added, “largely a borrowing facility which the executive can already dip into.” The Government tried to sell this as a gain for the Executive and something for which we should be grateful. In fact, when the two principals left a consensus was reached by the Executive parties, on the initiative of the Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, and under the leadership of Martin McGuinness and the First Minister, Peter Robinson, there was a push for real and meaningful negotiation. Six days later and following lengthy discussions, many of which lasted into the small hours, and at least one all-night session, an agreement was achieved which reversed many of the proposals put by the two Governments. Proof of this can be found by parsing the first draft and comparing it to the final agreed draft. I invite anyone who has any doubts about what I am saying to do this.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Charles Flanagan, and Minister of State, Deputy Sean Sherlock, may recall that the negotiations eventually got on the right track when Martin McGuinness and I warned the two Governments that their proposals were not sustainable. The Taoiseach has made a habit of stating that Martin McGuinness was prepared to accept a lesser deal than I was. He also described by behaviour as “outrageous”. While I could take that assertion as a back-handed compliment, I do not do so because it is totally untruthful. Martin McGuinness, who is as committed to all these issues as I am, described the Taoiseach’s remark as “stupid”. Why would a Taoiseach say such a thing? If he put any thought into his remark, it was obviously to distract attention from the Government’s refusal to develop any strategy for engagement with the British as a co-equal guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement and other agreements.

I have dealt with every Government since Charlie Haughey’s time, including a previous Fine Gael-led Government. The Administration led by the Taoiseach is the most deficient, inefficient and incompetent of all of them in dealing with the North. I do not say this lightly; it is my considered opinion.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy did not get his way.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Taoiseach views the North as a foreign country. Rather than facing across the Border and extending a hand of friendship to all the people of the North, he faces away and turns his back on people there. I ask him to reflect seriously on what I am saying. His Government should develop a strategy to fully implement the Good Friday Agreement and other agreements, as it is obliged to do.

What was the outcome of Sinn Féin’s outrageous negotiation? The total value of the British Government’s revised financial proposals now amount to almost £2 billion or twice what was originally offered. This sum includes £650 million of new and additional funding, including up to £500 million over ten years of new capital to support shared and integrated education. Crucially, there will be no reductions in welfare payments under the control of the Executive. The new welfare protections are unique to the North and in sharp contrast to the austerity driven welfare system being rolled out in Britain and the austerity driven focus of the Government in Dublin. Anti-poverty measures will be funded and remain in place.

Significant progress was achieved on the wider political issues. The Minister and Minister of State will recall that I described this as a defensive negotiation, one in which Sinn Féin defended what had been gained previously and was being diluted as a result of the ongoing process. The progress achieved included the defeat of an effort to close off access to inquests for families of victims of the conflict. Glacfaidh an dá rialtas le stádas agus meas a bhronnadh ar an

Ghaeilge ag teacht le Cart na dTeangacha Réigiúnacha nó Mionlacha ó Chomhairle na hEorpa.

Work has also commenced on the devolution of additional fiscal powers needed to grow the economy. A detailed proposal was agreed on a commission on flags, identity, culture and tradition, including its make-up and remit. Legislation on parades will be prepared with proper regard for fundamental rights protected by the European Convention on Human Rights. The Parades Commission also remains in place. All these measures are Haass-proofed.

The Historical Investigations Unit will have the full co-operation of all relevant Irish authorities, including disclosure of information and documentation. Important changes to the working arrangements of the Assembly and Executive were also agreed.

As with all previous agreements, the Stormont House Agreement is only as good as the determination of those involved to implement it. It is another key staging post in the peace process. The priority must now be to implement it.

As I stated, the involvement of the two Governments since this Government took office has been totally inadequate. While I commended the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Charles Flanagan, and the Minister of State in his Department, Deputy Sean Sherlock, on their role, the Tánaiste's presence at the talks is still a matter of wonderment to me. She had the right to attend and I welcome her involvement but I still have not figured out what her role was because she did not say anything in my presence during the talks.

I urge the Government to accept that the success and stability of the peace and political process in the North and the all-Ireland institutions are bigger and more important than any short-sighted, selfish electoral political agenda. The North is generally raised by other parties in this Chamber as part of a futile effort to score political points against Sinn Féin. Some of the progress that has been made has been the subject of ill-informed and untruthful comment, including by the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and leader of the Fianna Fáil Party in this debate. For example, it has been claimed that the agreement will result in redundancies in the public sector. While this may have been the intention of the initial proposals put forward by the Governments, there will be no compulsory redundancies. The Stormont House Agreement provides for a voluntary redundancy scheme for public sector workers who wish to avail of it. The scale of the take-up will be driven by public sector workers and balanced with the need to maintain public services. Sinn Féin will not repeat the mistakes of the Government by allowing a scheme to undermine public services in pursuit of savings. Any scheme will be agreed in consultation with the trade unions and Executive Ministers.

I remind the House that the peace process is the most important political project on this island at this time and it needs to be nurtured, protected and enhanced. It must be at the top of the Government's agenda alongside other priorities.

I welcome the financial commitments that have been made, including €25 million in annual funding for the A5 road project, which will assist people in Tír Chonaill, Derry, Fermanagh and Tyrone. I welcome additional funding for reconciliation under the European Union's PEACE and INTERREG programmes and the Government's renewed commitment to the Narrow Water bridge and Ulster Canal projects. These are important developments which need to be delivered.

Separate from the developments in Stormont House, the Government must also take action on the extension of voting rights to citizens in the North in presidential elections. Speaking at

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the Constitutional Convention in a previous ministerial role, the Minister for Foreign Affairs indicated he was in favour of the proposal to extend voting rights and I believe he was serious and genuine at the time. The decision by the Government not to proceed with the recommendation of the Constitutional Convention on this issue is deeply disappointing and lets down many people in the North who, as Irish citizens, believe they should have a say in the election of the President of this island.

The joint paper tabled by the Taoiseach and British Prime Minister is not the paper agreed at Stormont House in the absence of the Taoiseach and Prime Minister. I very much welcome that because the proposal was not sustainable and was entirely inadequate and in breach of the Government's obligations under the Good Friday Agreement. I very much welcome the Stormont House Agreement. For God's sake, let us work together on this very important issue for once as opposed to trying to score political points.

Deputy John Halligan: I will share time with Deputies Paul Murphy and Mick Wallace.

I remind Deputies who are members of a trade union movement or support the trade union movement that the body representing Northern trade unions has indicated it will not support the Stormont House Agreement. It has described the agreement as wealth transferred from working people to big business in a speculative venture funded by the equivalent of a payday loan. The Minister of State can smirk all he likes; this is what the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has called the deal.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: For the record, I am not smirking.

Deputy John Halligan: It is the first time in the history of the peace process that a trade union movement has refused to back a landmark political deal. This has to be considered and looked into.

I want to refer to the €2 billion of what is called new money. Everybody knows there is no €2 billion, and we can read the analysis in the Northern newspapers and, indeed, some of the Southern newspapers. Again, ICTU has said that a proportion will be taken from the €2 billion to pay redundancies. Having read the agreement, it is obvious to many people, including working people and the trade union movement, that the Tory Government is forcing the Northern Ireland Executive to take what has been called a payday loan cut in public services, which will result over a period of four years in the loss of about 20,000 jobs. As it will not be possible to get 20,000 voluntary job losses, the Government here should not fool itself. Very many people will just be sacked, while the savings from these losses will pay for a tax cut to big businesses through the reduction in corporation tax. Therefore, thousands of jobs and millions of pounds will be taken out of the economy, never to return, and the loss of the spending power of these 20,000 jobs will have a detrimental effect on the Northern Ireland economy.

All of these workers will face the Tory definition of social welfare payments in terms of how they are looked after while on social welfare. All we have to do is look at the intolerable Tory attitude in the UK in general to people on low incomes and social welfare, and how it has impoverished millions of citizens in the UK with a tax on social welfare recipients and those less well off in society. I do not believe for one moment that this will not happen to the very many hundreds of thousands of workers in Northern Ireland.

In the little time I have left to speak, I want to quote George Osborne, who said: "This will give the Northern Ireland Executive greater power to rebalance the economy towards a stronger

private sector, boosting employment?”. These were his words no later than yesterday, when he suggested that 20,000 job losses will boost employment. George Osborne, Theresa Villiers and Sammy Wilson are three of the most right-wing politicians one can come across in Europe; they are anti-worker, anti-union and pro-austerity. I would believe the ICTU any day before I would believe any of those three politicians.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Once again, we are told we have a monumental step forward, as the First Minister, Peter Robinson, put it; the Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, described this document as astounding; and the US diplomat, Meghan O’Sullivan, described it as a new era for Northern Ireland politics. In contrast to all of the empty bluff and bluster, the ad by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in the North says very accurately that this is a bad deal, fit only for a land of pound shops and food banks. Despite the overblown rhetoric and spin, this is another agreement to disagree on contentious issues but, at the same time, to implement a savage agenda of austerity that will create unemployment, destroy public services and attack those who are currently unemployed.

Patrick Murphy, columnist, described it well:

The north is to be privatised, its past sanitised and its electorate anaesthetised. That appears to be a reasonable summary of what the Stormont parties agreed in their annual sleep-over at Stormont.

On the issues of flags and emblems, of contentious parades and of dealing with the past, all that is agreed is new mechanisms to kick the can down the road. No real solution can ever be achieved by politicians who rely upon and have a vested interest in maintaining sectarian division. This can clearly be seen in the area of dealing with the past, where we are told there was most agreement. New support will be provided for the health needs of the victims and survivors but, in every other way, victims will be short-changed. They deserve a truthful account of the past. The proposals will not deliver the truth. No party or Government has an interest in exposing its own record to scrutiny because a genuine examination would expose the role played by the sectarian parties and the paramilitary groups, and the role of the British state, which employed vicious repressive methods for decades. The sectarian forces in the Executive and the British state are fundamentally incapable of delivering this.

There was a genuine consensus, however, among the DUP, Sinn Féin and all the main parties in Stormont, and that is the implementation of a programme of austerity so vicious that it would make Margaret Thatcher blush. It includes deep cuts to public services. It means public services like health, that are already in crisis, will be stretched even further. Again, Patrick Murphy says:

If this document does not exactly reflect the hand of history, it certainly smacks of the hand of Margaret Thatcher. It was achieved by the British government moving from bribing Stormont with its own money, to bribing it with its own debt.

There is a redundancy scheme across the public sector, with 20,000 jobs to be wiped out over a period of four years. Whether that is voluntary or compulsory, the end result will be 20,000 fewer jobs in the public sector in the North, in an economy that everybody knows is particularly dependent on the public sector, which is a massive blow to employment prospects for young people. There is a further five-year pay freeze for public sector workers, which is another significant cut in real terms. Shamefully, given the revolt we have here against water

charges, there is even the threat of the privatisation of Northern Ireland Water, which would inevitably lead to attempts to introduce water charges again in the North.

What do they get in exchange for all of this? The agreement states: “In view of the progress made in the talks, legislation will be introduced ... to enable the devolution of corporation tax in April 2017.” So, in exchange for implementing all of this savage austerity against working people in the North, Catholic and Protestant, the parties in the North get the right to reduce corporation tax for big business - more handouts for big business at the expense of austerity and the destruction of public services. The reality is seen in the impact on the economy, which has no green shoots and is slipping back into negative growth, with wages continuing to fall.

Martin McGuinness, obviously a member of a party that strongly criticises austerity in the South, has said that anyone opposed to this budget needs a good shake and is living in fantasy land. To be honest, you would have to be living in fantasy land to call yourself a friend of the trade union movement while implementing massive job cuts; you would have to be living in a fantasyland to call yourself anti-austerity while kicking the poorest in society by agreeing to Tory welfare reform; and you would have to be living in fantasyland to call yourself left-wing while agreeing to massive cuts to public services at the same time as preparing to cut corporation tax.

They will get a surprise. They will get the good shake that Martin McGuinness referred to on 13 March, when there is a massive one-day strike of all public sector workers and a layer of private sector workers. It has the potential to be the biggest day of working class action and working class power since April 1980, when a major strike against Thatcher shut down the North. It must be the opening shot across the bow in a sustained campaign, including further public action to reverse those attacks. Hand in glove with that is the need to build a new, united working class movement against sectarianism and austerity, and for radical socialist change. A united working class movement would be able to come up with real agreement around the issues that divide society and open up a real new era for Catholic and Protestant workers and young people in the North.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I think everybody in this House is in favour of peace, whether it is in Northern Ireland, Europe or the Middle East, although we probably differ on how best to achieve it. Given the events of late in Europe, I firmly believe that bombing people or terrorising them through drone attacks does much more for the arms industry than it does for peace.

It would be dangerous for us to become any way complacent in regard to Northern Ireland and the challenges it provides. I have been to the North on numerous occasions, mostly to Maghaberry Prison, in the company of a number of Deputies from across the parties. I would be very concerned about the tensions that exist, but I am not aware of any of the parties, North or South, addressing those tensions or taking them seriously enough. It would be unfortunate if we had to wait for some bad incident to occur before we woke up to the seriousness of the situation. There are particular challenges in regard to this prison. We have visited both loyalist and republican prisoners and are aware of a number of outstanding issues. Despite the optimism around the stock take, there have not been dramatic improvements in the areas of strip searching, control of movement, the isolation unit and use of it and visiting conditions. Negative tensions within the prison can impact on life outside the prison and the authorities need to be aware of this. It would be unfortunate if they woke up to this too late. Most of our involvement in Northern Ireland is not even remotely attached to any of the politics of any grouping we have visited. We are interested in human rights and believe affairs should be conducted properly. We

see huge problems in that regard.

Apart from the prison issue, the Craigavon Two is a stark case that appears to represent an injustice. In 2012, John Paul Wooton and Brendan McConville were convicted of the 2009 killing of PSNI Constable Stephen Carroll in Craigavon in Armagh, but the manner in which the evidence was gathered and presented left much to be desired. We attended the appeal case and met the widow of Stephen Carroll. If there has been a miscarriage of justice, it is of little good to her that the wrong people may be in prison for the brutal murder of her husband. The manner in which the authorities dealt with the appeal was very disappointing.

Of late, Dr. Kevin Harty has drawn attention to the fact that the RUC has been asked to look again at an incident that occurred in 1982 and the DPP in Northern Ireland, Barra McGrory, has ordered the reopening of a case involving MI5 interference with evidence. He pointed out that in the case of the Craigavon Two, a conviction was secured against John Paul Wooton and Brendan McConville, despite similar interference with evidence by the intelligence services. During a recent appeal by Wooton and McConville, it emerged that the intelligence services had deliberately deleted evidence from a tracking device attached to John Paul Wooton's car. As the claim that John Paul Wooton was a getaway driver in the Continuity IRA attack that killed PSNI Constable Stephen Carroll is central to the case against Wooton, questions must be asked in regard to what data was deleted from the device and why. One can assume that if the evidence corroborated the apparent guilt of Wooton, it would be produced in court rather than deleted.

This is a serious matter and I believe the Government should take note of it and the matter should be addressed, irrespective of whether people think these people were involved in military activities. If these people are not guilty of what they have been accused of, they should not be in prison for this crime. The Government should push the British authorities to look again at this case, because it is causing unnecessary tension in the community. It will only lead to a bad outcome if we do not deal with the matter in a positive manner.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I welcome the opportunity to brief the House on the outcome of the political talks in Northern Ireland which concluded on 23 December last with the Stormont House Agreement.

As Deputies will be aware, the British and Irish Governments convened the talks last October. It was the joint assessment of the two governments at that time that the political impasse in the North was such that the immediate involvement of the governments was required to break the logjam. Our objective in the cross-party talks was to conclude a broad agreement that provided for economic renewal and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

Together with the Minister of State, Deputy Sean Sherlock, I represented the Government at the weekly sessions of the talks over a period of 11 weeks. I co-chaired all-party round table talks with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Theresa Villiers, as well as having hundreds of hours of meetings and engagement with the parties in other formats as necessary. I believe that the agreement we reached on 23 December, following lengthy and at times challenging negotiations, represents a great opportunity to restore effective partnership government in Northern Ireland, advance genuine reconciliation between divided communities and progress economic prosperity for all.

The agreement covers a broad range of political, economic and social issues. In particular, the agreement sets out a plan for financial and budgetary reform; proposes a way forward on

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flags, identity, culture and tradition through the establishment of a commission; envisages the devolution of responsibility for parades to the Northern Ireland Assembly, with proposals on parading to be brought to the Executive by June 2015; establishes a programme of institutional reform at Stormont; progresses a number of outstanding aspects from the Good Friday and St. Andrews Agreements, including the establishment of a civic advisory panel by June 2015, a commitment to reporting on new sectoral priorities for North-South co-operation by the end of February 2015 and further development of the North-West gateway initiative; and most significantly, the agreement establishes a new comprehensive framework for dealing with the legacy issues of the past.

I wish to provide some detail about the terms of the agreement on dealing with the past. When I first visited Belfast, immediately following my appointment last July, it was clear to me that in addition to the need to address the political impasse, it was also vital to find a mechanism for dealing with the continuing corrosive effect of the past on the politics of the present. Several previous attempts had tried valiantly to address this issue, including the Eames-Bradley proposals of 2008 and the Haass talks process of 2013.

Building on this valuable work, the Stormont House Agreement sets out a framework which I believe will enable us to tackle the long-standing issues around the legacy of the past in a comprehensive way. In particular, the framework provides for an oral history archive which will provide a central place for people from throughout the UK and Ireland to share experiences and narratives related to the Troubles; a dedicated independent historical investigations unit which will have full policing powers to take forward investigations into Troubles-related deaths; and an independent commission on information retrieval to enable victims and survivors, North and South, to seek and receive information about the death of their loved ones. This comprehensive framework reflects the overwhelming consensus among all parties to the talks on the need to place victims and survivors at the heart of our efforts to deal with the legacy of the past.

As regards the financial aspects of the Stormont House Agreement, the estimated total value of the overall financial package agreed between the British Government and the parties to underpin the agreement represents additional spending power of almost £2 billion for the Northern Ireland Executive. As part of the agreement, the Irish Government also reaffirmed its commitment to part-funding the development of the A5 road to improve access to the north west. In addition, we have allocated €5 million to the International Fund for Ireland to support its work on reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border counties of the South. I had the opportunity of witnessing the ongoing importance of the fund's work in promoting reconciliation only last week when I visited Belfast and attended the Blackmountain Shared Space Project's Peace Walls Programme there.

As is the case with all participants in the talks, there were a number of additional issues which the Government would have wished to see progress further but there did not appear to be sufficient consensus to do so. Notwithstanding that it was included in a paper tabled by the Government at the outset of the talks, we were disappointed that a commitment to an Irish language Act, either enacted in Westminster or the Northern Ireland Assembly, did not form part of the final agreement. I welcome, however, the explicit endorsement in the agreement by the British Government of the principle of respect for, and recognition of, the Irish language in Northern Ireland. Similarly, while the Government would have wished to see the establishment of a North South consultative forum and a Bill of rights for Northern Ireland, the necessary enabling consensus was not forthcoming during the Stormont talks. However, the Government will continue to avail of other opportunities to secure progress on these outstanding issues and

there will be such opportunities.

Overall, the agreement represents the articulation of the next essential steps towards reconciliation and economic renewal. The two Governments sought to maximise what was achievable having regard to the core, and sometimes conflicting, negotiating positions of the parties and the finite time available to conclude the negotiations. By tabling papers and drafts of heads of agreement proposals, the governments helped to broker agreement on issues that had not been amenable to resolution during the Haass talks in 2013. I pay tribute to Richard Haass with whom I spoke on Christmas Eve.

I assure the House of the Government's commitment to the effective and expeditious implementation of the Stormont House Agreement, which is likely to be as challenging as its negotiation. In this context, under the terms of the agreement, both governments will convene quarterly review meetings, with the first meeting due to take place before the end of this month at which an implementation timetable will be agreed. As a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, the Government is conscious of its responsibilities to all of the people of this island. In the months ahead, we will continue to advance political progress and to play our part in the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement.

I wish to express my appreciation to all those who contributed to bringing the Stormont talks to a successful conclusion. In particular, I pay tribute to Secretary of State Northern Ireland, Ms Theresa Villiers, with whom I worked closely throughout the talks process. I acknowledge the presence in the House this evening of the British ambassador, Mr. Dominick Chilcott. The ongoing support and direct engagement of the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Cameron in the talks also played a crucial part in converting dialogue into agreement. I also acknowledge the constructive roles played by all the Northern Ireland Executive parties in reaching agreement and, in particular, the leadership shown by the First Minister, Peter Robinson, and Deputy First Minister McGuinness in bridging a number of negotiating chasms. I pay tribute to the officials from my Department and the Department of the Taoiseach. I would also like to pay special thanks to US Senator Gary Hart, for the most valuable role he played and for the ongoing support and commitment of the US Administration, including Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State, John Kerry, and other senior figures.

Last week I was in Belfast and I will be there again next week to represent the Government at the first implementation and review meeting of the Stormont House Agreement. I sincerely believe that the agreement provides the means for us to address the challenges facing Northern Ireland which I identified on my first visit to the North as Minister last July. I and my colleagues, in particular, Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Sherlock, will continue to apply the same level of determination and commitment in the implementation phase to ensure our investment in negotiating the agreement bears fruit and delivers on the promise of brighter days ahead for all of the people of Northern Ireland and, consequently, all the people on the island.

Deputy Brendan Smith: As Deputy Martin stated, the Fianna Fáil Party welcomes the agreement, which will help bring much needed stability to the workings of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland Assembly. As a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, it is incumbent on the Government to ensure the latest deal is fully realised. I welcome the Minister's concluding remarks that the implementation process and the implementation review will be at the top of the agenda, which is where it needs to be. The complacent strategy that has marked much of the Government's approach to Northern Ireland has to be replaced

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with active, ongoing engagement. A series of outstanding issues must be addressed to copperfasten progress in Northern Ireland. Like Deputy Martin, I compliment the Minister and the Minister of State. Since last July, they have taken a different approach from their predecessors by ensuring a hands-on approach. Time after time during Priority Questions to the previous Minister for Foreign Affairs, I indicated that it was my belief and that of my party that progress would not be made in Northern Ireland unless there was active engagement by both governments and unless both governments carried out their role as co-guarantors of the agreement. Unfortunately, for a long time it was left to the five Northern Ireland Executive parties to conduct the negotiations and the British and Irish Governments were bystanders. I compliment the Minister and Minister of State on their work in that respect.

The Stormont House Agreement before Christmas averted the political collapse of the Executive and impending financial suspension. Sinn Féin agreed to welfare cuts it had opposed for a long time. The British Government put forward a financial package of up to Stg£2 billion with additional borrowing powers for the Executive. The deal repackages much of the proposals put forward by Richard Haass and Meghan O'Sullivan, which were finalised on the final day of 2013, and it is unfortunate that because of the intransigent Unionist leadership those proposals were not advanced at a much earlier date.

The negotiations, unfortunately, failed to lead agreement on a bill of rights, an Irish language Act and an inquiry into the killing of Belfast solicitor, Pat Finucane. We will all recall discussing the de Silva report into Mr. Finucane's killing in the House, which exposed shocking levels of state collusion in his murder.

It is important that the key proposals be advanced as much as possible. It has been indicated that it may take two years to have the historical investigations unit to inquire into killings during the Troubles operational. I took from the Minister's comments that the unit's work would be completed within five years. I hope there will not be a lacuna of two years before its work commences. We are all aware of the electoral cycles here, north of the Border and in Britain. I sincerely hope the Minister of State when he replies will give the House an assurance that there will not be such a delay in setting up the unit.

My understanding is issues particularly relevant to the South may not be investigated by the unit unless the Northern Ireland Police Ombudsman agrees to refer the particular issues to it. That means many long-standing grievances, which have not been adequately reviewed or assessed in the context of who carried out particular murders, will be left out. I refer to a desperate bombing that occurred in Belturbet in my constituency in 1972. and I quote from *Lethal Allies*, Anne Cadwallader's book:

In between the Dublin Bombings of 1st December 1972 and the 20th January, 1973, Fermanagh-based members of the UDR and UVF carried out three bombings within an hour - Clones (County Monaghan) Belturbet (County Cavan) and Pettigo (County Donegal) - all on 28th December 1972. Two teenagers, Geraldine O'Reilly (aged fifteen) [from Belturbet] and Paddy Stanley (aged sixteen) [from Clara, County Offaly], were killed in Belturbet. Again no one was brought to justice.

I sincerely hope that no mechanism will be put in the way of ensuring that this particular atrocity, along with so many others, is fully investigated when the historical investigations unit is put in place.

The Minister knows that I have constantly raised the Dublin-Monaghan bombings and the failure of the British Government to release the files in respect of the desperate atrocity that occurred here in 1974. It was the single greatest incidence of carnage on our island during that period. Again, the British Government has not co-operated. Quite a number of us in the House this evening supported and spoke on motions in May 2008 and 2011. These two motions calling on the British Government to release those papers so that the proper investigations could be carried out into those desperate atrocities were passed unanimously by this House. We know that 33 people were killed on 17 May 1974, which is more than 40 years ago. As I said earlier, it was the highest number of casualties on any single day during that desperate period known as the Troubles. It left a further 300 people injured. Many families across this island suffered terrible losses during the Troubles, including the victims of the Dublin-Monaghan bombings and so many other atrocities. I appeal to the Minister to ensure that mechanisms are not put in place to prevent a proper investigation into those atrocities. It is very least that the victims' families and survivors deserve. Mention has already been made of the massacre at Ballymurphy in respect of which the British Government has refused a proper investigation. Again, this is totally unacceptable.

I think I used the phrase "who can be afraid of a civic forum?" during the last Question Time in this House. It beggars belief that there cannot be agreement on the establishment of a civic forum north of the Border. We know there are many communities which feel totally isolated. They feel that nobody of any political colour represents them. They believe that a forum which would hear the views of the different community organisations and different sectors could play a part in ensuring there was a broader representation for so many communities which feel alienated and believe they have not benefited from the Good Friday Agreement.

Given the considerable length of time that has elapsed since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and the time that has elapsed since the signing of the St Andrew's Agreement and the Hillsborough Agreement, it is time to move on. There must be a review of the workings of the Good Friday Agreement, particularly the all-Ireland bodies. We should be moving on to the next phase of introducing new all-Ireland bodies.

Deputy Martin referred earlier to the economic potential for the development of this island on an all-Ireland basis. There are significant economic challenges North and South and significant financial challenges for Administrations North and South. Surely we should be putting in place the structures to ensure we maximise the potential for the good of all the citizens throughout this island. I hope the Minister will retain a hands-on approach along with his colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, to ensure that what has been agreed is implemented.

I will conclude with the comments I read shortly after Christmas which were attributed to the SDLP. It behoves all of us in this House to listen to the concerns expressed by a party that has been central to putting the Good Friday Agreement and other agreements in place. The SDLP executive concluded that while there has been some progress, the final outcome was not "comprehensive or decisive across all issues". It stated that it will work to correct what is weak in the Stormont House Agreement and that it will try to make progress on issues where the Stormont House Agreement is far too silent, including a bill of rights, a proper civic forum and the freeing up of the potential North and South and Acht na Gaeilge. It acknowledges the progress on the past but expresses concern that the proposals lack detail and fail to make state agencies fully accountable. Again, it raises concerns about a lack of clarity on parades. I would also have concerns with regard to bringing the Parades Commission into the political domain. From my recollection, the first Parades Commission was strong, made decisions, stuck by them

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and made progress in very challenging times. I hope the Minister and his colleagues in Government will ensure that the concerns expressed by a party that has been to the forefront in trying to secure progress on this island are addressed and that, hopefully, the issues about which we all expressed concern in a positive way that can be built upon to make more progress can be addressed. We wish the Minister well in his work of ensuring that the agreement is implemented.

Deputy Seán Crowe: First, I want to congratulate my party colleague, Mitchel McLaughlin MLA, who was appointed as the first non-Unionist speaker of the Northern Assembly last week. I have known Mitchell for decades and know he will be non-party political and rigorously impartial and is more than capable of doing an excellent job. His appointment sends out a strong message of inclusiveness and I hope all parties of this House support this hugely symbolic move.

The Stormont House Agreement thankfully represents progress. I do not think it is outstanding. I do not think it is a wonderful agreement. To quote “Mary Poppins”, I do not think it is a supercalifragilisticexpialidocious agreement but it is agreement and is moving things forward which is the most important thing. This is the message that needs to come out of this debate - that we are actually moving things forward and things are progressing for people. It is a deal that will hopefully help and support the most vulnerable in society and deliver additional investment to the northern economy. The agreement also makes headway in respect of dealing with the legacy of the past, contentious parades and flags, symbols and cultural identity.

However, the agreement fell short of being comprehensive because the British Government, sadly with the support of the Irish Government, refused to meet its obligations to hold an inquiry into the killing of lawyer Pat Finucane, legislate for an Irish language Act or a bill of rights or address other outstanding commitments.

One key question that many Irish people are asking is why this Government turned away from its commitments to the Barron inquiry requirements on the Monaghan and Dublin bombings, the Pat Finucane inquiry, and the Ballymurphy massacre independent panel? Why did it exclude any mention of these events in the so-called “take-it-or-leave” paper that it co-authored with the British Government? Does the Irish Government still not want the families of the victims of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings to get truth and justice? This has been said to me by some relatives. Is the Irish Government not in favour of establishing an independent investigation into the murder of human rights activist and lawyer Pat Finucane? Why did the Irish Government co-author a draft agreement that ostensibly accepted the primacy of British national security interests over truth recovery for Irish citizens? Does this Government want to allow British national security interests to put a dead hand over the quest for truth and justice?

7 o'clock

How is that in the people of Ireland’s national interest? They supported the British Government’s efforts to close families off from accessing inquests into the deaths of victims of the conflict through the Coroner’s Court, the only option open to them at present. This approach undermined the integrity of the Good Friday, Weston Park, St. Andrew’s, and Hillsborough Castle agreements, of which both Governments were supposed to be co-guarantors. We could have made progress on securing the Pat Finucane inquiry, the Irish Language Act, the bill of rights and other outstanding matters had the Irish Government done the right thing and stood up for Irish national and democratic interests. Given this did not happen during the negotiations, can the Minister, Deputy Charles Flanagan, confirm that he will work with us in the future to

secure progress on these issues? What are his proposals to progress the other outstanding matters that were part of the agreements? How will he work to secure an inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane? I understand why the British Government does not want an inquiry to proceed but I cannot understand why the Irish Government does not support it.

The Tory-led government in London continues to brutally implement so-called welfare reform throughout Britain. That is the background to the agreement. It is attempting to unleash the same policies in the North of Ireland, while looking over its shoulder at the upcoming Westminster elections and courting the DUP in the event of a hung parliament. By its passivity, the Irish Government blindly pandered to these Tory desires. The big issue was the block grant, which is being cut by £1.5 billion. There was no support from the Irish Government in this regard. Correct me if I am wrong but it appears to have become a cheerleader for British Conservative austerity in the North and attempted to nationalise austerity and bring it to all corners of this island.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: Does the Deputy want me to correct him if he is wrong or is he asking the Chair to do so? I can correct him but I would be out of order if I did so.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I am aware that a Minister or Minister of State will make concluding remarks. The Minister is probably going to respond to me.

Deputy Finian McGrath: It sounds like the Minister is feeling guilty.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: He asked me to correct him.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The joint Government paper included a proposal on water charges in the North and ending protection for welfare recipients. The Government's negotiators seem happy to push this agenda. Sinn Féin was steadfast in our opposition to the agenda and we were able to defeat these efforts. Instead of the Tories filleting welfare and social services in the North, the agreement now contains revised financial proposals from the British Government amounting to almost £2 billion, or double what was originally offered. Crucially, there will be no reductions in welfare payments under the control of the Executive and anti-poverty measures will be retained. We need unity on this front. We need all parties and both Governments to support measures to tackle poverty rather than take resources away from communities. Inclusive community investment needs to be focused on need and not subject to political battles. As a legacy of the conflict in the North, the number of those who are reliant on welfare is higher than elsewhere on these islands. This has meant an increased need for State supports and investments.

The £2 billion financial package on offer includes £650 million in new and additional funding. The Minister for Education, Sinn Féin's John O'Dowd, MLA, has secured up to £500 million worth of new capital over ten years to support shared and integrated education. Yesterday's budget also demonstrated Sinn Féin's continued commitment to front-line public services. Reference was made to 20,000 jobs being cut. There is no way I would stand up here to support the agreement if I believed it would result in 20,000 jobs being cut in public services. More than £200 million extra will be invested in the health service and almost £100 million extra was announced for education and higher education compared to what was proposed in the draft budget. There were also increases for a number of other Departments, including £20 million for justice. Despite the Tory austerity cuts agenda Sinn Féin has continued to support public services and there will be no compulsory redundancies in either the Stormont House Agreement

or the subsequent budget announcement.

While the agreement provides for a fund of up to £700 million over four years for workers choosing to retire or leave the public service, this scheme will be demand driven and balanced by the need to protect public services. Public sector workers will have the option to take part in the scheme if they so wish and it is completely at their discretion. It will not be willy nilly; it is part of a package. Sinn Féin will also work to ensure that the design and operation of any such scheme will not adversely impact on front-line services. There is general acknowledgement that the peace process must not be taken for granted. The Stormont House Agreement represents progress even if it is not comprehensive. There are difficulties in the agreement but the most important element of it is that it brings progress. People may say now that we should have done this or that but very few people were coming forward with options during the negotiations. At least we had a plan for the negotiations, and we delivered on the best part of that plan.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Irrespective of how this agreement is dressed up, it is an austerity programme similar to our own austerity programme and it will be inflicted on the working people and vulnerable people of the North. It is the equivalent of our memorandum of understanding with the troika and, despite the decoration and spin that surrounds it, the intent is absolutely clear. It will smash the public sector, prepare for the privatisation of State assets in the North, lay the groundwork for service charges, including water charges, and attack the poor and vulnerable through so-called welfare reform. It is no surprise that the southern Government and David Cameron supports such an agenda but it is surprising that Sinn Féin is endorsing it, even as it tries to blame the southern Government for not fighting hard enough against the introduction of this austerity programme. Why would the southern Government fight against an austerity programme in the North when it enthusiastically inflicted one on the South? As far as I am concerned the final adjudication on this deal was given by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, which described it as a bad deal for workers, communities and equality. The agreement must be resisted and rejected. Thankfully, the mobilisation against this deal is already under way, with meetings planned across the North and a major demonstration taking place on 13 March.

It is disappointing that anybody would dress up plans for the privatisation of State assets and the slashing of 20,000 jobs. There were no compulsory redundancies in the public sector down here but we none the less lost 30,000 jobs. The same thing will happen in the North when a diluted version of vicious Tory welfare reform is inflicted on the poor and vulnerable. This deal must be resisted.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: The Stormont House Agreement is the latest in a series of agreements put in place since the Good Friday Agreement to deal with issues arising from the peace process. It is interesting that the first two pages of the agreement deal with the implementation of austerity in the North. In his contribution the Taoiseach said the agreement was unique in including so-called sound economic principles. That is a failure of the document and the entire process. How has achieving peace and a fair society become the same as implementing austerity? That is the question that must be answered. The first two pages of the agreement read like a memorandum of understanding with the troika in the South. It is about the implementation of austerity, not about dealing with the issues that must be dealt with in the North - the past, a Bill of Rights and an Irish language Act. These are the things on which the Government should have been focused in negotiating the agreement. With an eye on the election here, the Government in the South has focused on narrow political aims, rather than dealing with and giving a proper focus to the outstanding issues of the conflict in the North. That is what it had its eye

on in dealing with the agreement. Sinn Féin has made a brave attempt to justify the agreement in the House, but this is the conclusion of the road of compromises. It is unfortunate for Sinn Féin that it has come to adding austerity to an agreement which should be above that and the narrow views of the right-wing Government in the South and the Tory Government in England.

In terms of other parts of the agreement, it is ironic that there is a proposed oral history archive included in it. Will this go down the same road as the only other oral history archive, the one at Boston College? Will the archive be protected from the influence of the PSNI and British secret services and their access to the information provided by people who agree to participate? It will be very difficult to get anyone to agree to participate in an oral history archive given the history of how other archives have been dealt with in this process. The agreement states the archive will be free from political interference, but how can we have any faith in this given what has gone on in the past? The proposed independent commission on information retrieval might have some potential to deal with some of the issues in relation to the conflict and families getting some information on what happened to their loved ones. However, the same difficulties will be encountered in dealing with how information will be provided and the commitment of the British Government, in particular, to participate fully.

One of the major problems that has not been looked at is the significant issue in the Six Counties of the disenfranchisement of loyalist communities and how they can have real political leadership to represent their views. That is something that should have been considered in terms of the agreement and the Irish Government should have been active in trying to progress it. The agreement is completely silent on the issues around prisons as outlined by Deputy Mick Wallace. Certain actions in prisons and the treatment of prisoners who have opposed the Good Friday Agreement sow the seeds of future conflict. They are things that should be dealt with through these agreements to ensure the seeds are removed and that we do not slip back into conflict. The way prisoners are isolated within the CSU of Maghaberry Prison is one of the issues that needs to be dealt with. We must remove the seeds of future conflict. These agreements are about removing these seeds and delivering peace, not about delivering austerity on the people of the North.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for giving me the opportunity to speak in this very important debate on the recent conclusion of the talks on the North, in particular the Stormont House Agreement. I will be giving a different view to that of some of my colleagues. I warmly welcome the debate as I have major concerns that many of the real problems in the North of Ireland have been allowed to drift. It is important that we all keep ownership of the peace process. There is a constant need to keep our eyes on the ball. I was extremely annoyed by the recent reactions to the Haass proposals which were an important step in the peace process. It is not enough to say we oppose sectarian violence and marches that intimidate other communities; we must be proactive in pushing conflict resolution measures in order that we all move on in the debate.

It is particularly relevant coming up to the 1916 Rising commemorations as we all have a duty to stand by the wonderful Proclamation. When one looks at it, one is reminded of the work that needs to be done and that we must all bring Catholic, Protestant and dissenter, Muslim, Jew and non-believer together to build a new Ireland that respects all traditions on the island. I will always work for an independent and united country that enjoys and respects diversity and difference. Ireland does not stop at Dundalk. We must encourage a bringing together of all the people. Turning our backs on the North while hoping the issues will go away is never an option if we want to build and create a new republic and a new Ireland. Any person who has the

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honour of being elected to the Dáil or the Seanad must put this at the top of his or her political agenda. Sectarianism and division will never work and should never be tolerated on this island. Our history has taught us that. Each day we each have a duty to work towards that objective which should include a strong and independent foreign policy line as many countries around the world also need our respect and support.

It is worth recalling that when John Hume and Deputy Gerry Adams began discussions on a possible peaceful way forward, they were viciously attacked by sections of the Southern establishment. Sadly, that continues today, at times in the House. They and many of their revisionist friends must be challenged and we must stand up for the country. My objective has always been peace, justice and unity on the island, which is why I welcome the formation of the group Reclaim the Vision of 1916, a citizen's initiative for 2016 under the chairmanship of the great artist Robert Ballagh. We must all reassert the political principles of 1916 and demonstrate their continued relevance in the Ireland of today. I support the campaign for a better society and a democracy that puts the common good first. We have all seen the opposite in recent years.

I wish everyone involved in the talks well, particularly those who are directly involved. We must broaden this involvement to include as many people as possible. I want Ireland to develop a culture that fosters and encourages independence of thinking and action. Of course, we have many differences about how that vision can be implemented, but we must insist that those who believe in a democratic right of the people to govern themselves support a just and equal Ireland.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Sean Sherlock): I express the Government's appreciation of the support expressed by some Members of the House today for the Stormont House Agreement and the Government's role in negotiating it. The Stormont House Agreement was a necessity. The months before the political talks began were characterised by political deadlock and a public increasingly disheartened by the inability of the political system to deliver reconciliation and economic renewal for Northern Ireland. The talks embody the collective desire at Stormont and Westminster and in Leinster House to show that politics can deliver by addressing a range of contentious issues, including how best to deal with the legacy of the past and charting a way forward that will deliver for all the people of Northern Ireland. The Stormont House Agreement has created the conditions necessary to allow a fresh start in 2015 and beyond. It is the potential for a new beginning which Northern Ireland's leaders need to embrace fully.

I will address some of the points raised by previous speakers, in particular, about the outstanding commitments of previous agreements. As the Minister, Deputy Charles Flanagan, has underlined, the Government remains strongly committed to ensuring outstanding commitments are fulfilled. It must be repeated that, notwithstanding that commitment, the agenda for the most recent talks was essentially focused on outstanding commitments arising from the Good Friday and St. Andrew's Agreements, the foundational agreements of the peace process. To be clear, the Irish Government was not a party to the negotiations which dealt specifically with budgets and financial reform. That must be understood for the historical record of the House and the purposes of clarity in reply to some of the points raised by Members opposite.

While the case of the late Pat Finucane did not come within the scope of the Stormont House Agreement, the position of the Irish Government on this important point has not changed. A commitment to having a public inquiry on the murder of Pat Finucane, as provided for in the Weston Park agreement of 2001, should be honoured and we continue to raise the case with the

British Government. We were very conscious of the needs of the victims and survivors in the South, including the families of the victims of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings and others. The new independent commission on information retrieval will operate North and South. When appropriate, we will, in a timely fashion, legislate for it.

In terms of what was explicitly on the agenda, the Government's mandate going into the talks was to facilitate agreement between parties who held very different and differing views and this meant making a realistic assessment of what was possible within a very tight timeframe and locking down the best possible outcomes. We achieved this. The president of Sinn Féin, one of the parties opposite, has signed up to it, despite some of the attempts to revise his party's position on the talks. Having signed up to it, we stand over it.

It is a matter of regret that the Executive parties and the British Government were unable to agree on the inclusion of the Irish language Act in the Stormont House Agreement. Nevertheless, we succeeded in ensuring the agreement contained an important and formal recognition by both Governments of the need for respect for and recognition of the Irish language in Northern Ireland. The Government will continue to advocate for the enactment of an Irish language Act and to encourage the Northern Ireland parties which support an Act to continue to build the necessary enabling consensus among their Executive colleagues. One of the parties opposite, Sinn Féin, is part of the Executive. I beg the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's indulgence because there are some important points that must be addressed, if I may.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does the House agree?

Deputy Brendan Smith: We agree.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will allow another minute or two.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: In this regard, I am encouraged the recent announcement by the Northern Ireland Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure, Carál Ní Chuilín, of her intention to proceed with the publication of Irish and Ulster Scots language strategies for public consultation. During the talks, we advanced the view that a bill of rights for Northern Ireland could set out precisely and formally the rights upon which a shared society for Northern Ireland could be based. Regrettably, sufficient consensus between the Northern Ireland Executive parties did not exist to take this forward within the context of the Stormont House agreement. However, we succeeded in ensuring the agreement contained an agreement by the parties to serving the people of Northern Ireland equally and to the application of a broad range of associated rights.

Regarding a civic forum for Northern Ireland, during the talks the Government strongly advanced our position that greater civic engagement would stimulate informed public debate on key societal challenges. We welcome the fact that the Stormont House Agreement provides for the establishment of a civic advisory panel to meet regularly on key social, cultural and economic issues and to advise the Northern Ireland Executive. As Minister with responsibility for North-South co-operation, I was particularly pleased that the agreement provides for a number of concrete all-island measures. The North-South Ministerial Council, meeting in institutional format, will agree, by the end of February 2015, a report on new sectoral priorities for North-South co-operation identified during ministerial discussions since November 2013.

As many Members have observed, a key to realising the full potential of the agreement lies in effective and timely implementation. It is the Government's intention that the new framework be operational as soon as is reasonably possible. We will continue to take a hands-on ap-

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proach. In the months ahead, the Government will continue to sustain the commitment shown throughout the talks and play our part in ensuring the full implementation of the agreement. Dáil Éireann will maintain its important role in guaranteeing peace and reconciliation across the island of Ireland, not least through the consideration of the legislation that the agreement requires for the new institutions in dealing with the legacy of the past. I look forward to the co-operation and support of the Members of the House as we progress this important work, through the leadership of the Minister, Deputy Charles Flanagan.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I thank the Minister and Minister of State for their very measured remarks and ask them to use their influence to ensure that regular debates on the North take place here.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: Yes.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Yes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The matter can be taken up with the Whips also.

Topical Issue Debate

Homeless Persons Supports

Deputy Joan Collins: This Topical Issue debate was supposed to take place last Thursday. In the past month, I have been continually in touch with the homeless services checking whether the night café proposed in the Focus talks on 9 December had been implemented. Up to today, the café has been open until 10.30 p.m. and today I heard that, from tomorrow, it will open 24 hours including over the weekend. Although more than 200 dormitory beds have been put in place, which has helped many people to access emergency accommodation in the miserably cold weather we have had over the past week and over Christmas, there are still 55 to 70 rough sleepers on the streets of Dublin alone. I do not have the figures for the rest of the country. The source of these figures is the Simon Community and the Inner City Helping the Homeless voluntary group established by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Christy Burke. Even if nine dormitories had been available on the night of the tragic death of the Lithuanian man in Temple Bar, 55 to 70 people cannot access them.

I welcome the fact that the café will be open tomorrow night. It will cater for non-nationals because of their many issues regarding language, entitlement and mental health. It will also cater for those who do not want to go into dormitories. What is the Minister of State's opinion on how we can bring in more single-room accommodation for the 55 to 70 people who will not touch the dormitories? While they may use the night café, and I hope they do, to get off the streets, the services must be put in place where there is single-room accommodation where people can feel safe and that they will not be robbed, away from the chaos of the drug and alcohol use which causes many problems in the community. Dr. Austin O'Carroll claims that smaller rooms would draw more people in to emergency accommodation in the city. Will the Government give a regular update to the Dáil on the homeless oversight group the Minister established? Although it is probably discussed in the environment committee, it is important that

other Deputies who are trying to keep a finger on the pulse of what is happening on our streets be regularly informed about what is happening.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government(Deputy Paudie Coffey): I thank Deputy Joan Collins for providing me with the opportunity, on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Kelly, to update the House on actions being taken to address homelessness, including the night café in Dublin. At yesterday's meeting of the Cabinet committee on social policy and public service reform, the committee considered the progress on implementing the action plan to address homelessness. The Minister, Deputy Kelly, spoke about this plan and its development in this House on 10 and 16 December last. A copy of this action plan and yesterday's progress report is available on my Department's website.

The action plan, which committed to more than €20 million in expenditure, includes the immediate provision of additional emergency beds for people sleeping rough in Dublin, the provision of a night café to provide a contact point for homeless people who do not wish to be placed in emergency accommodation and the provision of transport with support services to bring people who are sleeping rough to emergency accommodation. A total of 271 new homeless beds were put in place in the Dublin region before Christmas in order that accommodation would be available for all those sleeping rough and that no one would need to sleep rough unless he or she chose to do so. The number and availability of emergency beds is being monitored closely with Dublin City Council and further beds will be provided should the need arise.

Not all homeless individuals wish to stay in the emergency accommodation that now is available for them. The establishment of a night café was considered to be an essential contact point for those who do not wish to be placed in emergency accommodation in order that they can be provided with food, a rest area and showering facilities. This service will provide the food, rest area and showers as needed. At full capacity, this facility will accommodate 50 people and will operate throughout the night seven days a week. As the Deputy has stated, the night café service has already opened, having started its initial operation on 15 December, with services available up to 10.30 p.m. Arrangements are being made at present to have it fully operational through the night. A recruitment process has now concluded and it is expected that the staff will be in place to ensure the night café service can operate efficiently and effectively, as outlined by the Deputy. The night café will link in with the new transport and support services, which have been operational since early December 2014 for those sleeping rough, as an integral part of the Housing First service. This initiative transports homeless persons to emergency accommodation and provides them with the necessary health and care supports in conjunction with other State providers. When a homeless person does not wish to be placed in such accommodation, the Housing First intake street team will refer the person to the night café in order that he or she will not feel obliged to sleep rough on the streets. I assure the Deputy and Members that addressing homelessness will remain a priority for the Government. It can and will continue to engage on and regularly discuss this important issue.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. The written reply provided to Members states: "Arrangements are currently being made to have it fully operational through the night by the end of this month." I happen to have been in contact with the Merchants Quay Project today and its staff told me it would be open tomorrow night all night, which is a huge step forward. A total of 44 days have elapsed since 9 December, when it was proposed to establish the night café, and perhaps an opportunity was lost to move faster in this regard. Perhaps the recruitment process was slower than expected, because the staff must be well trained. Obviously, they must also be given a decent wage to work such night shifts.

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The key point in this regard is that there are still 55 to 70 homeless people sleeping rough on the streets. Even were the night café to take in 50 - perhaps there is an over-capacity of nine to ten beds per night in the additional beds that were provided - this is the area on which Members and the homeless services must focus, namely, the question of how to work with those 70 people and possibly get them either into long-term accommodation or into an area in which they feel safe. I again ask the Minister of State whether the issue of setting up single-room accommodation has been raised in respect of some of these people. I refer to those who will not go into the dormitories and may not go to the night café either, although I hope they do and that the transport bus will bring people to the night café. However, this will be important. I am aware from talking to homeless people that they will not touch the dormitories because of their sometimes chaotic nature and because of the conflicts in respect of drug use, drink and so on, which can create quite a violent situation. I note that Dr. O'Carroll and Peter McVerry have stated that consideration must be given, even in the short term, to setting up short-term private rooms into which people can go.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: I can confirm to the Deputy that it was important to engage in the recruitment process and that qualified and competent people were found to run the service to give the essential supports required for the homeless people. However, I am glad to state that, as the Deputy has outlined, this process now has been completed and the night café will be open 24 hours a day, which is important for these people. As for the beds that were provided before Christmas, I acknowledge the input of NGOs and the various stakeholders that work in this area. Additional emergency beds have been provided and, to be fair, this issue has received the highest priority across the Government, involving all Departments, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister, Deputy Kelly, and myself. In conjunction with the NGOs the Government has provided those additional beds, and if more beds are required the Government certainly will address that as well and has committed to so doing. I also wish to note that homelessness is not just a Government issue, although it is most acute in the Dublin region. One must be conscious that other cities, such as Cork, Waterford, Limerick and Galway, also have homelessness issues, and arrangements are in place to provide additional emergency accommodation in order that no one is obliged to sleep rough in those cities either.

It is acknowledged that the provision of emergency accommodation is not a viable long-term solution to homelessness, and I acknowledge this point on the floor of the Chamber. This is why the efforts of the Government and of everyone must be focused on ensuring that long-term sustainable accommodation with appropriate supports is provided for those in emergency accommodation, as articulated in the Government's homelessness policy statement. The Government acknowledges that a person who is homeless also has many complex social and health needs, and it is not as simple as merely providing a bed. Social supports and the health supports also must be provided in parallel with that.

Essentially, the long-term solution to homelessness is to increase the supply of homes. Last December, the Minister, Deputy Kelly, launched the Government's social housing strategy. This six-year strategy sets out to provide 35,000 new social housing units at a cost of €3.8 billion, which is a strong commitment by the Government to address long-term solutions to this extremely difficult issue for society.

Airport Landing Slots

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The next item, on the need to retain the Aer Lingus Heathrow slots to ensure balanced development, has been raised by Deputies McNamara, Dooley, Carey and O'Donnell, who have two minutes each.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I will try to be brief, as I have just two minutes rather than the usual four. The last four years have been difficult for all regions of the country, including the mid-west and the county I have the honour to represent, namely, County Clare. Nevertheless, there have been significant achievements, particularly given the point from which the Government started. Unemployment remains a lot higher in County Clare than I would wish it to be, as more than 8,000 people remain on the live register, but this is a decrease from the figure of almost 12,000 when the Government took power. Only yesterday there was a significant jobs announcement in Shannon, whereby 40 jobs are to be created immediately, with the intention of increasing this to 100. AMAX, the company that announced the jobs, stated that one reason it chose Shannon was its accessibility - that it was linked to other important airports. The Minister of State, Deputy Nash, who was present for the announcement, also made that point. While Shannon is linked to North America, it also has links to Heathrow and from Heathrow to many routes across Europe. The Heathrow connections are of crucial importance in this regard, because Shannon Airport is not connected to any other European hubs, unlike Dublin, which is connected to the great majority of hubs. I acknowledge that this debate could easily be portrayed as parochialism or being about one's own backyard, but it is about a lot more than that. It is not simply about Shannon; it also is about Cork and about regional development, because both Cork and Shannon rely on connectivity to Heathrow in a way Dublin does not. Second, there is a greater risk to the slots from Cork and Shannon to Heathrow than there is to the slots from Dublin, purely because the volume of business. The route between Dublin and Heathrow is one of the busiest in Europe and consequently, even on a purely commercial basis, one would expect this connectivity to be maintained even though it is not even strategically important to Dublin, while it is of vital importance to Shannon. My fear is that, should Aer Lingus be taken over, with the Government retaining a minority shareholding, a new company could decide on a purely commercial basis that instead of flying three times a day from Heathrow to Shannon, it could use those slots for much bigger aeroplanes and could fly to more lucrative markets. That would be a huge strategic loss for the mid-west and the county of Clare, which I represent.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I welcome the opportunity to contribute with my colleagues to the debate on this issue of major importance not only to the region I represent but to the wider country. I will try to explain this under two headings. From the point of view of the capacity for the slots to be reallocated to other destinations in the event of Aer Lingus being sold, Shannon and Cork Airports depend hugely on connectivity into Heathrow for access not only to that part of London but to the wider world. In terms of the businesses located in the region, there is a real demand for the retention of those slots. The sale of Aer Lingus to IAG or any other organisation places a questionmark over the future viability of many of the jobs in that region. While in recent months there has been some positive developments in the area I represent, any questionmark over the continued connectivity between Shannon and London-Heathrow will impact on the State agency's ability to attract further foreign investment and on the companies already there, because as they argue within their own organisations for future investment it will hamper and hinder their efforts.

There is a wider issue involved. We are an island nation. The State, in retaining a strategic

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interest in Aer Lingus, did so to protect access to Heathrow through this slot allocation. To the best of my knowledge there is no way this could continue if the State were to sell its shareholding in Aer Lingus. Also, the sale of Aer Lingus could potentially have an impact on the north Dublin region. The purpose, generally, of any take-over is to reduce the cost base. As such, an amalgamation of the activities of Aer Lingus and IAG will result in cost reductions. Jobs will go and I do not think they will go in London. I believe the smaller airline will lose out. There are approximately 1,000 people in payroll and back office systems in Dublin whose jobs are in jeopardy if the State sells its interest in Aer Lingus.

I am asking that the Minister give a clear commitment that the Government will not sell its stake in Aer Lingus in a manner that could impact so drastically on Shannon and Cork and, also, North County Dublin.

Deputy Joe Carey: I welcome the opportunity this evening to raise this matter along with my colleagues. It is widely anticipated that IAG will make a third offer for Aer Lingus later this week. Aer Lingus holds 23 landing slots at Heathrow, providing connectivity to our State through Shannon, Cork and Dublin Airports.

I am asking this evening that access to these vital slots be the Minister's key consideration in developing a Government approach to the potential sale of the State's shareholding in Aer Lingus. These slots provide access to central London and, more important, connectivity to the wider world through the global hub of Heathrow. Therefore, they are of strategic importance to our State and must be maintained and secured in any potential sale of Aer Lingus.

I was delighted to attend yesterday at the announcement of the creation of 100 new jobs in Shannon by AMAX, a US ICT company. One of the major attractions of AMAX to the mid-west region was ease of access from America to Europe and the remainder of the world through Shannon Airport. It is clear that any change in our access through Heathrow slots will cause serious damage to our attractiveness and will have serious implications for foreign direct investment, regional economic development, business tourism and tourism generally. Shannon Airport experienced 17% growth in 2014. Since being granted its independence by this Government and following changes to its managerial structure, it has gone from strength to strength. Shannon is the driver of economic activity in the mid-west region and it has a direct positive impact on the whole of the western seaboard. Therefore, it is vital that the Government ensure retention of the landing slots into Heathrow.

I ask the Minister to ensure that any deal reached in relation to the sale of Aer Lingus be accompanied by legal guarantees, ensuring that the slots at Heathrow are maintained for use by Shannon, Cork and Dublin Airports in the interests of the economic and social future of our State.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, for being present in the House for this matter. As we speak, discussions are ongoing between IAG and the Aer Lingus board in regard to a possible third bid. In that context, it is vital the Heathrow slots, particularly in terms of regional development at Shannon and Cork, are protected. The stakes are extremely high for Limerick and the mid-west, where connectivity is vital. We have an enormous amount of foreign direct investment companies along the mid-west and western seaboard. Shannon Airport is the only airport along the western seaboard with Heathrow slots.

In terms of the critical importance of the Heathrow slots, in 2007 Aer Lingus had its Shan-

non slots relocated to Belfast. This heralded a period of downturn for Shannon. Since the restoration of those slots to Shannon the airport has recovered. Following the independence of Shannon, provided for by this Government, it has been a success. It is important that success is not jeopardised.

In regard to NewERA, which is part of the National Treasury Management Agency, and is designated with providing advice to Government on its shareholding in Aer Lingus, what direction has the Minister and Government given to NewERA in terms of its assessment of any proposal, particularly in the context of protecting the strategic interests of the Heathrow slots for Ireland Inc.? We are an island nation. We must have connectivity. The key focus in Article 10 of the Articles of Association is protection of the Heathrow slots. As a representative for Limerick and the region concerned I believe it is vital that the Heathrow slots be preserved. They are vital for the future of the region and, I would contend, the future of Ireland Inc..

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. I am keenly aware of the importance of this matter not only to the constituencies they represent but also to the wider economy.

I must preface my statement this evening by saying that following the announcements of recent approaches to Aer Lingus by IAG, the Irish Takeover Panel has deemed that Aer Lingus is now in an offer period. The Takeover Panel Rules in regard to communications apply to all parties during such an offer period and all parties, including the Government as shareholder, must apply the highest standards of care to any statements made on the matter. Specifically, shareholders must take care in any of their communications to avoid revealing any information that could potentially impact, either positively or negatively, on the Aer Lingus share price. Currently, no formal offer has been made to Aer Lingus shareholders. That said, I wish to make clear that should such an offer be made, we will take great care and exercise great caution in examining the pros and cons to Ireland of such an offer. We will bear in mind the same issues we considered when faced with previous takeover bids. We will consider the impact any change in ownership of Aer Lingus would have on the connectivity of Ireland, which connectivity is vital to our economy and our society. We will consider the impact it would have on competition for passengers to and from Irish airports and we will consider the impact on the bases from which Aer Lingus currently operates, namely, our State and regional airports. We will also, of course, consider the value put on the State's shareholding in Aer Lingus by any offer. Airport slots are a right granted to an airline which allows it to schedule a landing and departure during a specific time. Airport slots are not owned as such by the airlines and certainly are not owned by governments or states. However, at congested airports such as Heathrow, a secondary market has developed that has allowed airlines trade slots with each other to meet their changing business needs. A specific mechanism was built into the company's memorandum and articles of association whereby any proposal for the disposal of slots over which the airline had rights at the time of listing on the Stock Exchange may be subject to a requirement for a resolution approved by shareholders voting at an extraordinary general meeting, EGM. Where a resolution by shareholders is called for, the voting threshold to prevent a disposal of slots proposed by the company is such that the percentage vote against disposal at the EGM must be greater than the percentage of the company's shares held by the Minister for Finance plus 5%, or 25% if greater. The ability of the State's shareholding to block a disposal of slots is not guaranteed under this mechanism, as the support of at least another 5% of shareholders is required. This mechanism also relates only to a proposed disposal of slots. Aer Lingus does not require any shareholder approval to change the routes for which it uses the slots.

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Connectivity remains critically important for Ireland as an island nation. Heathrow remains a very important hub for connectivity purposes. As it becomes more congested, however, other hub options are becoming available including other European hubs. In addition, the number of destinations that can be reached directly from many of Ireland's airports has also increased over the years.

The State retains a significant but, nonetheless, a minority shareholding in Aer Lingus with just over 25% of the shares. The Government does not control the company nor does it appoint the chairman or a majority of the board members. In 2012, the Government included this shareholding among the assets to be sold under the State asset disposal programme but agreed the stake would only be sold when market conditions were favourable and if acceptable terms and an acceptable price could be secured. In late 2012, following a third hostile takeover bid for Aer Lingus by Ryanair, the Government indicated it would not be prepared to sell the shareholding in circumstances which could significantly impact on competition and connectivity in the Irish market. Such considerations would also be foremost in the Government's mind if a further offer is made for the company.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I appreciate the difficulty the Minister is in by virtue of the Irish Takeover Panel having deemed Aer Lingus to be in an offer period. I wrote to the Minister immediately following the publication of the news of the first takeover bid on 19 December 2014. I do not know if that was considered an offer period then, so perhaps a more detailed reply may have been possible. In any event, I did not receive one but I welcome the fact the Minister has come to the Chamber this evening to discuss the matter and appreciate the importance he has attached to connectivity and the Heathrow slots.

When I wrote to the Minister in December, I requested an assurance that any sale by the Government would be contingent on maintaining Heathrow slots for Shannon flights and that this would be legally binding in the event of a sale. That really is the crux of the matter and what I hope for from the Government. It is not enough that it offers to retain the Heathrow slots. There needs to be some legally binding mechanism to ensure they cannot be sold on if the company is sold and they can be used for another destination.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Minister for his clear outline of the situation as to how slots are owned and traded, as well as acquired as a grandfather right. Will he clear up the myth, if he can, and explain clearly that there is no mechanism by which the slots can be retained by the airports in the event of an outright sale of the company? It is my understanding there is no legal mechanism whatsoever that can be made to any attachment to the usage of slots if the company is sold, whatever protection the State has by virtue of its 25% shareholding. The articles of association prescribe that the Government must have an additional 5% support in such an event, support I believe in the current climate will be available from the shareholdings of other groupings including the pilots. Notwithstanding that, will the Minister confirm there is no capacity to retain any control over the slots if the entity is sold?

Deputy Joe Carey: I appreciate this is an offer period but I also welcome the fact that the Minister has given top priority to connectivity. Will he clarify if a proviso or legal guarantees will be put into any deal for the potential sale of Aer Lingus to ensure we hold on to the Heathrow slots because of the negative impact their sale could have on Shannon and Cork Airports in particular?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Minister for his response. He referred to preserving

connectivity and the Heathrow slots. The 25.1% stake was retained in Aer Lingus by the State for that very purpose. He also stated, “Following a third hostile takeover bid for Aer Lingus by Ryanair, the Government indicated it would not be prepared to sell the shareholding in circumstances which could significantly impact on competition and connectivity in the Irish market.” At the time, it was reported that Ryanair would divest its Heathrow slots to British Airways, BA, which is involved in IAG, International Airlines Group. The State must use its 25.1% stake to ensure connectivity is retained for the region. It is not just about the sale proceeds. It is about Ireland Inc. We are an island nation that needs connectivity. Thousands of jobs along the western seaboard and Limerick are reliant on foreign direct investment and connectivity to Heathrow airport. Will the Minister give a commitment that the 25.1% stake will be used to ensure the Heathrow slots are retained for Shannon and Cork Airports?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I acknowledge the importance of what the Deputies have raised. I understand the reasons they are making these points and the need to do so. Again, I must emphasise that because Aer Lingus is deemed to be in an offer period, I must take great care with what I say.

No formal offer has been made for Aer Lingus. I have been very clear on the point made by all Deputies regarding the importance of connectivity in all of its different dimensions to all different parts of the country. This is an issue that stretches well beyond tourism and regional economic development. The point raised by Members is a national one for Ireland Inc. Our travelling public and our economy have benefited greatly from the good competition and connectivity provided in the market for air services in and out of Ireland. I am in the process of finalising a new national aviation policy which I will publish shortly. As I emphasised earlier, maintaining competition and connectivity will be key elements of that policy document. If an offer for Aer Lingus is made by IAG or any other party, these policy matters will be very carefully considered before any decision is made on the future of the State’s shareholding in Aer Lingus.

8 o’clock

Sport and Recreational Development

Deputy Jim Daly: Ar an gcéad dul síos, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil as an deis a labhairt ar an ábhar seo sa Teach anocht. I thank the Minister coming in to take the matter. It moves seamlessly on from the previous discussion about airports moving into this area of tourism.

My overall objective and a dream I would like to realise, which I share with many of my constituents and many people across west Cork, is to be able to get off the aeroplane in Cork Airport and walk or cycle down into west Cork, and continue the journey through west Cork either on foot or by bike. While it sounds a bit romantic and a bit of a dream, there is a lot of work done to date on realising that dream. There is an incredible community spirit locally in west Cork and we have a long history of tourism. It is a discussion I have had on numerous occasions with the present Minister, Deputy Donohoe, and with his predecessor Deputy Varadkar, as well as the Minister of State, Deputy Ring. I have tried to realise that dream of developing walkways, what are known as greenways - blueways, of course, are the same thing through

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water - across west Cork in conjunction with the local people and Cork County Council and its officials. I had a meeting recently with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, with a view to ensuring that funding is made available to Deputy Donohoe's department for this specific issue.

I held a public meeting in west Cork last Monday night week in the Emmet Hotel in Clonakilty. I did not do much advertising for it, it was just carried in the local newspaper a couple of weeks ahead of the date. The crowd was massive, but what was far more impressive was the enthusiasm of the people. It was infectious. The amount of work people had done was striking, like the west Cork cycling group, which has already designated a 200 km cycle around west Cork for which they are developing an app that can be downloaded to phones. Sean Collins of that club spoke in great detail about developing the app and making it available. Very little money would be needed to signpost that route. They also have a smaller route of about 26 km ready to go.

The Acting Chairman would be no stranger to west Cork himself, of course, and would be familiar with the very natural and existing beauty. I know the Minister, Deputy Donohoe has holidayed there on many occasions and has come back to me with glowing reports. That is no surprise to me. We have a natural infrastructure there, but we also had an infrastructure at one time that was taken from us. Unfortunately there is nothing that can be done about that now. That is the railway line, of course, which also comes under the Minister's Department. The railway line was closed long before Deputy Donohoe's time, when the good people of west Cork were denied their railway. The line is still there, however, and Cork County Council has done a feasibility study and identified a 26 km walk all the way down it to Courtmacsherry. We hope to develop that as a greenway so people can walk, cycle, run or whatever takes their fancy on that route.

We also want to develop numerous other walkways and trails and it would remiss of me not to acknowledge the serious amount of work done by many groups in west Cork already. Dri-moleague would be one, where David Ross and his people have developed a number of trails and walkways. There is beautiful scenery and the area is made for that kind of exercise.

In addition to talking about tourism and bringing tourists into west Cork to avail of these facilities, there is huge demand from the domestic market, from the local residents who want to get out and exercise. I noted driving into Dublin today that a massive number of people were out walking and running even though the weather was not that conducive to it. People are very conscious of their health and they want to get out, get active and get exercise. It is a great way to spend time with our children. The roads have gotten so much busier now, so people want to do this exercise off-road.

I am very passionate about this, and I believe money is starting to come into the Exchequer. We have to reinvest back into our futures. This ticks so many boxes on so many different levels - physical health and well-being, mental health and well-being, as well as the tourism boxes. There is a huge appetite from the local population for it as evidenced at the meeting.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I am not at all surprised to hear of the interest within the Clonakilty community and within Deputy Daly's constituency, because the roll-out of these greenways across the country has been hugely successful. I can see the demand for the roll-out of this kind of infrastructure really beginning to steadily build. Because of that there is a need for us to evaluate how we are going to do that,

what money will be available and how they can be delivered in the best way. I am going to allude to some of the thinking on those areas in response to the Deputy's contribution.

As the Deputy is aware and has already acknowledged, last year my Department awarded €6.3 million under the National Cycle Network funding programme 2014-2016 to three local authorities for the delivery of greenways following a competitive process. A further 11 cycle-greenway proposals have been submitted by local authorities to share in the €200 million Government stimulus package for infrastructural development. Of that, €10 million was earmarked for the delivery of greenways. Seed funding was also provided to a number of local authorities in 2013 to progress planning and research for greenways. This funding amounted to €420,000.

At the moment, my Department has no plans to put in place a dedicated funding stream to provide funding to community groups to develop and deliver proposals such as those outlined by the Deputy as funding is fully allocated at the moment until 2016. As it stands I feel that the Leader programme serves this purpose although I am aware there are many demands being made on limited resources. I would recommend that local authorities and community groups continue working within their own resources where possible to progress plans for suitable projects so that when funding does become available they are in a position to apply for that funding. We might come back to that in a moment. It should be noted that the funding under the stimulus package last year was made to projects that were already on file with my Department following on from the awards under the National Cycle Network funding programme.

Offering our visitors an innovative tourism product has been key to growth in visitor numbers in recent years. The Government's commitment to sustainable transport and encouraging the development of world-class cycling and walking trails is an added incentive to visit Ireland. We must remain aware of the need to build greenways that appeal to local users, particularly where these greenways can help provide an alternative route to schools and work for children and families. The Deputy referred to that in his own contribution when he said that he noticed, when travelling to the Dáil, how many people were out and about on their bikes and on the footpaths despite the inclement weather, coming into their workplaces or going to school.

I understand that the National Trails Office in conjunction with stakeholders is working on a revised strategy for Irish trails that will be submitted to Government for approval later this year. This strategy, along with the Department of the Environment and Local Government's national countryside recreational strategy, which is also under review, will guide the Government's thinking on expanding the number of greenways, blueways and outdoor trails in the coming years.

It is important that, in preparing business cases and plans for greenways, communities and local authorities always keep in mind the end users. There is no point in seeking to put significant time, effort and money into projects that will not be used. The *Field of Dreams* approach - where "if you build it they will come" - will not necessarily work for greenways. People need to have access to them and the start and finish points must be carefully thought through.

I will refer back to some comments the Deputy made in my concluding comments.

Deputy Jim Daly: I thank the Minister for his response. In essence we are all on the one hymn sheet here. We all know it is a great idea and the merits of it. I will not labour those points. Having spoken with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, I am confident that new funding will be available and new stimulus funding will be announced

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this year, and I think Deputy Donohoe's Department will be in a better place. I am confident, anyway; I hope I am not revealing any trade secrets there, but the Minister, Deputy Howlin, was certainly encouraging in his comments on that matter. I hope the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport will be particularly proactive in this regard because it ticks two relevant boxes, that is, sustainable transport as well as the tourism element. Of course the domestic element is tied in with that as well.

I am delighted with the success of the greenway in Mayo. It looks to be a great success. The project got significant funding. However, in west Cork we do not have a Taoiseach or Minister of State with responsibility for tourism. I am keen to see our share of the spoils. Are we to get our share of the spoils? I hope the Minister will support me in ensuring that the good work done at grassroots level by community activists is brought to fruition. This work was evident at the meeting. Dozens of people contacted me by e-mail and so on afterwards. It is also evident on the part of Cork County Council, which has done considerable work on feasibility studies and identifying routes.

The old railway line in west Cork is an ideal route to be developed. However, we need funding from central government. I hope the Minister will take every opportunity to support us in this regard and to be cognisant of it from the start of the year. I hope we will be back in the House again with more positive news and announcements on this front during the year.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I assure the Deputy that I fully recognise the importance of the development of greenways and blue-ways throughout our island for the two reasons to which he referred. I wish to emphasise the sustainable transport aspect. In my visits to various points throughout the country I have been struck by the importance which local authorities attach to having their own sustainable transport strategies. In county after county I have met local representatives, directors of services or local authority chief executives. All point to the role of sustainable transport strategies in improving the lives of people in the areas they represent as well as helping its economic development.

I am very much aware of how greenways have already contributed to economic development and in particular the development of our tourism offering for domestic as well as international tourists. I have met experts in this area and they have made two points to me. First, the need for us to have more projects, in particular greenways of a certain calibre, throughout the country. Second, we need greenways of a particular length. This is because certain tourists are willing to travel to our country and spend money but they want to be able to use a greenway that will take many days of cycling to complete. This would allow them to spend time traversing the country and many different counties as opposed to a single or particular county. This is one of the reasons I am very supportive of the work that is under way - we have funding against it - for the Dublin to Galway greenway.

I hear clearly where Deputy Daly is coming from. He is looking for more of these facilities to be made available throughout the country, particularly in his county. Unfortunately, I am not in a position to confirm to Deputy Daly that the money is available now. However, we must continue planing in order that if and when funding becomes available in future we have projects that are ready to go. I assure Deputy Daly that I will be raising the need for this kind of planning and funding in these areas within Government.

One-Parent Family Payments

Deputy Willie O’Dea: I thank the Ceann Comhairle’s office for allowing me to raise what I regard as a grave injustice being perpetrated against the most vulnerable group in society, namely, lone parents. We live in a country where one in six of our population are living below the internationally accepted poverty line. In addition, a recent European survey indicated that a lone parent is 230% more likely than the average person to be living in poverty. A total of 40% of lone parents fall into the category of being at risk of poverty.

Following a change introduced by the Government, from next July any lone parent who has a child past the age of seven years will no longer be categorised as a lone parent. Such a person will be moved to the family income supplement or jobseeker’s allowance, as the case may be. This is going to have huge financial consequences for a large number of lone parents throughout the country.

The irony is that the Minister for Social Protection has repeatedly told us that these changes were designed to incentivise lone parents back into the workplace. The supreme irony is that for a lone parent who is not working and simply staying at home and getting the lone parents allowance, in financial terms this change will make no difference whatsoever. Such people will be in the same position financially before as after or after as before. However, the change will specifically hit working lone parents.

My interpretation of the term “incentive” is that we make it worthwhile for someone to do something and give that person a reward for doing something. One example is the family income supplement scheme, under which we give people an incentive to take up a low-paid job because it widens the gap between what they could earn and what they would have received on social welfare. The Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection reduced the jobseeker’s allowance for people under the age of 21 years from €200 per week. She said that they would have an incentive to go on a training programme because they would get €160 per week. This must be the first time in the history of the English language that someone is regarded as being incentivised to work when they are made less well-off as a result. It seems to fly in the face of every other facet of Government policy.

One example is that of a lone parent who is also looking after an elderly relative. This person has both child care and caring responsibilities and would lose, on average, €86 per week. This is because the recipient will only get the carer’s allowance in place of what he gets at present, which is the lone-parent allowance plus the half-carer’s allowance. Given the change in the means test and the drop in the income disregard, lone parents who work for less than 19 hours per week and earn the miserly sum of €150 per week will lose a further €24. This amounts to a cumulative loss of €53 per week as a result of the changes made by the Minister. Perhaps the Minister of State or myself could afford to take a loss of €53 per week but for a lone parent dependent on the lone-parent’s allowance and working for a €150 per week on a part-time basis it is a substantial hit.

Those who are working more than 19 hours per week and entitled to the family income supplement will lose the lone-parent allowance. Either they will get an increase in the family income supplement or they will go on family income supplement for the first time. By definition, the family income supplement will only be 60% of what these people had been getting by way of the lone-parent allowance. On average, these people will lose approximately €70 per week.

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The Minister stated on 18 April 2012 that the drop in the age limit to seven years would not be introduced until such time as we had a Scandinavian-type child care system in the country. I have the exact quote before me which I can read into the record if time permits.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Liam Twomey): Sorry, Deputy, your time is up

Deputy Willie O’Dea: My question to the Minister of State is simple. Since we do not have a Scandinavian child care system in the country and the Minister said we would not have this change until we had such a system, will the Minister now agree to reverse the change?

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Kevin Humphreys): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and affording me the opportunity to provide the Dáil with a response. Since its introduction in 1997, the one-parent family payment scheme, which provides an important income support to lone parents, has been passive in nature. This has engendered long-term social welfare dependency and associated poverty among many lone-parent families. This has given rise to significant higher rates of consistent poverty for lone parents in comparison to the population in general. The best route out of poverty and to social inclusion is through paid employment. I believe that supporting lone parents to participate in education and training once their children have reached an appropriate age will assist them into employment and financial independence.

In order to achieve these aims, reforms were introduced to the one-parent family payment scheme in budget 2012 to reduce the age of the youngest child to seven years for receipt of one-parent family payments. These reforms are aimed at providing the necessary support to lone parents to help them escape joblessness and poverty, to assist them to access the Department’s range of education, training and employment programmes and to attain financial independence and social well-being for themselves and their families.

The final stage of this reform will take place on 2 July, when the age threshold will be reduced to seven years for all existing and new recipients. Exemptions are in place for recipients who have been recently bereaved or who are in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance for one of their children. The provisions can extend payments to certain one-parent families beyond the maximum age limit threshold for these customers. It is expected that approximately 30,000 customers will be affected by this reform in July and they will be fully supported by the Department in the transition to another income support payment. It is expected that approximately 30,000 customers will be affected by this reform in July and they will be fully supported by the Department in transitioning to another income support payment. The majority of customers are expected to move to a jobseeker’s allowance payment, including the jobseeker’s allowance transitional arrangement. In recognition of the caring responsibilities of lone parents, the jobseeker’s allowance transitional arrangement was introduced in 2013. This arrangement caters for lone parents who transition from the one-parent family payment scheme to jobseeker’s allowance and who have a youngest child under 14 years of age. The arrangement exempts these customers from certain jobseeker’s allowance conditions, including the requirement to be available for and genuinely seeking full-time work. The jobseeker’s allowance transitional arrangement thereby allows these customers to balance their caring responsibilities and significantly reduces their requirement for child care.

As part of budget 2015, the Tánaiste announced the back-to-work family dividend. The dividend is available to customers who transition from the one-parent family payment to family income supplement as their primary payment. The dividend allows these customers to receive

a payment of €29.80 per child per week in their first year of employment and half that amount in the second year of employment.

The Deputy will be aware that the Department also introduced a number of child care initiatives jointly with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. These include the after-school child care scheme and the community employment child care programme, both of which provide support for lone parents. The key policy objective of this reform is to improve the outcomes for lone parents and their families. This will be achieved by providing lone parents with improved access to the Department's Intreo services, including the opportunity to develop a personal development plan with an Intreo case officer. On foot of these reforms, lone parents will have enhanced access to education, training and employment supports, including the back-to-work family dividend, which will assist them in improving their prospects of securing employment and financial independence.

There are no plans to review or revise the ongoing implementation of the one-parent family payment reforms.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The response from the Department states the 30,000 people who will be affected by this change next July will be "fully supported" by the Department in making the transition. They will not be fully supported. They are going to suffer an horrendous income loss, with no compensation from the Department or anyone else. In 2012 the Minister for Social Protection, while discussing an amendment to prevent this change, said:

I entirely agree that seven is too young for anyone to seriously contemplate any of these things without there being a system of safe, affordable and accessible child care in place, similar to what is found in the Scandinavian countries whose systems of social protection we aspire to. That is why I am undertaking tonight that I will only proceed with the measure to reduce the upper age limit to seven years in the event that I get a credible and bankable commitment on the delivery of such a system of child care by the time of this year's budget. If this is not forthcoming, the measure will not proceed.

That could not be more clear. The Minister of State did not give that commitment, but the Minister did. While I have every respect for the Minister of State, in fairness, the Minister should be here to explain why she is so flagrantly breaching her own commitment. Is the Minister of State aware that in 2012 there were 100,000 or so lone parents in the country, 60,000 of whom were working? After the changes introduced by the Minister in the past two and a half years, there are now 36,000 lone parents working - some 24,000 have dropped out of the workforce. Has any account been taken of the actual net saving to the Exchequer? I know that a gross saving to the Exchequer can be demonstrated through the simple mathematical device of taking out the cost of the payments and adjusting accordingly, but I suggest the net saving to the Exchequer is very little. There may be a net loss for the Exchequer because there are 24,000 fewer people working and contributing; they are now drawing the full lone parent's allowance instead of a partial allowance which many of them received previously.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: The Deputy has asked numerous questions which I am not going to be able to answer in the time allowed. In that context, I suggest he submit his queries to the Department by way of parliamentary questions and I will ensure they answered in full.

On the issue of using the Scandinavian model, the provision of child care services and future plans in this regard are matters for my colleague, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

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The Scandinavian child care model, while very comprehensive, is also very expensive. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs estimates the cost of universal child care provision would reach approximately €1 billion per annum. In the current fiscal environment that level of funding is not available. However, an interdepartmental group comprising the Departments of the Taoiseach, Education and Skills, Social Protection, Public Expenditure and Reform, Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation and Finance and led by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is examining the issue of child care. It is intended that it will finalise its work in the spring.

The experience in my constituency which is probably similar to that in the Deputy's is that the lone-parent payment has been a poverty trap. The reforms introduced have assisted lone parents back into the employment market by providing them with access to training and education, ultimately leading to employment and financial independence.

I apologise for not answering all of the Deputy's queries. I urge him to submit parliamentary questions and I will endeavour to ensure they are answered fully.

Junior Cycle Reform: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

— notes that the previous Government examined axing the junior certificate examination structures as a cost-saving initiative and that such axing of the junior certificate examination structures was the starting point of the current Government until teacher unions began a campaign of opposition;

— is concerned that the Minister for Education and Skills is refusing to listen to legitimate concerns of teachers who are expected to deliver reforms, which has created the impasse in the negotiations;

— notes that strike action by teachers is due to take place on 22 January and further notes that this action is not being undertaken lightly;

— notes that teachers have engaged previously in strike action and other forms of industrial action on an ongoing basis, which undermines the delivery of the proposed changes, including not attending the CPD training organised in connection with the junior cycle framework proposals; not attending planning meetings associated with the JCFP; not engaging in any aspect of school-based assessment for the purposes of the junior cycle student award; not engaging in any development or delivery of the new junior cycle framework short courses;

— acknowledges that the Minister for Education and Skills has moved previously on the issue of junior cycle reform;

— recognises that reform and modernisation of the junior cycle is needed in order that the education system is fit for students today;

— notes that schools and teachers are stretched beyond capacity within the current educational framework which has suffered enormous cuts to resources under the Government's austerity budgets, including a further 1% cut in capitation grants this year;

— commends teachers for continuing to work for their students under difficult circumstances;

— further acknowledges that students' education may suffer if teachers are expected to deliver reforms they are not adequately resourced to deliver and in circumstances where, in the absence of agreement, there is ongoing industrial action; and

— calls on the Minister for Education and Skills to postpone further implementation of junior cycle reform until all outstanding matters are resolved with the teachers.

Before I begin, I must point out that I am not aware of any motion put forward by the Government in response to my party's motion. I presume that the Government will table such a motion, but I have not yet seen one. I will be speaking without having seen the Government's motion.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: A counter motion has been circulated.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: The Minister must forgive me because I have not had the chance to read it.

In some ways, this debate has been in the making for a number of years. As far back as 2010, the first discussion document on new ideas for the junior cycle was put forward by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA. There was a 12 month consultation period following the publication of that document and a further document was then published by the Minister's predecessor, Deputy Ruairi Quinn in October 2012 entitled, A Framework Towards Junior Cycle Reform.

Everyone recognises the need for reform of the junior cycle. Everyone, including Members on the Opposition benches and members of the teacher unions, has bought into the idea of reform and agrees that reform is good. There are some aspects of what is being proposed by the Department which we certainly welcome, but there are others about which we have concerns.

Regarding areas of concern, I will not deal with the nub of the issue now, namely, ongoing assessment, but I will come back to it. I wish to begin with the issue of the development of short courses which have huge potential. Some of them will be ready-made courses that may be taken off the shelf and implemented by schools. In other cases schools will have the autonomy to develop their own short courses, although they will have to be certified by the NCCA. Care is needed on this issue because these short courses are not being developed by the NCCA, which means many of them will be dependent on the resources available to individual schools. For example, a school which offers an advanced music programme and has the resources required to buy equipment and so forth will have a significant advantage over schools which do not have the resources required to develop short courses.

Ongoing assessment is the issue that is creating most controversy. Deputies have discussed the problem with the Minister and her predecessor in the Chamber and in committee. Representatives of the trade unions, departmental officials and a delegation from the National Parents Council Post-primary appeared before the joint committee to give their opinion on continuous

assessment, an issue of fundamental importance.

In response to a parliamentary question, the Minister outlined the reasons she believes the reform is essential and listed a number of references. While I agree with some of her points, I disagree with many others. She presented information on the systems in place in other countries as evidence to support her proposal on continuous assessment. However, she did not compare like with like.

Schools and teachers already engage in ongoing assessment of students. I receive such assessments when I attend parent-teacher meetings and my children receive them in their examination results and meetings with career guidance counsellors. Such assessment is critical to their ongoing development. However, continuous assessment becomes a problem when teachers are asked to include their ongoing assessment of students, whether through portfolio and project work, one-to-one meetings, parent-teacher meetings or Christmas and Easter examination results, in the final results of the junior certificate examination. This requirement would result in teachers becoming judge and jury in the junior certificate examination. That is where the problem lies.

Reform of the junior certificate examination is being introduced against a backdrop of continuing cuts in education. Teachers are being asked to implement a reform which the Minister believes will deliver improved educational outcomes against the background of diminishing resources and an increasing student population. Something will have to give and the Minister will have to listen to the teaching unions' professional opinion that the proposal to have teachers become the final arbiter of their students' progression is not the best way to teach.

It is unfortunate that we have reached the point where 27,000 teachers will take to the picket line for the second time on Thursday next. The forthcoming one-day stoppage has not come out of thin air, however. Teachers initially engaged in lunchtime action and refused to engage in training for the implementation of junior cycle reform. This was followed by the first one-day stoppage and a second such stoppage is imminent.

I commend the Minister on her decision to reduce the amount of work assessed by teachers from 100% to 60% and, more recently, to 40%. While I recognise she has moved on the issue, the expert opinion of teachers is that the proposal will have a detrimental effect on educational outcomes. Sinn Féin calls on the Minister to postpone, as opposed to scrapping, the implementation of the proposed reform until all outstanding issues have been resolved. We do so because parents and students place great faith in their teachers and entrust their children to them every day. We value teachers for delivering education to our children and recognise that they are highly professional and have the best interests of our children at heart. When teachers argue that this proposal is not in the interests of our children's education, we must listen to them.

While the other issues raised in the talks between teaching unions and departmental officials can be resolved, something needs to give in the stalemate on continuous assessment. We cannot continue with the implementation of junior cycle reform against a backdrop of one-day stoppages by teachers and a refusal by the Department to move further. All preconditions must be taken off the table and all sides must engage in further talks to resolve the problem. Everyone must take a breath, which requires a pause in the implementation of junior cycle reform.

I will listen tonight and tomorrow to all contributions from Government and Opposition Deputies. I hope at the conclusion of this debate the House will reach a consensus that will

allow us to move forward on this issue. As I indicated, the motion recognises the movement made by the Department and the genuine concerns of teachers about junior cycle reform. In light of these concerns, I ask the Minister not to proceed with the implementation of the reform until all outstanding issues have been resolved.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: For four years, the Government has shown an insistence that public sector workers do more for less. They must do more work for less money in a shorter period and with less help. Gardaí, in particular, have been victims of this aspect of austerity. The force is being asked to enforce more laws with fewer gardaí, Garda stations and vehicles, less pay and reduced allowances for essentials such as uniforms.

This time, it is the turn of the teachers. Not happy with cuts to all manner of supports for teachers, especially in areas with a history of educational disadvantage, the Government wants to make them work longer for nothing under the guise of junior certificate reform. This move places in jeopardy the supportive relationship that exists between teachers and students. A student struggling with course work will no longer have the same relationship with a teacher who grades 40% of his or her work.

Major questions arise as to the equity of this process and the pressures it may place on teachers. In smaller communities, many secondary school teachers know the families of their students. How can teachers be expected to grade fairly the work of students from families they know? Will the children of teachers be prohibited from attending the school at which a parent teaches?

An external assessment model is essential to ensure reform of this nature is administered fairly and students and teachers are able to work together in a supportive manner. Every student is entitled to a fair, impartial and transparent junior cycle examination system. The continuous assessment model will leave the quality of education and variety of subjects in the hands of schools to a much greater extent than at present, with the result that standards will be open to variation on the basis of the resources at the command of individual schools.

Educational disadvantage and poverty are major issues in my local area where many schools are struggling to keep going. Every day is a battle to keep young adults in school and provide them with the resources they need to learn in the face of many obstacles. Asking such schools to provide additional mini-courses will be a major imposition and will not be feasible in some cases. As a result, schools in more affluent areas will be left at an even greater advantage than currently.

One programme directed at challenging the trend of educational disadvantage and the vicious cycle it shares with poverty is the school completion programme, which is aimed at keeping young people in secondary education. It sets out to increase school participation, attainment and retention among these young people. Low educational attainment and educational disadvantage have been shown to have a highly detrimental effect on the individuals affected, their families, their community and society at large, not to mention the economic problems caused when young people are failed by the education system.

The cycle can be broken, but only by providing resources to educational programmes that take a step towards those affected by poverty and educational disadvantage. In the areas of Finglas and Ballymun, which I represent, we benefit from the wonderful efforts of schools involved in the school completion programme. They have recently been gravely concerned, not

about how they can reform the junior certificate or provide more varied course work, but simply for the future of the programmes. The school completion programme in Ballymun gives vital support to approximately 300 children and young people each year.

The schools involved give glowing accounts of the positive impact of the programme. They state that more can be done, but not while less is being given. Since 2008, the school completion programme budget has been cut by 33% and continuous reductions have badly hurt the programme's ability to do its work. During this Government's time in office, the annual budget has been reduced by €5.3 million, which is a cut of 18%. This is a cut to a service for some of the most vulnerable young people in the country and comes on top of other cuts to vital educational supports for disadvantaged children. This year's allocation remains well below funding for 2011, while the top rate of tax has been cut. If education is the key to a decent, productive life as a member of our society, then we must ensure it is open to and supportive of those who are at most risk of being failed by the education system and all the other support systems we rely on.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: I have the amendments, or what I call the counter-motions, by both the Government and Fianna Fáil. Few would doubt that reform of the junior cycle is needed so that students at second level receive the best education possible. However, the changes that have been proposed by the Government have been met with dismay by those involved in delivering that education, the teachers. I believe their dismay and concerns are not driven by self-centred interest but by their concern that their pupils receive the best possible education.

There is a problem with assessment. Under the proposed new junior cycle, the assessment is to be carried out by the teachers themselves. If the State junior certificate is abolished, then there must be an external extermination process. It can hardly be fair on students or on teachers that assessment at junior cycle level is made by the teachers themselves. Surely this will lead to discrepancies in the education system, with results and standards varying from school to school, and from teacher to teacher, and it will lead to allegations of favouritism and discrimination.

There is also the question of whether schools are adequately resourced to deal with a change of this magnitude to the junior cycle examination system. Schools are already at breaking point and teachers are already overstretched and beyond their full capacity. Few resources are available to teachers to aid them in transferring over to the new system of junior cycle assessment. Teachers of English received just one day of in-service training in 2014 to familiarise them with the new system. If we want our students to perform to their best, then we need to have our teachers well prepared and well resourced. Austerity has meant that many schools have been pushed past the brink and that some schools are already unable to cope with the system that is currently in place, never mind the pressures which a new system would likely heap on them.

What has been very worrying about this entire process embarked on by the Government to reform the junior cycle assessment method is that there was no consultation with teachers prior to the announcement by the Minister that the State junior certificate was set to be abolished, apart from the issuing of a discussion document. Teachers are the ones at the coal-face of the education system, day in and day out. They are the ones who know what works, what does not work and what will not work. Parents have also expressed their concerns regarding the changes to the system. Parents put their faith in teachers to provide their children with the best possible education. In order to create a happy and successful teaching environment, parents, students and teachers must work in co-operation towards a common goal.

Sinn Féin is calling on the Minister to revisit the proposed system and to put on hold the

introduction of the new system until such time as she has talked to teachers and parents groups, and addressed the outstanding concerns they have with the system. Sinn Féin is not against change. We believe change is needed and we want what is best for students. The single most important thing a teacher, a school or a system of education can deliver for students is a love of learning and a passion to progress to further education. It is difficult to see how the Government's handling of this change supports that objective. Respectfully, I suggest to the Minister that we go back to the drawing board on this one.

Deputy Martin Ferris: Education, like every other facet of this society, has taken a hammering due to Government austerity policies. The importance of education cannot be overemphasised and it is a self-evident truth that if an education system does not get it right the first time, it is harder for a person to go back and undo the damage in later life. Children and young people in a progressive society with an adequate education system should come out of that system willing and able to continue their education, and with a positive outlook on that prospect.

Education is too important to mess with. It is unforgivable to propose so-called reforms, when what seems to be the priority is, in fact, cost-cutting, and to run the risk of real damage to people's future prospects and well-being as a result. The money being saved is not worth the hassle and stress it is causing to parents, pupils and teachers across the board.

With regard to the proposed junior cycle reforms, I do not believe that teachers go on strike unless they feel there is no alternative. They have already taken other forms of industrial action, not because they are against reform, but because they are in favour of progressive and constructive reform. I, for one, trust their common concern for the measures proposed. Schools are already stretched beyond their capacity and this will be even harder to deal with this year, with another 1% of the capitation grant being cut.

Teachers are already working in difficult circumstances. Many are stressed by what is happening as a result of austerity in the schools and due to the effect on the pupils they have worked among for many years. In these circumstances, it is not the time to introduce ill-conceived reforms, which our teachers do not welcome and for which they are not prepared. They believe that the marking of junior certificate exams within the school will threaten equity, threaten the student-teacher relationship and also damage standards. I believe the unions are open to negotiating on different forms of assessment but they are opposed to turning teachers into examiners in circumstances where they are already hard-pressed and are not willing participants in these reforms. Every student deserves not only a fair and impartial junior cycle examination system, but also one that is administered by people who feel positive towards it. Parents are concerned and teachers are opposed to the proposals. In these circumstances, there cannot be confidence in the new assessment procedures. I call on the Minister to continue to negotiate with and listen to teachers' unions on their concerns.

We in Sinn Féin are not against change. We embrace it, but only when the ground is prepared and the potential outcome is positive. Teachers do not go on strike lightly. Their job and their concerns for their pupils have precedence and they do everything in their power to ensure their students progress to a better place. However, when they are totally opposed to what the Minister is implementing, this affects their morale and that of parents and students. I urge the Minister to reconsider the approach she is taking. I urge her to listen to what teachers have to say and return to the negotiating table and do justice not just to teachers and their students but to society as a whole.

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Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. The teachers have made it clear that their opposition to these proposals, to the extent that they are taking industrial action again this week, is serious. The general rule of thumb is that the people responsible for running an institution on a day to day basis are those best placed to know how it should be run, but this is not to say that changes cannot be introduced.

I know the Minister has consulted widely on these matters and discussed them with teachers and their representatives, but the problem with consultation, particularly departmental consultation, is that it can be something of a PR exercise. We have seen that happen in other areas. When Ministers hand the consultation process to officials, this makes matters worse. A Minister is elected, but when officials play too great a role in negotiations, this can cause problems and skew the outcome, leading to a situation similar to that we have currently, where the Government is in confrontation with the two teacher unions at secondary level, the ASTI and the TUI.

The spin in regard to the proposed changes is that they are part of improving the education system and making it more student friendly. However, I suspect more basic reasons lie behind the proposals. This is made clear by the fact that the previous, Fianna Fáil-led Government, which now opposes policies it had been about to implement, was also planning to implement measures along the line of the current proposals and proposed changes to the junior certificate. However, the reason given by the previous Government at the time was that the then proposed changes were being made for financial reasons rather than being to do with the welfare of students or the education system as a whole. It was bluntly stated that the reason for the changes was to save money. At the time, we were told these moneys were badly needed to pay debts and fill other holes in the economy due to the mismanagement of the Government of the time. Recent declassified documents dating from that time reveal that saving money was central to all the proposals and drove the plan to change or dismantle the junior certificate as we know it.

In the face of widespread opposition, the current Government has realised that it needs to put some kind of ideological veneer on its proposals. This was particularly true in the case of the former Minister, Deputy Ruairí Quinn. He claimed, as the current Minister will claim, that the proposed changes are based on educational rather than financial criteria. The teachers and increasing numbers of parents do not accept this. I have seen statements from parent representatives of national organisations stating the parents fully support the changes the Minister is advancing. However, opinion polls taken on this issue do not show this. The word I hear on the ground is that parents are very concerned.

I appeal to the Minister to engage in proper negotiations on the proposals to ensure the teachers do not need to engage further in industrial action, which would impact on students currently preparing for the junior certificate. Often when teachers or other public servants who engage in industrial action, there is a backlash from right wing media suggesting they are out to get more money for themselves or improve their pension entitlements etc. That is not the reason for this protest and the Minister knows that as well as I do. The reason teachers are protesting concern education. It is about upholding the integrity of the existing system.

There has been significant talk about reform, but let us look at what reform has taken place at secondary level. Substantial reform has taken place over the past ten to 15 years, right across the State. Teachers have accepted, embraced and implemented second component assessments, project work, portfolio, practical and oral based work. There is no issue in that regard. Where the problem arises concerns how work is assessed and marked. Teachers do not mark their own pupils for final exams. Doing this would put them under enormous pressure, particularly in the

country. If a teacher lives beside a pupil and talks to the parents of that pupil daily, this puts the teacher in a difficult spot in regard to final assessments. This is the issue.

Teachers want to embrace change, but they and parents want assessments to be carried out externally. What the Minister is trying to do is to have them carried out internally. I accept the Minister has moved 60% on this, but we cannot have 60% integrity. We must have 100% integrity. I appeal to the Minister to engage with the unions again in a meaningful way to try to sort this out.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. When considering the long overdue efforts to reform the junior cycle, Sinn Féin has consistently supported the progressive proposals put forward by the Government. We recognise that modernising this important exam is necessary if we are to better prepare our young people for life beyond school so that they are equipped to compete in an ever evolving workplace. If implemented properly, reform of the junior cycle can greatly enhance the school curriculum. However, the ambitious proposals being put forward by the Minister have not been matched by the funding and supports that teachers will need to successfully implement meaningful change.

The majority of our teachers, whose unquestionable commitment within the classroom is universally acknowledged, want to play their part in delivering junior cert reform. Any contradiction of this fact degrades their dedication to our young people. The resistance by teachers to acceptance of some of the changes to the revised junior cycle, particularly proposals around continual assessment, must be seen in the context where in recent years tens of millions of euro have been cut from the education budget.

The Department of Education and Skills has attempted to implement these changes without properly consulting teachers and unions. Its ham fisted efforts at consultation are illustrated by the failure to provide the concrete, practical details teachers and unions have repeatedly sought in order to allow them objectively consider the proposed changes. Concerns have been raised that such drastic changes to the education system, for which adequate preparation has not been made, will cause lasting damage, particularly to individual students. The proposed changes are not realistic in terms of the lack of capacity of many schools to provide the programme in the wake of a litany of cutbacks.

Many schools are hugely under resourced and are already stretched beyond their means to deliver to the best of their ability. Despite this, the Minister, like her predecessor, is determined to enforce radical and fundamental changes to the education system, without providing the necessary resources to allow teachers to implement these changes.

9 o'clock

If teachers are not given the proper supports through good teaching resources, including ongoing professional development and whole school in-service, the implementation of meaningful change will fail. Teachers of English who are now required to implement the framework for junior cycle English specification received just one day of in-service prior to September 2014. All teachers will be required to implement the framework and assess their own students in the coming years. This is entirely unrealistic and unfair given the pressures many teachers find themselves under today. It is not news that they are struggling to cope. Unions have made it clear over recent years that increases in the PTR and further cuts to key services are making it difficult to deliver the school curriculum in some cases. The expectation that teachers will also

carry out increased responsibilities in exam assessment as proposed is unacceptable.

Unfortunately, it is often the most vulnerable children who are unfairly left behind because they do not get the help they need and schools struggling to deliver will particularly feel the brunt of the new reforms as a result. Many parents also have great concerns. The issue of internal assessment and the potential for lack of bias is a logical worry. Not having external examiners mark 100% of a student's work for the new junior cycle will understandably not sit well with every parent. The notion that students could potentially be assessed on who they are in the classroom rather than how he or she performs in an assessment is not reassuring. The issue of anonymity is important in examinations. Potentially confidence in the examinations could be undermined.

While we recognise that modernisation of the junior cycle is needed, it must be done in a sustainable way. Sinn Féin has welcomed the Minister's engagement with the unions but the concerns of teachers must also be heard. If their concerns are not dealt with and if they are not involved sufficiently in the development of new reforms, any changes will be redundant.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Cuirim fáilte roimh agus tacaím leis an rún atá curtha síos ag mo pháirtí agus go háirithe ag an Teachta Dála O'Brien anocht. I gcoílár an rún seo tá an scairt atá ag dul amach anseo sa Dáil anocht agus is í sin go gcuirfeadh an athchóiriú atá molta don Theastas Sóisearach ar athlá agus go mbeadh cainteanna idir an Rialtas, an Aire agus a Roinn agus iad siúd atá ag déanamh ionadaíocht ar son na 27,000 múinteoir ar fud an Stáit. Tá na múinteoirí seo claonta in éadán an athchóiriú nó cuid den athchóiriú seo atá molta ag an Rialtas agus ag an Aire. Níl dabht ar bith ann ach go bhfuil inní ar dhaoine, ní amháin ar mhúinteoirí agus ar na ceardchumainn atá ag déanamh ionadaíocht ar son na múinteoirí, ach ar thuismitheoirí fosta. Tá inní orthu faoi na ciorruithe atá curtha i bhfeidhm ag an Rialtas seo agus ag an Rialtas deireanach sa chóras oideachais. Tá na ciorruithe seo ag cur isteach go mór ar chaighdeán oideachais ár bpáistí agus ar ábaltacht mhúinteoirí an athchóiriú atá molta ag an Aire a chur i bhfeidhm.

Is í an cheist atá ann ná an féidir an athchóiriú seo a chur i bhfeidhm agus an ceart an athchóiriú a chur i bhfeidhm go huile is go hiomlán? Tá go leor cainte ann maidir le hathógáil eacnamaíochta agus deireadh le polasaí diana. Ach tá fios ag gach aon duine atá ag obair san earnáil sin go bhfuil laghdú ar na deontais caipitil de 1% á chur i bhfeidhm aríst i mbliana. Tá fios againn, agus páistí ag bogadh ó dara leibhéal go dtí tríú leibhéal, go bhfuil táilli choláiste ag dul in ard aríst agus sin €2,500. Tá fios againn nach bhfuil deireadh le polasaí diana i gcúrsaí oideachais.

Mar dhuine as Tír Chonaill, tá fios agam na himpleachtaí a bhí ag na polasaí sin ar scoileanna, go háirithe bunscoile beaga agus scoileanna na Gaeltachta nuair a cuireadh suas na rátaí den méid páistí a bhí de dhíth chun múinteoir a choinneáil sna scoileanna sin i 2012, 2013 agus aríst i Meán Fómhair 2014. Cuireann a leithéid sin go mór isteach ar cheantair tuaithe. Bíonn inní ar dhaoine nuair a bhogann páistí nó teaghlach as cheantar go gcaillfear múinteoir san scoil agus go mbeadh ar an scoil dúnadh má choiméadann rudaí sa treo sin.

Má dhírfimid ar an fhíor-cheist, agus mar a dúirt an Teachta O'Brien, tá sé seo ag dul ar aghaidh le tamall fada anois. Tá na múinteoirí ag gearán faoi seo i ndóigheanna éagsúla. Níl siad ag comhoibriú leis an athchóiriú. Tá cuid acu nach bhfuil ag freastal ar na cúrsaí atá á reachtáil dóibh. Tá cuid acu ag déanamh rudaí le linn am lóin. Tá fios againn go raibh stop iomlán ann ar na mallaibh agus ceann eile beartaithe aríst ar an Déardaoin. Cé go bhfuil aitheantas

á thabhairt ag ár bpáirtí go bhfuil athrú ann ó thaobh na Roinne de ó tháinig an Aire i gceannas uirthi, níl dabht ar bith ann ach go gcaithfidh an Aire bogadh níos faide síos an bealach sin. Ceann de na rudaí a chur isteach go mór orm féin ná an chuairt a rinne mé go dtí an RDS an tseachtain seo imithe thart, when I visited the BT Young Scientist exhibition. It was uplifting to see so many students and the innovation they were showing and their excitement about their projects as they explained what they were doing. However, along with all the students were the teachers. They probably lit a fuse under them and encouraged them to continue in that direction.

Sometimes when we discuss curriculum reform we forget about the extra-curricular activity engaged in by teachers. This comes down to a basic principle. What is in the best interest of our children? There is no doubt the junior cycle needs to be reformed and teaching at all levels has to be continually reformed. That is accepted and that has happened throughout the decades. However, when 27,000 teachers tell the Minister this is not in the best interest of the students, who do we believe? Do we believe the Minister who says at face value that this has nothing to do with money yet moves from 100% down to 40%? Does she believe it is in the best interest of children that it should be 40% or does she believe it was 100% originally? Should we believe the teachers who convinced the Minister it was in the worst interest of the pupils to have 100% and this is the reason she moved? I believe the practitioners who are in our classrooms teaching our children everything they need to learn to best equip them in society are not striking for themselves. It is not about money; it is about what is in the best interest of their children and our children. As my party has said, there has been a marked difference in the Department's approach to this issue since the Minister took office. However, this is avoidable. The core of the motion is a proposal to suspend the reforms - not to abolish them because they are required - go into meaningful negotiations with the unions, reach agreement to prevent the impending strikes that are in nobody's interest and ensure meaningful reform that has the support of teachers, parents, children and the Minister and her Department.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Jan O'Sullivan): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"acknowledges that the current Government's only motivation in proposing Junior Cycle reform has been improving outcomes for students;

recognises that the Junior Cycle reforms are based on longitudinal research carried out by the Educational and Social Research Institute and the advice of the statutory body charged with providing advice on curriculum matters to the Minister for Education and Skills: the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment;

accepts that unless there is an element of school-based assessment at Junior Cycle, classroom practice will remain unchanged and real reform of the Junior Cycle and improvements for students will not be achieved;

notes that the Minister for Education and Skills has listened to the concerns of all stakeholders, including teachers, on this issue and has met teacher union representatives on several occasions;

further acknowledges that, on the basis of the concerns expressed to her, the Minister for Education and Skills has significantly amended the reform proposals to meet the concerns of teacher unions;

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further notes that compromise suggested by the Minister for Education and Skills proposes 60% external assessment by the State Examinations Commission for all subjects and moderation by the State Examinations Commission in respect of school based assessment;

regrets that:

— notwithstanding the significant movement by the Minister for Education and Skills, teacher unions have not seen fit to make any changes whatsoever in their position;

— industrial action by teachers is due to take place on 22nd January when the Minister for Education and Skills has made every effort to progress discussions and made significant concessions to meet teacher concerns; and

— the industrial action of teachers encompasses measures which impact negatively on students, their parents and teachers themselves who are missing an opportunity to engage in professional development;

recognises that reform and modernisation of the Junior Cycle is needed so that our education system meets the needs of today's students;

notes that investment ring-fenced for Junior Cycle development in budget 2015 is €9.3 million and that the Government is committed to this essential investment for the roll out of an education for students which is fit for purpose; and

calls on the Minister for Education and Skills to continue implementation of Junior Cycle reform which has been welcomed by education stakeholders including parent and student representatives and school management bodies.”

I wish to share time with Deputies O'Donovan and Nolan.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to debate junior cycle reform in the House. I would like to set out clearly the rationale for reform of the junior cycle and to underline the necessity of implementing these important changes. The new junior cycle is about making fundamental changes in our approach to learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment. The aim is to significantly improve the quality of learning experiences for our students. The new junior cycle gives flexibility to schools by allowing them input into the design of their own programmes, to meet the varying needs of their students. Through the reforms, we are placing increased trust in schools and teachers by giving them more autonomy.

School-based assessment is an important element of the reform. School-based elements, along with the final examinations set and marked by the State Examinations Commission, will comprise the new state certificate. As Sinn Féin Members said, teachers engage in school-based assessment. They correct homework and award marks for exams set each Christmas and summer and the vital advice and guidance discussed at parent teacher meetings is largely based on the teacher's assessment of the work of their students. Many of us are parents and we welcome the feedback given even if it is not always positive. In reality, what is assessed is valued. School-based assessment will promote a learning culture in schools. It will change what happens in classrooms in a way that external assessment cannot, and it will recognise and reward skills that cannot readily be assessed through externally marked written final examinations at the end of third year. Under the current system, this professional teacher judgment and experience is excluded from formal junior certificate assessment. That needs to change.

I acknowledge the professionalism of teachers and their capacity to assess the work of their students. I also acknowledge their dedication and innovation, as seen in the Young Scientist exhibition recently. I am also mindful, of course, of the need to enhance teacher competences and confidence in this area. Assessment should assist students in the quality of their learning and not be regarded as the end point. Research shows that unless assessment changes, little else will.

The new junior cycle did not emerge in a vacuum. The background work was carried out by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA. It was the NCCA, the State body created to advise on reforms in curriculum and assessment, which carried out the consultation, not the Department or the Minister. Its work involved the investigation of international developments in lower secondary education in the OECD countries and specifically in Scotland, Northern Ireland, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Finland, Canada and Australia. In high-performing education systems such as these, schools have been given greater autonomy and flexibility in the programmes they offer. This allows schools to design their own programmes, mindful of the needs of their students and their teaching resources. In 2011, the NCCA, with the assistance of Department of Children and Youth Affairs, consulted with Dáil na nÓg on reform of the junior cycle. Its findings included the fact that “The majority of young people considered the Junior Cycle curriculum to be too exam-focused and the Junior Cert examination itself to be a negative form of assessment, which causes stress and is essentially ‘a memory test’.” These are the views of our students.

The ESRI has carried out a longitudinal study of the experiences of our students at second level. That research found that a significant number of first-year students do not make progress, particularly in English and mathematics. In second year, many students become disengaged from the learning process and find it almost impossible to reconnect to learning subsequently. Choices made as early as the first year of junior cycle - for example, to take a subject at ordinary level rather than at higher level - are almost impossible to reverse and may limit the options open to young people for the leaving certificate and after leaving school. This is a particularly important issue for students in lower-stream classes. I would put it to Deputy Ellis, who was particularly concerned about disadvantaged areas, that, in particular, it does not serve students in disadvantaged areas. In third year, the junior certificate examination dominates the experiences of students, the focus of learning narrows and the emphasis is on rote learning. For many students, the examination does not lead to positive learning experiences and outcomes. These are some of the findings that the ESRI has published, capturing again the experiences and views of our students, which really must be central in our discussion of this issue.

We also know that assessment at the end of junior cycle in Ireland is out of line with best practice in many countries with high-performing educational systems. Research shows that the learning experience of students is narrowed if an assessment system is restricted to assessing them solely through external examinations and testing. This occurs because both teachers and students focus on learning what is necessary to do well in final examinations rather than on pursuing an educational programme designed to meet students’ needs. Multiple studies over time clearly show the significant impact that classroom assessment has on student learning and achievement. The OECD reviewed evaluation and assessment in 28 countries to produce a report called *Synergies for Better Learning*. That report recommends that countries should “maintain the centrality of teacher based assessment and promote teacher professionalism”. It identifies teacher-based assessment as having many advantages. These include allowing for competencies to be measured that are difficult to capture in standardised assessments. Most

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importantly, the report suggests that teacher-based assessment is more authentic than examinations and has greater potential to be used for subsequent improvements in learning and teaching. I have cited just some of the relevant research here this evening. I have previously provided to both Opposition spokespersons a list of some of the significant pieces of research that were drawn upon in the development of the NCCA proposals. The NCCA has indicated that it can provide further such material if that is requested by members of the House.

A red herring has been recently introduced into this debate and was raised again tonight by Deputies Ferris and Stanley and others, which I want to address directly. Each year, a range of budgetary proposals are considered by the Government of the day. In 2009, the previous Government considered abolition of the junior certificate as one such proposal. The proposal was rejected by the Government at that time. My proposals for junior cycle reform are not the proposals on abolition which were put forward in the past. Savings have not been realised to date and there is no expectation that the new proposals will deliver savings. In fact, the reform will cost an additional €9.3 million in 2015, and I have repeatedly stated that I will secure the resources necessary to support this reform into the future. The reform of the junior cycle is about changing and providing a high-quality teaching and learning experience for our students. It is not a cost-saving exercise. There were several references to cuts. There was actually an increase in the Department's budget for this year.

The NCCA is very much a partnership body. The members of the council are drawn from the teacher unions, management bodies, parents and representatives of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and business. Since the NCCA made its proposals, we have continued to have significant engagement with all education partners on this process. Indeed, the pace of change was slowed in January 2014 to address some of the concerns that had been raised. Since I came into office, I have been engaging with parents, students, school leaders and management bodies, as well with the teacher unions. I have met with the leadership of the teacher unions many times. In November, I appointed an independent facilitator, Dr. Pauric Travers, who was nominated by the unions, to oversee negotiations between the two sides. On 10 November, during three days of intense negotiations, officials from the Department tabled my compromise proposals. My proposal aimed to unblock the obstacles to reform which were identified to me by the teacher unions while maintaining the integrity of the reform proposals.

The main elements of my proposal are that final exams in third year will account for 60% of junior cycle marks, that these exams will be set and marked by the State Examinations Commission, that 40% of junior cycle marks will be awarded for project or portfolio work or orals during the latter half of second year and at Christmas of third year, that this 40% would be assessed by classroom teachers within agreed criteria, and that the State Exams Commission check a proportion -10% to 15% - of these marks in our schools to ensure consistency and fairness. This combined approach to assessment, involving a school-based component and external examinations, will have external checks and balances. It will lead to State certification on completion of the three years of junior cycle. It will have integrity and validity and teachers will be supported in this change. I should also note that well-being will now be a compulsory element of the junior cycle, encompassing areas such as physical education, social, personal and health education, and civic, social and political education. This is in line with Government policy as set out in the Healthy Ireland framework. The health and well-being of our students are of the utmost importance. The imparting of information and an understanding of healthy life skills at this critical stage in their development are essential. They are every bit as important as exam results.

I am glad to report that my proposal has been welcomed by the National Parents' Council Post-primary and the Irish Second-level Students' Union. It has also been welcomed by the management bodies, representatives of school leaders, the education and training boards, academics and employer representatives. The teacher unions acknowledged that my November 2014 proposal was significant. They stress that they welcome many aspects of the new reform, including the emphasis on group work, project work and orals. However, they continue to maintain the position that teachers will not assess the outcomes of their own students for certification purposes. This remains the main point at issue with the teacher unions at this stage.

My revised proposal for a significantly increased role for the State Examinations Commission in respect of the overall assessment was a considerable move to address the concerns that had been expressed. I am very disappointed that the teacher unions have not responded positively to my revised proposal. Progress needs both sides to be willing to move on previously held positions. It is regrettable that the unions have decided to ignore the compromise available and instead decided to proceed with their one-day strike on 2 December 2014 and a further strike this Thursday. This is unnecessary and disruptive for schools, students and parents. I know there is a lot of concern that this strike is going ahead on Thursday. The unions have argued that they need this strike to demonstrate the strength of feeling among teachers on this issue. My willingness to compromise and to continue discussing these reforms with them is clear evidence that I am aware of the strength of feeling amongst their members.

Proceeding with a further strike this Thursday is unnecessary and only serves to damage the education of our students, many of whom are preparing for exams later this year. The threat of further strike action continues to loom large but I hope the unions will not continue down this road. It remains my intention to seek agreement. As recently as last Wednesday, January 14, I met the unions again to find a basis for progress. Teachers are vital stakeholders and I have been working hard to seek a consensus with their representatives. However, no one party can have a veto on progress and change in the system. A clear research base shows that we can do better for our students and I have a duty to listen to the views of the many stakeholders who also have a vital interest in this reform and want to see it happen. I refer in particular to parents and school students.

The reform of the junior cycle has already commenced. It started this September with a new specification for English and some short courses. The reform is being introduced in a phased manner to enable schools and the education system to prepare for the changes. This will continue to be the approach throughout the implementation process. I recognise the need to lay the ground carefully and to provide the information, training and support necessary to enable teachers to absorb and deliver the required change over time. The junior cycle for teachers, JCT, team of trainers has been in place for almost two years and will be in place for the foreseeable future. Teachers usually teach two subjects at junior cycle and will receive up to 16 days of continuous professional development, CPD, over the next five to six years, including subject specific CPD and whole-school CPD. Elective workshops will also be made available. Resources will be provided by the JCT on its dedicated website, which teachers can consult in their own time. In January 2014, additional commitments were given to increasing the resources at both subject specific and whole school level. The team is ready to work with teachers and school leaders. Time is allocated officially for this CPD. Unfortunately, however, the industrial action by the unions includes a block on participation in such CPD by their members. This is the most regrettable form of industrial action because it prevents teachers from improving their own education.

Extensive and careful work is also ongoing in developing the subject specifications, assess-

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ment criteria and moderation toolkits for the reformed programme. The NCCA's approach includes all of the education partners and is based on building consensus. The involvement of the State Examinations Commission will provide reassurance and confidence for teachers, parents and pupils in the assessment process. They will be involved in setting and marking the final assessment component and in moderating the school based component in each school.

I have spoken at some length about the research which underpins these reforms and the negotiations which we have undertaken with the unions. I have outlined the supports which are available to schools and teachers as they implement these changes. Day after day, I hear calls from the Opposition benches for reform. Reform of our politics, and reform of our society are the clarion calls of Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin, and the rebooters and freebooters on that side of the House. It strikes me, however, that when it comes to implementing any actual reform, their response is to shout "Stop." Attempting to introduce real and meaningful change is important but it is not easy. There will always be opponents of proposed reforms. The job of the Government is to implement reforms that will benefit all of our people instead of simply pandering to individual groups or vested interests.

In December 2012 this House debated a motion on junior cycle reform, which was supported by all sides. For the benefit of members of the House, I will quote from the contributions made to that debate by Deputies Jonathan O'Brien and Charlie McConalogue. Deputy Jonathan O'Brien stated:

We will see the benefit of these proposals in the long term. We are talking about improving an aspect of post-primary education and making courses more suitable for students rather than gearing them towards one examination. What we are beginning will shape future educational experiences for hundreds of thousands of students who will come through our system.

Deputy McConalogue stated:

As the Minister will be aware, my party has been very much in favour of reforming the junior certificate. There is a strong body of evidence to support the need for radical reform of the junior certificate.

Both Deputies, on behalf of their parties, referred to the research I have cited to support the implementation of junior cycle reform. As we edge closer to a general election, it is disappointing to see these parties seek to cast that evidence and research aside in pursuit of political advantage. I put it to the House that reform is not simply a word that should be bandied about during political debate. It involves considering radical and far-reaching changes to long standing institutions, and carrying through on those changes for the benefit of all of our people. Deputies who support the Sinn Féin motion are effectively walking away from reform. The motion tabled by Sinn Féin this evening is a conservative call to support the *status quo*.

Agreement on junior cycle reform can and will be reached. We want the hearts and minds of our teachers to be committed to this reform and we will continue our discussions with them to reach that end. Further strikes and disruption will serve nobody's interest, particularly the interests of our students. This reform is about providing a quality learning experience for our young people that acknowledges their wide range of skills. Such an educational approach will prepare our students for a very different world of work and life to that which most of us entered when we left school. In view of this, it is instructive to consider the history of the last junior

cycle reform. The first reports on the then newly unified junior cycle in 1990 suggested a mismatch between the curriculum and the exam. The assessment reforms associated with the new curriculum were not delivered, leading to a new curriculum being strangled by an old examination system. In the absence of assessment change, the system reset itself. In seeking to improve the education of our young people, we must not make the same mistake again.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I am glad the Minister concluded her remarks by reminding certain Deputies about what they said in 2012. I sat through most of the debate to which she referred. The then Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Quinn, received considerable support and praise from Opposition Deputies for his proposals. Some of what these Deputies are now saying stands in stark contrast to what they were saying little more than 18 months ago. As a former teacher, I am very supportive of the move away from rote learning. When I attended Mary Immaculate College in the Minister's constituency it was drilled into me that the child should be an active agent in his or her learning. Children should learn for a reason, and that reason should not be to vomit something onto a page in June, walk out of the exam hall and reboot oneself afterwards, be it politically or educationally, for the next set of exams. That is not what education is supposed to be about.

I would support any effort the Minister can make in her engagement with the unions to avoid unnecessary industrial action. The unions are representative of people like me, who turn up to teach every day out of a love of teaching. They are public servants. Given that people will be following this debate live or reading the transcript, I am glad Sinn Féin has proposed this motion because it is part of a Government in Northern Ireland which is preparing to make 20,000 public servants redundant over a period of four years.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: The education budget was increased by £67 million.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I presume those public servants will include people like me, who were trained as primary or secondary teachers, or clerical officers working in education or agricultural offices. These are people who are trying to rear families. I welcome the party opposite to the real world of politics, where it has a budget and is required to make ends meet, whether at national level or in the Northern Ireland Executive. By agreement, the DUP Minister for Finance is being supported by Sinn Féin in getting rid of 20,000 public servants.

One of the extremely important things in junior certificate reform is the move away from rote learning. I asked the Minister's predecessor and am asking her now to look at the same thing. Rote learning has quite rightly been moved away from at primary level. As a primary teacher, I had to carry out assessments of the children that attended in my class for things like learning support and resource hours. There was a trust between me and the parents, me and the school authorities and me and the Department that when I carried out those assessments in the primary classroom, I was doing so in the best interests of the child. When I calculated a child's STen score, it was to identify whether he or she needed learning support and resource hours. There must be an element of trust at junior certificate level about whatever assessment teachers are being prepared to carry out.

The BT Young Scientists exhibition two weeks ago was the best example if anyone ever needed it of the need for our society to move away from rote learning. As someone who studied chemistry in college, I can see that these kids at 13 and 14 years of age are working outside the box; totally outside the curriculum or anything presented in a book they will be expected to vomit onto a page in June. They are learning that from the guidance they get from their teach-

ers, parents and the school environment. That is the kind of learning experience I would love to see in our primary schools and, following on, in our secondary schools. Whatever reform ultimately comes around - and I have no doubt that there will be an agreement - the Minister cannot allow the junior certificate to hang in limbo while the leaving certificate continues to be an exam based entirely on rote learning. Every child, adolescent and adult can have a bad day. By God, I have had a lot of them when it comes to exams. One can go into an exam hall having spent two years cramming and breaking one's you-know-what to get the points to advance oneself, have a bad day and find that it is all over. That system is in dire need of change.

If the Minister is going to start with the junior certificate and proceed by agreement with the unions, she should not let matters rest there. I have every confidence in the Minister arriving at an agreement with them. She should not let a child move from primary school where rote learning is frowned on to the junior certificate where it is frowned on and then to the leaving certificate where everything is dependent on it. I urge the Minister while she has a reform agenda not to leave it hanging at the 15 year old. She should continue it through by agreement and negotiation with the unions.

Deputy Derek Nolan: The first thing to point out in any discussion on this topic and in reaction to a little bit of the debate that took place is that the House is elected to make policy for this country. We are elected as legislators. We get together, pass laws and have Departments which make policy. While all stakeholders must be involved in those policy discussions, no one stakeholder should have a veto or be able to dictate what policy should be. No more than one would not have bus drivers deciding every bus route or timetable or doctors deciding how everything should run, teachers cannot dictate how the education system is run. They must be consulted and the Minister has done that and will continue to engage. However, we must also recognise that it is the prerogative of the House to set forward legislation and ideas for reform.

It was very evident from what the Minister said that if one looks at it logically, one must agree that there is a problem with the junior certificate. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment looked at the research and international best practice and put forward proposals based on empirical research from countries all over the world. It said that in first year in our schools children have a difficulty in that they are settling in. Second year is where the real danger kicks in and children can get disengaged and lose out. They may possibly never recover from that. In third year, there is the quick rush with the exam coming in June. The grinds are done and people go mental. We are all studying and have this quick burst of an exam. I remember it myself - it is not that long ago - and as soon as it is over one has forgotten what one knew. It is in there for an hour or two and it is gone. That does not work. The council said that if something is to be valued it must be assessed. If we want it to be valued all the time, we need regular assessment.

It was very telling and the Minister was right to point out that there was previous support from all sides of the House for the idea that we needed that assessment. It happens all over the world. I worked for a year as a language assistant in schools in rural Germany and we assessed the children all the time. There were never phone calls or threats and it was an accepted part of the curriculum. To read into it that teachers will be lobbied is almost to say that teachers are not professionals and that they cannot be trusted but will be subject to lobbying and take bribes. It undermines their professional independence to say "You know what, we cannot trust you. You are not independent enough and do not have the thick skin required to be trusted". It is a horrible message where one is talking about the teaching profession because it is not true.

I acknowledge that it is right to discuss this matter given the strike on Thursday about which families, parents and teachers across the country are very worried. However, Sinn Féin put forward a motion acknowledging all the things that have happened and that reform is needed without setting out a single suggestion as to how that reform would proceed while contradicting what it said earlier. Earlier, Sinn Féin said we needed continuous assessment, but three of its speakers said we could not have it because it would put undue pressure on teachers. The Sinn Féin motion should have read that Sinn Féin recognises there is a strike on Thursday, that there is a bit of political opportunity in having a go at the Government on it, that it does not actually have an educational policy, that it will contradict what it said two years ago and that it might get a few votes out of it. That is the essence of the debate we have had tonight.

The Minister could not have been more clear about where she is coming from, why she is doing this, the empirical research, the consultations that have happened and all of the things we know need to happen. She acknowledged that there were problems and worries and, as such, she negotiated and compromised. She cannot be any more reasonable than that. While it will not happen, if the outcome of this were to give in, ignore research and accept bad outcomes to get people off our backs and obtain a few votes in the general election, it would not be politics and it would not conform to why we are in the House. Not all teachers are opposed to this and many are happy with the compromises the Minister has put forward. We will get there because the Minister is doing the right thing, not by doing the opportunistic thing.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important issue and glad to see it getting a proper hearing for it in the House. I commend Sinn Féin on putting the matter down for discussion. I emphasise that Fianna Fáil favours very much reform of the junior certificate and achieving it in partnership with teachers. If one looks at how this came about, a great deal of work was carried out and in train before the Government took office. I am surprised by the first paragraph of the Sinn Féin motion where it is stated that it notes that the previous Government examined axing the junior certificate exam structure as a cost saving initiative and that such axing of the junior certificate exam structure was the starting point for the current Government until teacher unions began a campaign of opposition. That opening comment is simply incorrect.

Much work had gone into preparing for what is widely regarded as a necessary reform of the junior certificate. When Mary Coughlan was Minister she conducted a consultation on how reform would be progressed. A working group was established by the NCCA which included all stakeholders with a view to looking at the research that was there and coming forward with a proposal to achieve real and genuine reform of the junior cycle. That resulted in the publication in early 2011 of the NCCA working group report which was the starting point for the current Government. The NCCA working group proposed that 60% of the mark of a student in the new junior certificate student cycle would consist of terminal examinations, as in the past, set by the State Examination Commission, SEC, and corrected under its auspices, independently, as in the past. It proposed that the other 40% would be assessed through classroom based activities and project work, which would involve teachers assessing their students. Stakeholders from all the groups were involved and it was accepted by the then Minister, Deputy Quinn.

Unfortunately, approximately a year later, at the end of 2012, Deputy Quinn made a departure of his own volition, and very much of his mind and his mind only. He decided he would not accept or go forward with the proposals that had come forward from the NCCA working group but instead abolish the junior certificate examination. It would no longer be a State examination with 60% corrected by the SEC but become a school certificate. The 60% written papers would

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be corrected by teachers while the other 40%, as proposed under the working group proposals, would also be corrected by teachers. The then Minister, Deputy Quinn, came out unilaterally, as was his wont, with lights, camera, action at the little house in the middle of the Department of Education and Skills.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: The clock tower.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Deputy Quinn was very fond of it.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: It is a nice place.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: He invited all and sundry along for show-time and told them how it was going to be. Despite the fact that there had been widespread agreement on the proposals that had been worked out with many people, Deputy Quinn said they would go forward a different way and told everybody to row in behind and follow him so he could make his legacy. Our situation is emblematic of some of the approaches Deputy Quinn took, for example his proposals on patronage, which were very similar to the way he handled the junior certificate. The success of the approach is similar to that of junior certificate reform. Again, Deputy Quinn made a big announcement that he was to change the patronage of 50% of national schools. He got everybody’s back up by insisting everybody row in behind and follow him. Deputy Quinn has moved on from the ministry and only one school has changed patronage under his stewardship. His approach has made the diversity required for our school system more difficult to achieve. Junior certificate reform has had similar results.

Deputy Quinn planned to abolish the examination, and Sinn Féin supported the initial proposal. Nevertheless, Sinn Féin, in the initial paragraph of the motion, tried to have a bite at Fianna Fáil because some group had made a proposal to abolish the examination. It was a bit rich considering Sinn Féin had no problem with it when the then Minister, Deputy Quinn, proposed it and it was Sinn Féin’s position until recently. Given that, unfortunately, I missed the earlier speeches, I am still not sure if it is still Sinn Féin’s position; it might be. The motion it has proposed today does not move away from the position or say what is the party’s position on the matter.

My party and I have always opposed Deputy Quinn’s plan to do away with the State certification of the examination. We have consistently highlighted the view that the 60% of the examination, which the working group proposed should continue to be set and marked by the SAC, should continue. We strongly believe there should be consistency as to how the junior certificate marks are regarded across the country. The junior certificate is very much respected by teachers and students, and it is important to keep that aspect of it. The initial proposal ensured this by keeping 60% of it as an externally set and marked examination. This would ensure a student would have faith that the mark he or she got through the process in Donegal would have the same value as the mark somebody got in Kerry.. Likewise, it ensured that teachers were not incentivised to mark up their students to ensure they did not get lower marks than the school down the road or the class down the corridor. Everybody felt this was important and the approach would have ensured that consistency and fairness were maintained to a large extent in the new junior cycle.

Deputy Peter Mathews: Hear, hear.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Had this approach been taken, it would have given the Minister, the previous Minister and the Government much credit in the bank to engage ap-

appropriately with teachers as to how the 40% that was to be awarded in the schools would be structured and rolled out. However, the Minister never got to this stage because she was immediately in conflict. Instead of working with partners, they became her opponents. While it was great to hear all the chat about reform, it has not been delivered. The former Minister, Deputy Quinn, had one big gambit, take it or leave it, namely, doing away with the junior certificate State examination. The Minister, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, came in with her take-it-or-leave-it approach, which was going back to the starting point. She proposed to return to having 60% done by externally assessed State examination with 40% internally assessed, take it or leave it. The Minister made a call; she thought they would take it. Whoever advised her - I do not know if it was her Department officials or the former Minister, Deputy Quinn - she took the advice.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: While I listen to advice, I make my own decisions.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I do not doubt it.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Sometimes they are the wrong ones.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: This time last year, I proposed that the then Minister, Deputy Quinn, delay the implementation instead of going forward with English. Had he delayed it until the following September, the new Minister could have started English alongside science and used the interim period to try to get agreement with the teachers. She could have used the benefit of the fact that she was a new Minister to achieve it. However, Deputy Quinn decided to plough on, despite the fact that he could have delayed. It was a strong-arm tactic. He told the teachers that given they were employed by the Department, they had no choice but to teach the curriculum they were given. Despite the fact that a non-participation approach that was taken meant that not all teachers had participated in training, the strong-arm tactic of starting the process proceeded. Even if it is delayed, it has already started in that English has started and science is due to begin in September.

Unfortunately, the Government has left itself in a position in which it will be very difficult to achieve meaningful reform. There is not long left for this Government. There will be another strike at the end of the week. The teachers should not have called a strike but should have engaged with the Minister to move forward. The teachers were goaded into it by the Government's approach. It will be exceptionally difficult for the Minister to achieve it because of the way it has been done. The Minister made a mistake before the first strike. The Minister's position with the teachers was that they would be obliged to take it and that, while she would negotiate with them, it would only be on the basis that they would agree to how she wanted the 40% to work. It was not a type of proposal that was designed to bring people to the table. The first strike took place and now, unfortunately, we will have a second strike. What needs to be reformed and those measures that would be highly beneficial for students are now further away than when the Government first came to office. Moreover, there is a chance that by the time the next Government takes office it will be even further away. This is the stark and unfortunate reality we face.

I believe the Minister and the teaching unions must continue to engage. I ask the teaching unions to put aside industrial protest and engage with the Minister. Moreover, what must happen is that this must be done through the prism of the student - that is, what will the actual curricular end result look like for the junior cycle student who will be taking it? How will such students be fulfilled and developed appropriately by the type of curriculum that will be offered to them? Consideration through a black-and-white prism of whether a particular type of project

or activity is externally accessible will not necessarily achieve a curriculum that is to the greatest benefit of the students. I believe this is the method by which both sides must thrash out the detail in this regard because, unfortunately, detail has been absent at all stages of this process and political bravado has been to the fore. As a result, essential reform - the delivery of which is supported by my party - has stalled and it appears as though it may not be delivered without a change of approach on all sides. Consequently, I ask for this to happen. The Minister should note that teachers have genuine concerns, while there also is valid research in respect of the reasons for the proposals put forward. Both sides must try, in a spirit of partnership, to come to an accommodation that will deliver a reformed curriculum, which will benefit students, facilitate radical change in the education cycle and ensure the students get to develop their personalities and develop as people with multiple talents and different skills throughout their secondary school careers. This is something that the current formulaic and restricted curriculum does not achieve in the way it could.

Deputy Finian McGrath: First, I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this important motion and commend it. I totally support reform of the educational services and all aspects thereof, and urgent reform is needed. My one major objection is that independent objective assessment also is needed in State examinations. As far as I am concerned, class teachers should not grade their own pupils in State examinations. An independent outside examiner does not know whether a pupil is rich or poor or is male or female. The Minister should think carefully before scrapping a system that is professional, objective and, above all, above suspicion. If the Minister is interested in reform, she will note that 27% of secondary school teachers are on temporary contracts, often with part-time hours and no job security. In addition, 52% of teachers under the age of 30 are in temporary jobs. Consequently, if the Minister cares about reform, she will care about that. In respect of the junior certificate, teachers will not implement proposals that are educationally unsound and will have a serious negative impact on students. I say “Yes” to reform and to modernisation but “No” to teachers assessing their own students for State-approved qualifications.

In 2011, the plan of the NCCA recommended that teachers assess 40% of students’ grades, with 60% being assessed through a final examination. I note that 5,447 appeals were made in respect of the leaving certificate examinations and, as a result, 18% of these students got higher grades. While one must ensure that teachers’ professionalism is respected in this debate, I also refer to respect for the students. Teachers guide and nurture pupils, and, when it comes to a State examination, do not wish to be in the position of assessing them. As for productivity, I note that at second level, Ireland’s net teaching time of 735 hours compares with the European Union average of 622 hours. In the OECD PISA rankings for reading ability among 15-year olds, Ireland is ranked fourth. One should look at these if one is interested in reform. Ireland also is ranked ninth in science literacy, which is an increase on its previous ranking of 13th. Recently, the Minister wished to establish the position with regard to literacy and numeracy in primary schools. She got an outside group to go into the schools to assess the teachers’ work and assess the pupils and then she got a national feel for the improvement in literacy and numeracy skills. However, it was carried out by an external independent assessment group from Drumcondra.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: It was in conjunction with the teachers. The teachers were involved.

Deputy Finian McGrath: In addition, while the Minister claims to be listening to parents and teachers, last May an *Irish Independent*-Millward Brown poll showed that 60% of the pub-

lic supported the view that teachers should not assess their own students for certification. If the Minister is listening to parents or to teachers, she should withdraw this particular aspect of the proposals, and then she will go a long way.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: I have listened to the National Parents’ Council Post-primary.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion and for the chance to speak on it. I am fully in favour of reform. One can talk about it or throw whatever one wants at it, be it a right boot, a left boot or a reboot-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: No boots over here.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: -----but the bottom line is that I am in favour of reform. Second, I note that the Minister has made a better attempt at this than did the previous Minister, who tried to ram things down people’s throats. As everyone is aware, a dispute is no good to anyone, and ultimately it is the students and the parents - who must arrange babysitters or whatever - who will be in disarray in a few days’ time. People must keep talking and this problem must be resolved. All over Ireland, and in rural Ireland in particular, school competition is getting ever stronger as numbers fall. I am on a board of management and, as everyone knows, in order to get kids into a school one must drive as hard as one can to get one’s school to have the best name in the area. It is deeply unfair to ask a teacher to mark his or her own exams because, at present, there is so much pressure whereby one’s school must be deemed to be one of the best in an area to make sure one gets the students into that school. This issue requires a radical look. I have examined and weighed up this matter and I am a firm believer that schools could be pooled in certain areas and exams could be shared among different schools. This could be a workable solution. I am throwing the idea out to the Minister that four or five schools in an area could work together and each year different schools could mark different examinations. This could be a way of moving the whole thing forward. I have visited the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition and have seen the enthusiasm of those young students. That should not be tarnished but should be driven on. If reform is being undertaken, I would ask another thing of the Minister. I note that in marking examinations, summer examinations and so on, retired teachers are being brought back. As there are so many young teachers who have no jobs, they should be given priority in this regard.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: While one talks about reform, I refer to something else that is needed, for which it may be necessary to take a step backwards. I see many youngsters aged 15 or 16 who, at one time in the past, when they went through the vocational system and learned many different skills, went on a different route. Although not everyone will become a doctor or a lawyer, we have concentrated a great deal on this and have gone in a different direction. However, when one looks back at the results that were achieved in the vocational schools, one sees that if reform is to be undertaken, the entire concept of the manner in which kids are taught must be examined.

Debate adjourned.

The Dáil adjourned at 10 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 21 January 2015.

20 January 2015