



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 24 Márta 2015

Tuesday, 24 March 2015

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Cyber Security Policy

119. **Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil** asked the Minister for Defence the role he envisages for the Defence Forces in addressing cyber security issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11697/15]

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: This question focuses on the issue of our national security, which nowadays is not just concerned with the security of our communities and Border, but also the security of our cyberspace. Will the Minister focus on the need to develop within the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces a dedicated cyber-defence unit? Could the signals intelligence unit be the body to play that role?

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): This is a relevant question in the context of the White Paper and the changing security concerns. The growth of cyber threats to critical private, government and defence networks requires a co-ordinated response at national and EU level across member states. There is a need to focus on advanced collaboration between the public and private sectors. The response to the cyber threat remains a whole-of-government challenge, with the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources taking the lead role and inputs in the security domain from the Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces. The Office of the Government Chief Information Officer works closely with Departments in this regard.

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Following a Government decision in July 2011, the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources established a computer security incident response team, CSIRT, to support Departments and key agencies in responding to cyber incidents, including malicious cyber-attacks that would hamper the integrity of their information systems and harm the interests of the State. The CSIRT also acts as a national point of contact for entities within Ireland and as the point of contact for international discussions on issues of cyber security. The scope of the body's activities covers prevention, detection, response and mitigation services to Departments, State agencies and critical national infrastructure providers.

The Defence Forces provide two seconded specialists to assist with the work of this unit. Its work is also supported by an interdepartmental committee on cyber security, established and chaired by the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, that regularly reports progress on cyber security issues to the Government task force on emergency planning, which I chair in my capacity as the Minister for Defence.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I am surprised and pleased to learn there is a unit within the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources but it is a very well kept secret because today is the first I have heard of it. It is, however, in the Department of Defence that such a unit should be based because the high level of expertise required to secure our cyberspace rests primarily within the Minister's Department. Since it is ultimately a defence issue it is in the Department of Defence that the continued development of the strategy should be focused and led, rather than in the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. We all acknowledge the inordinate importance for our economic recovery of companies like Twitter, Google, LinkedIn, Facebook and so on. Given the huge amount of information the State itself stores about our citizens it is critical that the material be secure.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I agree with all of that. A high level interdepartmental group chaired by the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and including senior representatives from the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces is finalising a draft national cybersecurity strategy that will focus on improving cybersecurity capabilities in Ireland. The draft strategy will be published this year by the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in consultation with other key departments and agencies. This will provide a framework within which the future contribution of the Defence Forces will be assessed.

The Deputy is right that this is a threat that needs a comprehensive response from Government. The only issue is which Department should be the lead. To date the decision has been that the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources should be the lead Department for cybersecurity but that Department works with other Departments and we in the Department of Defence have a significant input into the strategy, along with the Defence Forces, because we have the necessary capacity. The Deputy needs to wait to see the detail of the cybersecurity strategy and how it will function. He will see that the Government is working on a complete response to the issue.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: My problem with what the Minister has said is that the risk exists now. We have seen the hacking of the Twitter account of central command in the US and production was stopped at Intel, in my own county, earlier this year following a bomb threat. Security risks exist now and we need to move urgently to address those risks. It is very much in the broad national interest that we do so, having regard to the importance of information technology to our economy. Can the Minister at least agree that, notwithstanding the well kept

secrets within the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, it is within the ranks of the Defence Forces that the primary expertise exists to develop the sort of strategy that we need? Will he, as Minister for Defence, appoint his Department as the lead Department in this area?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I do not accept that other Departments do not have a significant role here. Yes, there is some expertise within the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces in this area but there is also a lot of expertise within the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. It deals with a lot of companies in the private sector on cybersecurity issues and has broad experience across the public sector in the area. Every country, Ireland included, is looking at cybersecurity issues as the threat evolves and changes and even the most powerful countries in the world find themselves the victim of hacking and other issues relating to cybersecurity. As the chair of the Government task force on emergency planning, I get regular updates from the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources on cybersecurity. We are close to finalising a cybersecurity strategy which will have the input of all relevant Departments, including the Department of Defence, and we should be less concerned about who is taking the lead and more concerned about a complete cross-Governmental response. It is a current issue and one which needs a response this year. That is what it will get with the national strategy. The strategy is no secret as it has been worked on for some time.

European Council Meetings

120. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence the discussions that took place at the informal meeting of EU Defence Ministers in Riga on 18 February 2015; the position he took on the review of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy; and if it will have implications for the work and deployment of the Defence Forces. [11664/15]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I have tabled this question to find out more about what was discussed at the informal meeting of EU Defence Ministers in Riga last month. Irish citizens and others throughout Europe are opposed to the further militarisation of the European Union and concerned about future developments in the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy, especially as it works its way towards the creation of a standing EU army.

Deputy Simon Coveney: First, there is no standing EU army and as there are no plans for one, I am not sure where the Deputy is coming from in his question. It seems to suggest the informal meeting of Defence Ministers in Riga recently was undercover but nothing could be further from the truth. The most recent informal meeting of EU Defence Ministers took place in Riga, Latvia on 18 and 19 February. The informal defence ministerial meeting is not a decision-making forum, rather it provides an opportunity for Defence Ministers to discuss current issues and review ongoing progress in Common Security and Defence Policy developments. As such, the meeting did not have new implications for the work and-or deployment of the Defence Forces.

The first working session during the informal meeting was focused on preparations for the June 2015 European Council at which the issue of defence will be on the agenda. Clarification was provided by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the process leading to the June meeting and the issues she regarded as priorities for Heads of State. She informed Ministers of her intention to initiate a process to review the European security strategy and produce a new foreign and security policy. In her presentation

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to the European Council she will signal the launch of the process.

The meeting of Defence Ministers continued with discussions on the importance of strategic communications and the complex issue of hybrid conflict such as we have seen in Ukraine and Syria. Strategic communications are a key enabler in securing popular support for the activities of the European Union in crisis management operations.

During the final working session Ministers were briefed on the ongoing Common Security and Defence Policy military operations. During this session there was also a forward-looking briefing, linking rapid response and the battle groups with possible scenarios and concrete crisis areas. In the past few days I had the privilege of visiting, meeting and spending some time with the Irish troops in Mali in west Africa in one of the EU-backed missions. I take the opportunity to congratulate them on the impressive project on which they have embarked in undertaking a training mission in Mali.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I hope my question did not suggest what the Minister said it did, namely, that there was a hidden agenda. That was not my intention in tabling the question, rather I was trying to find out what had been discussed. For instance, given that the Council meeting was held in Riga, was there a discussion of the Maltese navy and its call for help from the European Union in dealing with the continuing migrant problem on the Mediterranean? The UNHCR has stated that this year alone 3,500 migrants will die on the Mediterranean in trying to access the European Union. Was there a discussion of whether more could be done by way of an EU search and rescue effort? Ireland recently offered the decommissioned *LE Aoife* to the Maltese. Could more be done by neutral states such as ours?

The Minister has said there is no question of having a standing army, but the Secretary General of NATO stated in his opening remarks, “During these challenging times ... NATO Allies spend more on defence, and spend better.” Does the Minister agree with him and that it should be the other way around - that less should be spent in Europe on defence, given that more than €200 billion is spent by EU countries during a time of austerity?

Deputy Simon Coveney: They are all very fair questions. We have an agreement to provide the *LE Aoife* which has been decommissioned to be used in Malta for security purposes and as part of a more effective response to the migration and human challenges faced by it. There has been some media coverage to the contrary but Malta is delighted to accept the vessel. We will help to train the crew and make sure they are fully trained on the vessel before it leaves from Haulbowline to sail to Malta. We are confident the vessel will be able to perform the function asked of it for the next four or five years while Malta goes through the process of securing a newer vessel for that purpose. It is a good example of collaboration between two relatively small European states. Ireland is not a member of NATO and has no intention of joining NATO. Any comments from NATO representatives apply to NATO member states. I will reply further on budgets in the next response.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The final supplementary question is about comments made since the Riga meeting and related by Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, and backed up by the German defence Minister, who reissued a call heard for a number of years on the urgent creation of a standing EU army. That was the context in which I was asking the question. Does the Minister agree with the comments by the President of the European Commission? Does he believe deepening EU military integration is inevitable and positive? I have the opposite view.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I can only speak for Ireland and different Ministers will have different views on this. I do not envisage Ireland being part of the development of a European army. Through the Partnership for Peace, we are part of the battle groups structure, which is a voluntary structure. Countries volunteer to be part of a certain battle group and we are part of the Nordic battle group, which is something Ireland has agreed to be part of. The collaboration, training and interoperability between the member states that are part of the effort exists so that if Europe collectively must respond to a crisis, which we have not yet used battle groups for, we have the capacity to do so. Various member states contribute to the effort but that is not the same as a European army. From a military perspective, Ireland is the neutral country and we determine our own affairs. If Irish troops go anywhere, it is subject to the triple lock and it will remain like that for the foreseeable future.

Defence Forces Personnel

121. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Defence if he is satisfied with the manner in which Defence Forces personnel are being deployed for ATCP duties at Shannon, with particular reference to the two emergency landings that were made by US military aircraft at the end of February 2015; if he has discussed these circumstances with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Justice and Equality; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11651/15]

Deputy Clare Daly: The question is whether the Minister is satisfied with the manner in which Defence Forces personnel are being deployed on an almost daily basis for aid to the civil power, ATCP, duties at Shannon Airport, with particular reference to addressing the so-called emergency landings of very strange military aircraft in February, in clear breach of our neutrality and potentially endangering the lives of Defence Forces personnel.

Deputy Simon Coveney: This is a matter discussed several times during Question Time. An Garda Síochána has the primary responsibility for law and order, including the protection of the internal security of the State. Among the roles assigned to the Defence Forces is the provision of aid to the civil power which, in practice, means to assist An Garda Síochána when requested to do so. On occasions, the Defence Forces are deployed to Shannon Airport in an ATCP role in support of An Garda Síochána. The decision to seek support from the Defence Forces is an operational matter for An Garda Síochána.

With regard to the two emergency landings mentioned by the Deputy in her question, Defence Forces personnel were deployed to Shannon Airport on both occasions. On 28 February, Defence Forces personnel were deployed following an emergency landing of a US military aircraft. An emergency landing of a US military aircraft also took place on 6 March 2015. On this occasion, Defence Forces personnel were already deployed to Shannon Airport for another aircraft at the time. Notwithstanding the emergency nature of both landings, the deployment of the Defence Forces in support of An Garda Síochána was in accordance with normal procedures and there was no particular reason for me to discuss these matters with ministerial colleagues. However, I am satisfied that there is ongoing and close liaison between An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces and between my Department and those of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Justice and Equality regarding security matters generally, including in respect of the Defence Forces' ATCP roles.

Deputy Clare Daly: As the Minister stated, we have discussed this issue on many occa-

sions. Unfortunately, however, we have never addressed the matters which lie at the core of it. Perhaps the Minister is of the view that his repeating the same banalities on each occasion will encourage us to give up and to stop asking questions. I assure him that will not be the case. On 28 February, a US military EC-130H aircraft, described as an airborne tactical weapons system which uses a heavily modified version of the C-130 Hercules airframe and the primary function of which is electronic warfare, suppression of enemy air defences and offensive counter-information, landed at Shannon. How could such an aircraft not be in breach of our neutrality? When we posed questions to one of the four Departments responsible for this issue, having to some extent been kicked around in respect of it, we were initially informed that a different type of aircraft had sought permission to land ten days previously. On 28 February, the US military sought permission to land a normal Hercules plane but suddenly a so-called emergency landing was required and an EC-130H, an entirely different aircraft, landed at Shannon Airport. As commander-in-chief, as it were, of the armed forces, how can the Minister for Defence be of the view that it is acceptable for Defence Forces personnel to be called out to deal with such a scenario? Is it not his obligation to discuss matters of this nature with his colleague in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, who is initiating an investigation into the events to which I refer, particularly in the context of what the US military is up to at Shannon Airport?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I do not have the details of the aircraft that landed at the airport in my possession. What I do have in my possession is that which I have already outlined, namely, the dates on which emergency landings were sought and granted. Outside of that, I do not have with me any further details I can supply today.

Deputy Clare Daly: That is regrettable because that was the matter with which the Minister was originally requested to deal.

Deputy Simon Coveney: No, it was not.

Deputy Clare Daly: Yes, it was. The Minister was asked about his particular concerns regarding the two emergency landings to which I refer. He has informed the House that he did not bother to obtain any information on that matter and that he has no such information with him. I contest that there were some peculiar circumstances with regard to some of the landings in question. The Minister has an obligation to Defence Forces personnel who are called out to the airport to investigate matters further and he must seek the input of his colleagues, particularly if ministerial responsibility for this matter does not solely rest with him. When replying to the original question, the Minister provided the normal response regarding ATCP duties. Will the Minister clarify whether the Defence Forces personnel who are deployed to Shannon on an almost daily basis are always brought there at the request of An Garda Síochána? Is it the case that when they are at the airport they are answerable to the authority of An Garda Síochána or do they have independent authority and are they responsible for their own actions when there?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am sure the Deputy probably knows the answers to these questions. When the Defence Forces deploys personnel to assist An Garda Síochána, which has primary responsibility for security, it does so in response to requests for assistance from the force. Such assistance is always provided. When a Defence Forces unit arrives to assist, a lead officer will be in charge and it is his or her responsibility to ensure that the task the unit is requested to perform by An Garda Síochána is duly completed. My understanding is that responsibility for the approach taken by the Defence Forces personnel rests with the lead officer. However, those personnel are deployed in response to requests for assistance from An Garda Síochána. The latter is responsible for making decisions in terms of calling for such assistance in the first

instance.

Air Corps Equipment

122. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl** asked the Minister for Defence if he is satisfied that the Air Corps is capable of dealing with unauthorised incursions into Irish airspace by military aircraft from other countries; the action he took on foot of recent developments involving military aircraft from other countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11698/15]

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: This question is straightforward. It asks the Minister whether he is satisfied with the capacity of the Air Corps to deal with unauthorised incursions by military aircraft into Irish airspace, whether sovereign or Irish controlled, and the actions that he has taken in the aftermath of the recent two Russian incursions, whereby bombers flew across Irish controlled airspace with their transponders turned off. These incidents gave rise to serious public concern.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The White Paper on Defence published in 2000 sets out the current defence policy framework. The role of the Air Corps as set out in the White Paper is to provide a range of military and non-military air services. The Air Corps has traditionally discharged a mix of functions based on a need to supply a range of services, such as air ambulance, fishery protection and support to An Garda Síochána, in addition to its military roles. The White Paper found that going beyond this capability would require a level of investment in Air Corps personnel, equipment and infrastructure which could not be justified. Accordingly the Air Corps is not tasked with or equipped for monitoring or responding to unauthorised aircraft overflying Irish airspace.

Work is continuing apace on the development of a new White Paper on Defence. A key part of the development of the new White Paper is consideration of the current security environment and challenges that may emerge into the future. Working groups comprising civil and military representatives from the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces are considering likely future operational demands and the defence capabilities required to meet them. This work will inform recommendations on defence provision.

With regard to the presence of Russian military aircraft in Irish controlled airspace on 28 January and 18 February 2015, it is important to note that these aircraft did not at any time enter Irish sovereign airspace. The aircraft were in an area for which the Irish Aviation Authority has responsibility for provision, operation and management of air navigation services for civil aviation. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport consulted my Department and other Departments in relation to the incident and developed an agreed response to it.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: I ask the Minister to tell us what the agreed response was. One would assume there was some engagement by our Government with the representatives of the Russian authorities. The public were certainly concerned about the incursion. A security expert, Dr. Tom Clonan, referred to Ireland's airspace defences as Europe's weakest link and suggested that if terrorists took over an aircraft in Irish space, it would be game over. I fully appreciate the enormous economic and financial constraints under which the Department of Defence must operate but, as we look to the future, what are the Minister's plans to strengthen our air defences or to make the sort of investment that will be necessary for our Air Corps? Is he committed to that and does he have any sort of vision as to how our air defences should be

developed?

Deputy Simon Coveney: In regard to the incidents involving Russian aircraft, while the aircraft did not enter Irish sovereign airspace, they were flying in an area for which the Irish Aviation Authority, IAA, has responsibility for air traffic control. I understand the IAA co-ordinated closely with its UK counterpart at all stages during the incident to avoid a risk to any civil aircraft. I also understand the two authorities are in discussions on how best to resolve this issue through the International Civil Aviation Organisation, and that contact has been made with the latter. In addition, a senior official from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade met the Russian ambassador to convey the Government's serious concerns about the unacceptable safety risk which could be posed by non-notified and uncontrolled flight activity. I understand that the ambassador undertook to bring these concerns to the attention of authorities in Moscow.

In regard to the Deputy's second question, even when there were not expenditure limits in terms of pressure on the Exchequer, there was no decision by previous Governments to build capacity in the Air Corps for air defence because it was perceived as not presenting a sufficiently significant risk to justify such expenditure. We must examine expenditure in the context of a new White Paper. The White Paper is the reason we carry out this exercise every ten to 15 years. However, I do not envisage the financing of the purchase of fighter jets any time soon. I do not say this flippantly, but the budgetary consequences of doing so would mean we would need multiples of the current capital defence spend.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: The capacity or range of our aircraft is between 10% and 20% of that of Russian aeroplanes. If we are to address any challenge, from Russia or anywhere else outside the European Union, we need to consider this issue. Can the Minister commit to some rolling programme to replace the five Cessnas? It is welcome that there has been some engagement with the Russian ambassador on this matter. The issue of public safety is of paramount importance. Some 75% of transatlantic flights cross Irish airspace, or approximately 1,800 flights every 24 hours. Therefore, it is extremely reckless for aeroplanes to come into Irish controlled airspace with their transponders switched off, which constitutes a serious danger to public safety.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I agree with the Deputy that it is unacceptable for large aircraft to travel at high speed through international airspace that is the responsibility of the Irish Aviation Authority without informing it and with their transponders deliberately turned off. The only reason we knew they were there was the United Kingdom had informed us. The focus must be on our capacity to understand and know what is travelling through our airspace. We do not have long range radar capacity to do this along the west coast. This issue is being examined and costed and we are in discussions with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport on the matter. This must be the first step towards more effective surveillance in order that we will know at any given point the number of aircraft in our airspace and, if possible, beyond this in international airspace. It is one thing not being able to respond to an aircraft travelling through airspace under the control of the Irish Aviation Authority but it is quite another not knowing it is there. Surveillance is the first step and we are looking at that issue in some detail.

Overseas Missions

123. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide an update of the work of Irish troops who are deployed with a task force to help in the fight against

Ebola in Sierra Leone; the work they are undertaking; when they will finish this tour of duty; and if they will be replaced by a new group of troops when they finish. [11665/15]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I have tabled this question to seek an update on the commendable work of all Irish soldiers serving in Sierra Leone and assisting in tackling Ebola. They volunteered for this difficult and challenging tour and left Ireland earlier this year to fight the worst outbreak yet of Ebola which has claimed over 10,000 lives or more. What work have they been doing? When are they due back and will a further detachment be sent to finish or continue their work?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy for asking this question as it gives me an opportunity to thank the members of the Permanent Defence Force involved in this important contribution towards the fight against Ebola. To assist in Ireland's response to the Ebola crisis in west Africa, five Defence Forces medical personnel have been deployed to Sierra Leone for a four month period to participate in the wider international response to the crisis. Irish personnel are part of a UK-led joint inter agency task force tackling Ebola in the region. The Irish personnel arrived in Sierra Leone on 17 January following pre-deployment training in the United Kingdom.

The Defence Forces team is working in conjunction with UK military medical personnel at the Kerrytown Ebola treatment centre, just south of the capital Freetown, and at a medical facility at the international security advisory team camp in Freetown. This facility also provides medical force protection for UK and Irish personnel in Sierra Leone. Irish personnel are not engaged in the direct treatment of Ebola victims but continue to provide a supporting role for front-line workers who are so engaged. In May 2015 it is planned to rotate the Defence Forces team that is due to return to Ireland at the end of its rotation.

The Defence Forces medical team comprises highly trained personnel who are making a tangible contribution in assisting in the control of the spread of this disease. Participating as part of the larger British military medical effort is an effective means to optimise the contribution of the Defence Forces which is going some way in assisting efforts to fight against the spread of this deadly virus. Under the emergency civilian assistance team, ECAT initiative, Defence Forces personnel have also been deployed to Sierra Leone to assist the Irish embassy in responding to the Ebola virus crisis. Two Defence Forces personnel are primarily providing security and operational management in the embassy and this has been very well received by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: This is one question on which we can all agree. Is it intended to increase the detachment even though the UN Ebola virus mission is suggesting that the outbreak may be over by August? The Minister mentioned that the next detachment is going out in May. It may be important to consider increasing the number of personnel, given that there may be other outbreaks in the future. In what way will the Defence Forces benefit from the experiences of the seven personnel who are currently in Sierra Leone to ensure that the Irish Defence Forces have gained the best possible knowledge in the event of them having to work in other outbreaks in the future?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy for his recognition of the significant work which they volunteered to do. I have huge time for the personnel who have volunteered to be part of the mission. This is a new mission on a number of levels. For example, it is very much part of the UK mission in that this is the first time our medical people have slotted into a UK-

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managed mission. I was anxious for our Defence Forces to contribute medical, logistics and management expertise to the anti-Ebola virus efforts in West Africa. We could not afford to put a full mission together ourselves because of the cost and the resources required. The obvious way to be of assistance was to slot in with a larger country which had a big footprint on the ground. The UK has medivac capabilities, hospitals and isolation facilities. We do not have any plans to increase the number of personnel even though I think the UK would like us to send more personnel because it has been a very successful project to date and the UK is very happy with the level of training and approach of our Permanent Defence Force. We are somewhat limited in terms of overall resources and human resources, especially in the medical area. We plan to keep the number of personnel at five but there will be a rotation of personnel in May. The Deputy suggests that this problem might be over by August; the increase in the spread of Ebola virus will be over by August but there is a lot of management yet in this crisis before we will be able to say that a country like Sierra Leone is free of the virus.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I understand the limitations in terms of medical personnel but I was suggesting that additional support staff might gain other experiences which may be useful to us in other humanitarian responses in the future. Are the troops in Sierra Leone being given the anti-malaria drug, Lariam? Is it being used across the whole mission or are some people being given the other drug, Malarone instead of Lariam?

Deputy Simon Coveney: Lariam is still used across the Defence Forces, although I am not sure if Defence Forces personnel in Sierra Leone are using that product or other products. The Defence Forces only use drugs that are approved by the Medical Council. As I am not a doctor, I take the advice of doctors as to the appropriate drugs for use as protection against malaria for troops. While the personnel in Sierra Leone are probably using Lariam, it would not surprise me if they were using Malarone, as both drugs are now used to good effect in the Defence Forces. While some people have expressed concern about the use of Lariam and the drug's side effects, in general it is being used to very good effect in the Defence Forces, especially in Africa.

Other Questions

White Paper on Defence

124. **Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil** asked the Minister for Defence when the White Paper on Defence will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11641/15]

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: The Minister referred several times to the impending White Paper on Defence. It is two years since the Green Paper on Defence was produced and 18 months since the deadline for receipt of submissions elapsed. The Minister is running out of time to publish this important White Paper. Is he in a position to indicate a timeframe for its publication?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I have been consistent on this issue since assuming the role of Minister for Defence. I indicated I would try to bring the White Paper to Government before the summer recess in July. That is the timetable to which we are operating. If the White Paper

is approved by Government, as I hope it will be, we will probably be able to publish it in September or October. We are consulting on the White Paper and as part of the process of finalising it, I hope to arrange a full day of debate and statements in the Dáil. There will also be a full day of consultations with Defence Forces representative bodies and other stakeholders who will contribute to the finalisation of the process. I hope to be able to bring a White Paper to Government towards the end of July.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: The timescale the Minister outlined is welcome if it can be realised. The Minister stated recently that he intends to consult on the White Paper nationally and internationally. With which categories of people or stakeholders will he consult? Will he also give an undertaking to use as a resource the large repository of skills and information that exists among retired officers? Those who retired recently have gathered a wide range of experience internationally, not least in the area of peacekeeping. Will he contact, liaise with and obtain feedback from this group?

Deputy Simon Coveney: We have a good group in the Department which has been liaising with many other Departments. The basis of a White Paper must be a comprehensive security assessment to identify that which we must defend against. We must then provide an infrastructure to ensure the State is adequately defended for the next ten years. That is essentially the approach taken in the White Paper. The Department has been moving from a Green Paper to a White Paper and has engaged in extensive consultation with other Departments, particularly on the security assessment.

I established a group outside the Department and Government to advise me on international best practice and put forward other views to ensure I am being challenged in terms of issues that should be considered. I have asked Mr. John Minihan, the former chairman of the Progressive Democrats Party, to chair the group. Mr. Minihan is a former officer who served abroad on many occasions, including in Lebanon, and is passionate about defence policy. The group also includes Mr. Karl Croke, a former Defence Forces officer who has been very successful in the private sector and has particular expertise in human resource management.

Marie Cross is also on the aforementioned group advising me. She has a lot of experience, has worked with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and is now deeply involved in the Institute of International and European Affairs, IIEA. In addition, Frank Lynch, who is the former flag officer of the Naval Service, is on that group. It is a group of four highly experienced people, three of whom are ex-Defence Forces personnel and all of whom are ambitious and interested in defence policy and the Defence Forces in Ireland. They are contributing to the development of the policy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will come back to the Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Finally, on the Department's consultation day, it will invite experts, be they from countries in Europe or elsewhere, where there is relevance to the Irish White Paper in respect of the work they have been doing. This will take place in approximately one month's time.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: Budgetary constraints are the major impediment at present and I note defence spending has fallen by approximately 20% since 2008, bringing Ireland to the point where it has the second lowest expenditure on defence in Europe, in terms of percentage of GDP spent, behind Luxembourg. As part of this White Paper process, does the Minister en-

visage that this fundamental situation will change?

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is hard to give a “Yes” or “No” answer to that question until the response to the security threat assessment has been finalised and fully costed. However, I envisage that yes, defence spending in Ireland over the next ten years will need to increase. New challenges must be faced, Ireland has a huge marine resource that must be protected, airspace that must be managed and it has natural resources that must also be part of that security threat assessment. Moreover, Members have already discussed cybersecurity and so on. In addition, Ireland has an increasing responsibility abroad in terms of peacekeeping, conflict management, post-conflict stabilisation and so on. I would like to see an increasing budget for defence to be able to do all those things. However, that must be negotiated and will not happen in a single year. My view on the White Paper is that over the next decade, the State will work towards putting in place a modern, well-resourced defence infrastructure which I believe will require increases in budget over time.

Defence Forces Recruitment

125. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to address the staffing deficit within the Army bomb disposal units; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11622/15]

Deputy Denis Naughten: The explosive ordnance demolition unit or the bomb disposal squad is an integral part of the Defence Forces and of the security of the State. In the past three years, it has been called out 595 times, 75 of which have been in cases of unstable chemicals in schools. There has been a reduction in the staffing complement of that unit and I wish to ascertain what steps will be taken in the immediate future to ensure there are adequate staff numbers to maintain the four units across the country.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy has raised this issue with me previously and I will give him an update. On the actual numbers, I am glad to state there was a significant reduction in the number of call-outs last year. There were 215 call-outs in 2013 and this number fell to 141 this year. The number of call-outs for viable improvised explosive devices also fell last year. There was a reduction from 96 in 2012 to 81 in 2013 and the number fell to 52 last year. While this is a positive trend, it remains necessary to have the capacity to deal with a significant increase, should that happen for whatever reason.

Explosive ordnance disposal is the military term used to refer to what is commonly called bomb disposal. Explosive ordnance disposal is a task assigned to the Defence Forces by the Government and is provided in aid to the civil power. Within the Defence Forces, the explosive ordnance disposal function is assigned to the Ordnance Corps. As I stated in response to Question No. 9 of Wednesday, 14 January 2015, the issue of the terms and conditions for entry into the Ordnance Corps has been raised by the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, at conciliation council. In accordance with normal procedures, the association’s claim is being dealt with under the conciliation and arbitration scheme for members of the Permanent Defence Force.

As discussions under the scheme are confidential to the parties involved, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the details today. However, it is my intention that recruitment will commence as soon as the terms and conditions have been agreed.

In other words there is a dispute, I suspect, over the level of incentive to get people into this specialist training area. It is dangerous work, quite frankly, and requires about two years of training. We are going through the usual procedures to agree a way forward and a compromise that everyone will accept and agree upon. After that, we will be pressing ahead with an active recruitment campaign because we do need to increase the numbers in that unit.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I accept what the Minister has said. However, the difficulty is that the last recruits came out of the training process in September 2010, which is four and a half years ago. It takes 18 months of training before unsupervised personnel can be involved in bomb disposal work. Is the Minister aware that by the end of April we will have less than 50% of the full complement of those four units? In light of that, what immediate action can be taken to address this situation? Is there now a real risk that one of these units will have to be disbanded, at least temporarily, in order to maintain the effective operation of the other units?

Deputy Simon Coveney: No, I do not think that is likely. We are anxious to finalise the conciliation process so that we can get on with the new recruitment drive. The Deputy is right in that the numbers have fallen, but there is still a strong capability to do the required job. Nobody is suggesting that the level of service and response is compromised, but we do need a new recruitment drive. We need to get some new people in training for these units. That will be the focus once we can get the conciliation finalised.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I have some brief questions. On foot of the Minister's last comments, can he reassure the House that the unit based in Athlone is secure into the future? What does he envisage is the timeline for agreement to be reached between the Government, the Defence Forces and RACO? When are we likely to see a recruitment campaign commencing?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I have given numerous assurances concerning the number of personnel and units in Athlone. I have had no briefing or suggestion from anybody that there will be a disbanding of the unit in Athlone. From that point of view, therefore, I can give the Deputy an assurance - unless I get some briefing to the contrary in the next couple of days. However, I certainly have nothing to suggest that that would be the case.

The focus has been on trying to get through a conciliation process which is a fairly normal process within Defence Forces' structures. We had to go through that process with the 21-year soldier issue, which resulted in a reasonably good outcome for everybody, including a fair compromise. We need to get through this process also. I think RACO would be aware that there is a need to move on with this issue now. We are anxious to move on in order to get recruitment under way again. The sooner we can resolve the issues the better.

Air Corps

126. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence if he remains satisfied that the Defence Forces are adequately equipped to detect incursions into Irish air space by potentially hostile intruders, manned or unmanned; if counter offensive measures need to be updated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11647/15]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question concerns the need for the Air Corps to be in a position to monitor and, if necessary, intercept aircraft intruding into Irish air space, as well as being in a position to identify the purpose of the mission.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I answered a similar question earlier. Under the current strategy which dates back to the 2000 White Paper on Defence, the role of the Air Corps is limited to surveillance and some limited defence capacity. If there is a fast-moving military plane coming into Irish airspace, our Air Corps is not going to have significant defence capacity to deal with that. When the White Paper was put in place back in 2000, the assessed risk of that happening was deemed to be very low and therefore we could not justify the expenditure on putting together significant air defence capacity. We now have to reassess that in the context of the new White Paper.

First and foremost, we need to improve our capacity to monitor what is happening in our airspace and in international airspace for which the Irish Aviation Authority has responsibility. That is why I mentioned that we are looking in some detail at the cost and equipment that would be required to improve long range radar capacity along the west coast in particular. That is the first step. We will have an opportunity in the context of the broader White Paper to discuss what we should or should not be doing in terms of the Air Corps and its future role. It is important to be realistic. The cost of putting together a fleet of fighter jets is probably similar to all the defence spending in Ireland put together. We are unlikely to be pursuing that course of action, although we have to have an open mind. Instead, we need to look at improved surveillance so that we understand and have a detailed knowledge of what is happening in our airspace.

We do have some capacity at the moment. It should not be suggested that we have no capacity. We have radar capacity along the west coast that covers the vast majority of our air space, as it happens. If the Deputy is talking about further out to sea, 30 km to 50 km into the Atlantic and into international air space, he is talking about long-range equipment, which has a cost implication.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister. A somewhat unstable situation exists globally at present, in that quite a number of trouble spots exist across the globe. Would the Minister agree that, as a result, neutral countries in particular may be vulnerable? To what extent is that going to be taken into account in determining the degree to which defence methods and mechanisms can be upgraded in line with international standards, given the urgency?

Deputy Simon Coveney: First, I would not like to give the impression that Irish defence capacity is not in line with international standards in the areas where we operate, because it is. Training and fitness levels in the Irish Defence Forces benchmark really well with international standards. Looking at the capacity for Ireland in peacekeeping operations, for example, we are as good as if not better than any other country in terms of our experience and what we bring to many of those missions, whether in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, UNDOF, Mali, Sierra Leone, or wherever we are. We are very good at what we do.

The issue is whether to change perspective from the 2000 White Paper on Defence, which limits our capacity in certain areas, to respond to what has happened since 2000 regarding international security concerns and issues. Cybersecurity is one obvious area that has been raised today. Migration is another area, and we have to ensure that we have a comprehensive security risk assessment, which will then be the basis for deciding how we respond in the White Paper.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Would the Minister agree that in the course of that risk assessment, it might be useful to include the use in some quarters of unmanned aircraft which continue to be employed in many locations throughout the globe? In the context of discussion

with his EU colleagues, has any consideration been given to the vulnerability of neutral states within the European Union whereby there might be a security deficit compared to best practice internationally?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy will be glad to hear we already use drones, or unmanned aircraft. The Army uses them in terms of surveillance, target accuracy and so on.

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The Naval Service is also testing drones and considering their use to push back the horizon and improve surveillance capacity. We have some technology companies that are developing and designing new drone technology. Ireland will be one of the world's leading countries in designing and developing the next drone technology which will actually attract more civil than military use. It is a space in which we are very active. Enterprise Ireland and Science Foundation Ireland have been examining it also.

What was the Deputy's second question?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: It was on the sensitivity of neutral nations.

Deputy Simon Coveney: A country that is neutral or militarily non-aligned has to have the capacity to stand on its own two feet. That is a subject on which we need an honest debate in Ireland.

Defence Forces Operations

127. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Defence the protocol that exists when the Defence Forces are called upon to carry out aid-to-civil power duties, in terms of chain of command, with particular reference to whether the Defence Forces or An Garda Síochána are responsible for decision making in relation to the duty. [11618/15]

Deputy Mick Wallace: We agree that we need an honest debate on it. Recently in reply to a question the Minister stated, "When deployed in an ATCP role, Defence Forces personnel remain under the operational command of a Defence Forces officer at all times." He has said this again today. In the response he also stated, "For security and operational reasons, it is not considered appropriate to make any further comment in relation to how such operations are conducted." Does this mean that he believes there are security risks associated with defending US military aircraft at Shannon Airport? If so, are members of the security forces made aware of the risks involved in defending these military aircraft?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am not quite sure what risks the Deputy is talking about. Certainly, when An Garda Síochána seeks assistance from the Defence Forces on security arrangements at Shannon Airport, it gets it. The assistance comes in the form of Permanent Defence Force personnel under the control of the senior officer performing the tasks they are being asked to perform by An Garda Síochána. As I stated, it is the role of the Defence Forces personnel to perform the tasks they are being asked to perform. I am not quite sure what the Deputy is getting at. I am not trying to be evasive, but I am just trying to understand what he is getting at. This is a security operation to provide security for aeroplanes landing, refuelling and taking off at Shannon Airport. When An Garda Síochána needs the assistance of the Defence Forces, it gets it. It is no more complicated than that.

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Deputy Mick Wallace: I was surprised when the Minister said that, for security and operational reasons, he did not consider it appropriate to make any further comment on how such operations were conducted. It goes without saying there is considerable confusion about roles and responsibilities. Does the person in charge from the Defence Forces have the authority to decide to inspect an aircraft? Alternatively, would the Minister say Garda personnel have greater authority on the platform at Shannon Airport? Can they actually decide to inspect an aircraft if they believe there is a good reason to do so?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am not going to answer the question for An Garda Síochána which is the lead organisation in terms of security within the State. When it needs assistance in performing its role, it asks for it and gets it from the Defence Forces. However, the task the Defence Forces are asked to perform by An Garda Síochána is managed operationally by the senior officer of the Defence Forces on site. That is my understanding of how it works. The duty of making the actual request and overall responsibility lie with An Garda Síochána.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Can the Defence Forces take charge of the security of an aeroplane without Garda personnel being present? We understand from the defence in a recent court case in Ennis, taken by the State, that An Garda Síochána was not allowed to exercise discretion at Shannon Airport and that if, for any reason, it suspected an aeroplane needed to be inspected, it was not allowed to do so. The gardaí were not allowed to use their own discretion as they would on the street. They were compelled to contact the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This came as a surprise to us.

Deputy Ó Fearghaíl and Deputy Durkan raised the issue of the Russian plane and what we should be worried about coming through our airspace. Were these people remotely interested in the EC130 Hercules which was armed and landed in Shannon? Are they remotely worried about the incredible security risk to the Irish people of seriously heavy armoury coming through Shannon?

With regard to the role of terrorists, since the end of the Second World War the US military machine has created more terrorism on the planet than the rest of the planet put together. We are allowing these people to use Shannon and we do not seem to have a problem with it yet we are worried about a Russian aircraft flying down by the west coast. Give us a break. What would the Russians be doing invading us?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister to conclude.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am not sure the US will invade us either, with all due respect.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I am not worried at all.

Deputy Clare Daly: They are here already.

Deputy Mick Wallace: In fairness to the Minister, I do not expect him to clarify whether the Russians are coming either. The two boys were worried though.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We need to try to have a calm response to these things. I will not answer on behalf of An Garda Síochána, which is under the political responsibility of a different Minister. Our role, in the Defence Forces, is to respond to specific tasks when asked for assistance by An Garda Síochána. We then manage and operationally take control of these tasks

through a senior officer in the performing of those tasks. It is no more complicated than that.

There are broader issues and I know Deputy Wallace has a strong difference of opinion with me and with the Department on these issues. However, they are separate issues. My responsibility, as Minister for Defence, is to account for the actions of the Permanent Defence Force when it is operationally asked to perform certain tasks by An Garda Síochána, which it does very professionally.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Can the Defence Forces monitor the plane without An Garda Síochána being there?

Deputy Simon Coveney: My understanding is that An Garda Síochána asks for assistance with a particular task and it is this task which the Defence Forces personnel operate. It does not, on its own initiative, then decide to do a whole series of other things like inspect planes.

Defence Forces Deployment

128. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail** asked the Minister for Defence if Ireland has received, or expects to receive, any request for the Defence Forces to participate in any mission to Libya; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11642/15]

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: With regard to the political situation in Libya, we are currently aware that there are peace talks taking place in Morocco with a view to bringing about the creation of a government and national unity. In this context, there has been much speculation that the UN might ask the EU under the common security and defence policy to send in a force to support the peace initiative. Has Ireland received any request or does the Minister anticipate a request being received in this regard?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The straight answer is that Ireland has not received any request. The honest answer is that I do not know if we will receive a request in the future. That would be two or three steps away from where we are now. We need to achieve political stability in Libya first and the European Union is very engaged through a special representative there in trying to achieve this. If agreement can be reached on a government of national unity in Libya, such a government may need assistance in terms of bedding down and stabilising the governing structure. The UN will be engaged in this process, as will the EU. It is only when this happens that we will be asked to look seriously, as a member state of the EU, at how we can support this. There have been suggestions of sending an EU mission there. There have also been suggestions that the Nordic battle group could be asked to be part of this and so on. These are very much suggestions which are made in the absence of two or three decisions which need to happen first.

I do not anticipate a request to send troops there in the immediate future. However, if we are requested to do so, and if other European countries are so requested, we will consider the request on its merits. We will go through the usual consideration process. As Deputy Ó Fearghail knows, before Irish troops can go anywhere, we will have to go through the triple-lock mechanism which will involve an opportunity for discussion and debate in this House.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I do not want to detain the Minister unduly on this matter but, given the IS threat in Libya and the dangerous nature of the Golan Heights mission, has he any overview of or concern about the situation? Is he in a position, even at this early stage, to indi-

cate whether he would recommend participation by the Defence Forces were such a request to come to the Government?

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is far too early to say that. We would have to go through a detailed threat and risk assessment before I would recommend sending troops anywhere to the Government. We are not even close to being at that stage. If the request were to come, we would take it seriously. Libya's situation is complex.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: Yes.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is a tragic story. We would like to do anything we can to assist in stabilising the unstable environment in Libya, but sending troops is a major decision and we will not take it before conducting a thorough risk assessment and reverting to the Government and the House. We are thinking ahead a little too far, though. No request has come through.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: Okay.

Proposed Legislation

129. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail** asked the Minister for Defence when he will publish the Red Cross (amendment) Bill; his views regarding recent events at the Irish Red Cross; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11643/15]

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: This goes to a matter that I have raised repeatedly on the Order of Business, that being, the publication of the Red Cross (amendment) Bill. Recent media reports suggest that all may not be well within the Red Cross, which emphasises the need for legislation on addressing governance issues to be introduced as a matter of urgency. I am particularly conscious of the fact that the secretary general and directors of finance and communications of the Red Cross have resigned recently. What is the Minister's feeling on these resignations and will he reassure the public as regards the governance systems that are in place in the Red Cross, which spends approximately €900,000 of taxpayers' money at home and more abroad?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The figure is a little less than that, but it is substantial. In accordance with a programme for Government commitment, my Department is continuing to progress a legal review of the basis, structures and governance of the Irish Red Cross. It is proposed that the existing primary legislation, which dates back to 1938, is to be repealed in new primary legislation that will redefine the relationship between the Government and the Irish Red Cross Society. This will further underpin the independence of the society. Draft heads of the Red Cross Bill are being finalised.

In recent years, the society has reformed its corporate governance structures and has in place a governance framework that meets the standards set by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The reforms introduced were facilitated by the legislative amendments made by this Government in 2012, which represented the most wide-ranging and fundamental set of changes to have occurred since the establishment of the society in 1939.

While the society is an independent charitable body corporate with full power to manage and administer its own affairs, it has without question made substantial improvements to its

governance framework in recent years. I am nevertheless also aware that, despite this progress, there is some concern that other aspects of governance have not moved as quickly and that this is an issue of ongoing debate within the society. As the Deputy has pointed out, three senior managers at the society have recently resigned from their positions. With the outgoing chairman's term of office coming to an end shortly, this is a time of change at the society in terms of its board, officers and management. It is important that the incoming administration find the right balance between the pace of reform and the obligation to manage the society in a way that meets the expectations of all of its stakeholders, including the Government, which commits approximately €860,000-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am sorry, but we only have time for one supplementary question.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: I will be brief. While I accept the Minister's answer, all is clearly not well. When three senior line managers in the organisation resign simultaneously, it indicates that there is a problem. That problem needs to be addressed urgently. The legislation to which the Minister referred needs to be introduced. It is not as though the Department of Defence is overrun in terms of the legislation it has in the pipeline. Indeed, no publication timelines have been indicated for any of its legislation. Will the Minister prioritise this matter, please?

Deputy Simon Coveney: Clearly, all is not well. That needs to be corrected. We are prioritising the legislation. The Deputy will see proof of that shortly when we finalise the heads of the legislation and I bring them to the Government.

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 or Members in each case: (1) Deputies Clare Daly and Mick Wallace - the deteriorating situation in Syria on the fourth anniversary of the conflict; (2) Deputy Terence Flanagan - the need for measures to be introduced to reduce the burden of child care costs; (3) Deputy Derek Keating - the need to address the lead-in time for registration of UK-trained nurses by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland; (4) Deputy Pat Breen - the need to support the GAA in seeking UNESCO intangible cultural heritage status for hurling; (5) Deputy Alan Farrell - the need to amend proposals to route construction traffic through Donabate town centre for the construction of the national forensic mental hospital; (6) Deputy Lucinda Creighton - the need to secure the future of the school completions programme and oversee its expansion by ring-fencing funding for the years to come; (7) Deputy Mattie McGrath - the decision to establish a full PRI scheme for end-of-life tyres in February 2015; (8) Deputy Frank Feighan - the status of the Garda station in Boyle, County Roscommon; (9) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - concerns regarding the delivery of the SICAP and the need to ensure a Connemara-based delivery of it, (10) Deputy Sean Fleming - concerns regarding the publication of a HIQA report into maternity services at the Midland Regional Hospital in Portlaoise, County Laois; (11) Deputy Denis Naughten - the need to ensure twilight premium payments for social care workers in Galway and Roscommon as is done in other parts of the country; (12) Deputy Regina Doherty - changes to funding of the Tús scheme; (13) Deputy Joe Costello - the need to ensure that Dunnes Stores engages

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in the industrial relations machinery available to avoid industrial action; (14) Deputy Barry Cowen - concerns that figures for 46,000 houses to be built in Dublin are exaggerated due to the lack of zoned land to meet the requirement; (15) Deputy Timmy Dooley - recent findings that road deaths tend to be significantly higher in counties with low numbers of penalty points; (16) Deputy Dessie Ellis - the housing strategy in light of accusations of spin doctoring; (17) Deputy Billy Kelleher - concerns regarding the publication of a HIQA report into maternity services at the Midland Regional Hospital in Portlaoise, County Laois; (18) Deputy Colm Keaveney - reports of an increase in cases where electroconvulsive therapy has been used against a patient's will; (19) Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - the lack of availability of inpatient beds for children with mental health difficulties; (20) Deputy Thomas Pringle - the need for a new school building for St. Mary's national school, Stranorlar, County Donegal; and (21) Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail - the need to provide clarity to those organisations in receipt of bridging funding under the scheme to support national organisations.

The matters raised by Deputies Clare Daly and Mick Wallace, Frank Feighan, Joe Costello and Timmy Dooley have been selected for discussion.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: I wish to raise the issue of the unedifying spectacle of the HSE threatening legal injunctions against the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, in the context of an investigation into quality, patient safety and standards of service at the Midland Regional Hospital, Portlaoise. The background to this is that, more than one year ago, the chief medical officer, Dr. Tony Holohan, conducted a report as a result of perinatal deaths at the hospital. His report, which was an initial conclusion, did not pull too many punches. He said that families and patients were treated in a poor and, at times, appalling manner, with limited respect, kindness, courtesy and consideration. He said that information that should have been given to families was withheld for no justifiable reason, poor outcomes that could likely have been prevented were identified and known by the hospital but not adequately and satisfactorily acted upon, the Portlaoise hospital maternity services, PHMS, could not be regarded as safe and sustainable under their governance arrangements, many organisations had information regarding the safety of the PHMS that could have led to earlier intervention had it been brought together, and the external support from and oversight by the HSE should have been stronger and more proactive.

As a result, the then Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, decided to initiate the HIQA investigation into the safety, quality and standards of service provided by the HSE to patients in the Midland Regional Hospital, a broader investigation in many ways. Over the past year, HIQA has been engaged in that exercise. Obviously, the then Minister believed that this was a serious matter, given the report of the chief medical officer. Eighty-five families have provided information to the HIQA investigation.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We need to be sensitive to the parents of babies who have died at the hospital and their absolute need for the full truth to emerge unhindered.

I put it to the Taoiseach that this could be a defining moment for HIQA, its independence and its capacity to investigate without being emasculated, undermined or, to put it more bluntly, told to “shut up” or to pull its punches behind the scenes. I have read the correspondence that has either been leaked or distributed by the HSE, which seems to believe that the investigation should be a joint process between HIQA and it. Today, the Minister spoke about a bilateral process having been agreed by both organisations - the entity that is investigating and the entity that is the subject matter of the investigation. There is a certain irreconcilability about such a process. I want the Taoiseach to confirm something to me. I do not think it is a case of the Government being detached from the issue. The Minister has not affirmed the independence of HIQA in the conduct of this very important investigation. Its independence is at stake. Does the Taoiseach accept and affirm the independence of the Health Information and Quality Authority in this investigation? Will he indicate when he now expects the report to be published?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this as it is a serious matter. It is a sensitive issue because it refers to parents and the birth of children. Yesterday the Minister publicly affirmed the absolute independence of HIQA. The letters from the HSE to which the Deputy referred have, according to Mr. Tony O’Brien, been published on its website and speak for themselves. It is regrettable that this has taken place in this fashion. It is not the first time that agencies of the State have taken legal action against each other. In the closing paragraph of the HSE letter it is stated that it will withdraw from what it calls the “extraordinary position” of having to seek advice of counsel in respect of going to court. The Minister has intervened to say it is not appropriate that taxpayers’ money should be used to settle a row between two agencies of State. I am glad that, following a meeting last week, a way forward has been found. As I said, the Minister has affirmed the absolute independence of HIQA and a way has been found to deal with this matter which involves sitting down and working it out. I cannot indicate when the report will be published. It would be wrong to publish what is currently a draft report, but the matter needs to be dealt with taking into account the responsibilities of the HSE, the independence of HIQA and the requirement to send a report to the Minister which he will receive, consider and publish.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The language used by the Taoiseach goes to the core of the problem. He has said they are “sitting down and working it out.” Working what out?

The Taoiseach: The difference between the findings and the assessment of the HSE.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I accept the need for fair procedure and due process but the idea now seems to be emerging that, behind the scenes, the two bodies are going to sit down and work it out. Work what out? The job of HIQA is to investigate and come to conclusions. These conclusions may be unpalatable to the HSE, but their full extent and range should not be up for grabs or “sorted out” behind the scenes. Are they going to go through the report conclusion by conclusion? Will HIQA’s report ultimately be fatally undermined by the bilateral process of working it out in this way? Will the Taoiseach elaborate?

The Taoiseach: HIQA’s report has not been accepted by the HIQA board yet.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It has not been put to it.

The Taoiseach: It has not been accepted by the HIQA board yet. It is a draft report. The investigating independent authority is HIQA.

Deputy Micheál Martin: With respect, the Taoiseach should change his terminology. He

is playing with words. It suggests the board is against the investigation.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy knows the procedure and should resume his seat. The Taoiseach to continue, without interruption.

The Taoiseach: The Minister has reaffirmed the independence of HIQA. This is a draft report which has not been finalised by the HIQA board. The HSE contests elements of what HIQA has put into the draft report and did intend to proceed to a court hearing on the matter. The Minister has said this is not appropriate and I agree with him. It is a case of the HSE answering the charges made in the draft HIQA report and when the discussions are concluded, I expect there will be a report that can be finalised, agreed and sent to the Minister for consideration and publication.

Deputy Micheál Martin: What the Taoiseach is saying is very worrying.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy might prefer the way it was done in the Department of Education during the years when, for example, taxpayers' money was used to go to court to ascertain the rights of children with particular challenges, but in this case HIQA has made a report which was initiated by the previous Minister for Health. It has made certain findings, but it is a draft, not a finalised report.

Deputy Sean Fleming: It is about protecting the senior staff and blaming the nurses.

The Taoiseach: The HSE is entitled to answer the charges made against it by HIQA, as the Deputy is well aware. That is the way the draft report will become a finalised report.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Who is the chairman of the board of HIQA?

The Taoiseach: HIQA has found against the HSE in a whole range of areas, as referred to in the published correspondence.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We do not know that; we do not know anything about it.

The Taoiseach: A way has been found to have this proceed without a court case.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The entity being investigated is selectively leaking what is going on.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy never listens.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Is there any political influence on the board of HIQA?

An Ceann Comhairle: I remind Deputies that there is a system in place for these debates.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: The Deputy should be asked to withdraw that comment.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Government has claimed for months that the anti-water charges campaign is on its last legs, but the huge turnout of citizens at the right to water rally in this city last Saturday gives the lie to these claims. Contrary to the Government's assertions, citizens are more determined than ever on this issue. They have told the Government that they cannot and will not pay its water charge and that Irish Water is a toxic quango that should be abolished. Instead of listening to all of the warnings and the hundreds of thousands who have demonstrated and instead of scrapping water charges, water charge protestors were jailed, local authorities

were forced to hand over details of tenants, while landlords were forced to do the same. The Government wasted €650,000 on a new advertising campaign and gave away €85 million of taxpayers' money to private consultants, as well as wasting €539 million on water meters. Now the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, is threatening to take water charges from people's wages or social welfare payments. Does the Taoiseach support the Minister in his latest threat? Will the Taoiseach explain the legal basis for the process he has indicated? Will he tell the Dáil how the Government intends to distinguish between those who cannot pay the water tax and those who will not pay?

Deputy Eric Byrne: Who will not pay? Deputy Gerry Adams will not pay.

The Taoiseach: I am happy to note that 1.23 million people have signed up with Irish Water.

Deputy Sean Fleming: They have signed up for the conservation grant.

The Taoiseach: Some 250,000 are not Irish Water customers, but they will qualify for assistance from the Department of Social Protection. This morning I listened to one of the Deputy's left-wing colleagues talking about paying for this through transaction taxes, corporation taxes and general taxation and his own party has put forward propositions that are wildly off the mark.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is not the only party to be wildly off the mark.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: We are already paying for water.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy says we are already paying for it.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Yes, we are.

The Taoiseach: It is a case of "I'm all right Jack," but what about the people who have inferior water supplies? What about the people who have no sewerage systems?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Try fixing the leaks.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is not the leader of his party yet. Will he settle down, please? Deputy Gerry Adams is well able to look after himself.

The Taoiseach: I would be interested to hear how Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett is going to solve the problems in his own area where thousands of houses appear to be connected to a water supply via lead piping. This is not satisfactory, which is why we need an entity that is able to borrow separately from the Government and invest to fix supplies for the future. The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government is dealing with the problem. He has not yet brought his propositions to the Government for consideration and decision, but he will do so shortly. The Government will ensure that the legislation sets out the criteria for full compliance with the law in respect of the modest contribution that is involved of €1.15 or €3 per week depending on the number of persons in the household. That will come before Government in the near future and it will consider the propositions from the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government and make its decision.

As the Deputy is aware, in cases where people genuinely have a real difficulty in paying, there are always opportunities to give assistance, as has applied to schemes over the years.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What schemes are those?

30 January 2008

The Taoiseach: The Government listened very carefully to the many thousands of people who expressed their anxiety and concern and reduced the charges to a very modest contribution of €1.15 and €3 per week. The Cabinet will consider and decide on the propositions from the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government in terms of the legislation to ensure full compliance here.

As Deputy Adams is aware, the prices have been set out to 2019 and no other utility facility has been priced in that way with regard to water rates. For the people all over the country, the 1.29 million who have signed up, the compliant number of those who are Irish Water customers, they have a sense that this is an important element of our country moving forward. For those who decide that they will not pay, they are not being fair to those who understand that water is a precious commodity. To have high quality water and proper sewerage schemes requires investment on a major scale and it cannot be done under the discredited system that we have had for the last 40 years.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I asked the Taoiseach three questions and he ignored two of them. I will repeat them. Does the Taoiseach support the Minister, Deputy Kelly, in his latest effort to impose attachment orders, and how does the Government propose to distinguish between those who cannot pay and those will not pay his water tax?

Deputy Eric Byrne: People like the Deputy are on the public record as saying they will not pay, and the Deputy is one of them. He is a sponger.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Byrne, please settle down. The Deputy is back in business now, he has had his holiday. Deputy Adams, please proceed.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There was a time Eric, it was back in 1985 I think-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Deputy had a ticket in his back pocket.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I remember when he was very poor.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It was in 1985, 1986, 1987.

Deputy Ray Butler: In fairness, he was going to pay but he changed his mind.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Butler, the Taoiseach does not need your help at this stage.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Deputy used to get cheap flights to Cuba; they were flights from Shannon to Cuba.

(Interruptions).

Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Adams, please proceed.

Deputy Gerry Adams: It is interesting that this latest threat to working people is coming from the labour wing of the Fine Gael Party and the heckling is coming from one of his side-kicks but maybe the Taoiseach will answer this question because it was also revealed at the weekend that there are no records and no minutes of important meetings that were held in 2012 between the former Minister, Phil Hogan-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: It is a bit like the kangaroo courts.

Deputy Gerry Adams: -----and key players in Irish Water. In the light of the scandal around the huge sums of public money spent on consultants, will the Taoiseach agree that this is an extraordinary revelation? During Irish Water's first six months, from April to September 2012, 23 meetings took place between Bord Gáis and the Department but only ten were minuted. There were four meetings between the former Minister, Phil Hogan, and the Bord Gáis officials, two of them with the Bord Gáis chairwoman. It is certainly not creditable that meetings took place about the establishment of a major new public utility but no notes were taken at any of these meetings. Has the Taoiseach spoken to the former Minister, Phil Hogan, about this? Does he agree that this scenario is unacceptable? Will he also agree, given the issues at stake, that an Oireachtas inquiry into this entire matter is needed? Will he please answer my earlier two questions?

The Taoiseach: I support the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government and I await him coming before Cabinet with his proposals to ensure there is fairness and equality of treatment here and compliance in respect of the modest contribution that is required for water. Obviously, we will consider and decide on the proposals the Minister will bring to Cabinet. I support him in what he is trying to do to provide a proper high quality water supply for businesses and consumers alike and to provide our country with an investment capacity to deal with the grossly inferior sewerage systems that apply in many parts of the country.

In respect of meetings that have taken place, let me assure the Deputy that the independent regulatory authority has signed off on elements of this in terms of the set up costs for Irish Water. The Cabinet approved all the major decisions in respect of Irish Water and the Minister has already answered many questions on that.

As I said to the Deputy, the position is that 1.23 million have signed up and I hope many more will. About 250,000 of those are not directly customers of Irish Water but they will have the opportunity to claim the assistance support from the Department of Social Protection and, as in any other scheme, equality and fairness is very important here.

As the Deputy is well aware, a few months ago he was very much in support of making his payments because he realised the importance of good, clean water but he listened to the populist drum and changed his tack.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I asked about having an Oireachtas inquiry into the matter.

The Taoiseach: The Minister is quite prepared to answer any questions here or at the Oireachtas committee. There is no need for a formal investigation because these matters have been signed off on both by Cabinet and the regulatory authority, and the Minister has answered questions right along the line in this regard.

Deputy Tom Fleming: Post offices play a crucial role in the social and economic life of our communities throughout Ireland. Recently, we have seen the closure of small shops, schools, Garda stations and other community focus points, particularly in the rural areas. Post offices are the largest retail network in the country, with 1,150 post offices employing 3,700 people. Some 1,100 of those post offices are operated by postmasters who are locally based small and medium businesses providing employment, facilitating economic activity and providing community engagement. There is a world class IT structure in place in these post offices, which is technically capable of being of the same quality as what is in place in the GPO in Dublin. That spells out that they could offer the same services as those provided in the central post offices.

Also, 1,7 million customers avail of the services of post offices each week.

Recently, we have seen thousands of letters coming out from the office of the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection encouraging people to change from their post office financial services to the banks. That will have a major detrimental effect-----

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, please, Deputy. Thank you.

Deputy Tom Fleming: -----in that people are being encouraged to receive their payments directly to their bank accounts rather than collecting them in the post office. We are all well aware that more than 30% of the post office business is social welfare payments and taking those crucial services from post offices will only accelerate closures.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to put his question.

Deputy Tom Fleming: Also, many people do not realise that they will pay the banks for this service while there is no cost for the service in the post office. Will the Taoiseach talk to the Tánaiste and the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Alex White, about this and intervene directly? This should not be allowed to continue. Will the Taoiseach recognise that the post office network is a national asset and ensure its future by making it the provider of choice and the front office for all Government services, for instance, for the payment of the various local authority charges-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is way over time.

Deputy Tom Fleming: -----motor tax, hospital charges etc.-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Government does not care.

Deputy Tom Fleming: -----and secure the role of the post offices in delivering all social welfare payments into the future.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: These are some of the letters that have been sent out.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Tom Fleming for his question. This is an important issue in rural Ireland. The world in which we live has changed very much over the past ten to 30 years. Some 24 post offices were closed since 2010 and 197 closed between 2006 and 2010, figures that speak for themselves. Post offices were an important social element of rural Ireland. In many cases, post offices were part of a small shop, a supermarket, a petrol filling station or other facilities that grew over the years. In other cases, there was just a post office in the corner room of a house. Over the years, postmasters and postmistresses moved on and things changed with the digital and electronic worlds. The Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Alex White, appointed a group to look at this. The terms of reference are to examine the potential from existing and new Government and commercial business that could be transacted through the post office, identify new business opportunities for the post office network, taking into account what is happening internationally, to engage as necessary with the public sector, commercial bodies and other interested parties in pursuit of the objectives, and to prepare an interim and final report for the Minister by the autumn. In so far as the Government is concerned, it has no intention of closing any post offices.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Why is Wonder Woman sending out letters?

The Taoiseach: Opportunities are being examined for other business to be done in post offices, even to the extent of people being able to pay water contributions through the post office system. Postmasters and postmistresses agreed on charging a fee for it, which was less than what they originally sought. The recipients of social welfare payments from the Department of Social Protection are entitled to say where the payments should be made. Unfortunately-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: They are being told.

An Ceann Comhairle: Members should settle down. This is the question asked by Deputy Tom Fleming.

Deputy Noel Grealish: We are backing him up.

The Taoiseach: -----the vast majority of people in receipt of payments from the Department of Social Protection choose to have it paid directly into their bank accounts when they are asked the question. That is their choice. The Department will follow those instructions.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: They are being told.

Deputy Seamus Healy: They are sending letters asking people to change.

The Taoiseach: If everyone said they wanted the payments made into post office accounts, that is what the Department would do. It is the choice of the recipient. If Deputy Seamus Healy thinks it is different, let him give me the evidence of it. The vast majority of people, when asked the question where they want pensions or social welfare payments paid, they ask for them to be put into bank accounts, not post office accounts. The Department follows this answer.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: They are being told.

Deputy John Halligan: We have all been at meetings where people say that they want to keep their post offices.

An Ceann Comhairle: Members should stay quiet.

The Taoiseach: The Government values the network of post offices and has written to people to say that any new business opportunities or options will be followed through. Mr. Bobby Kerr is hugely experienced in this area and he will report to the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Alex White, by the autumn on the terms of reference as set out. Some 24 were closed since 2010, with 197 closed between 2006 and 2010. The figures speak for themselves and, of that 24, the Deputy will understand the circumstances that apply in a number of those cases throughout rural Ireland.

Deputy Tom Fleming: That is not what I am hearing about in public meetings in my county. People are at the end of their tether and they are worried and concerned about the attitude of An Post to the local communities.

Another retrograde step is that several services have been transferred to multiples on the edges of towns. People can post parcels and buy stamps at PostPoint outlets and they can pay their bills. This is causing further erosion and undermining of services in post offices. Recently, in the town of Listowel, there was a movement of the post office on the main street in the centre of town to a supermarket multiple at the far end of the town. This takes away the footfall from the centre of the main town area. This is detrimental to the overall trading situation in the

town for all businesses.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should put a question.

Deputy Tom Fleming: The move was kept under wraps and there was no transparency for local people. This should not be allowed to happen under the public procurement criteria. I ask the Taoiseach to ensure this will not be allowed to happen again. There should be public consultation in future because this was done by stealth. It should not be allowed to happen. I ask the Taoiseach to intervene so that there will be no closures of post offices where there are pending closures until the Bobby Kerr report is made available. I ask that this be done immediately.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Tom Fleming is well aware that the only people who can keep open the post offices are those who use them. Unfortunately, in many areas around the country, people prefer to go to the nearest town and do their business. It is a fact of life. I represent the county where this has happened on many occasions. From first-hand experience, I know that when a postmaster or postmistress comes to retirement age or no longer wants to do the job and where the families have no interest in it, if no one else from the local area is prepared to take on something that involves quite an amount of work for very little return-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: They close them.

The Taoiseach: I came across a case where someone said they would take it on but went back on it six weeks later. It is not true to say that. The only people who can keep the post office open are those who use its services. The community must say it wants the post office, values it and will use its services. As far as the Government is concerned, we want to see post offices being able to do more business.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: What about the letters?

The Taoiseach: The opportunity for that exists and if all of those who receive social protection payments in a parish were to say that they want the money to be paid into the post office instead of the bank account, it would change the nature of things. Deputy Tom Fleming is also aware of the volume of material coming into the country from outside, which passes through the post offices. The Government does not want to close post offices and the figures, 24 post offices closed since 2010, reflect this. It is important the network is kept alive but it will not be kept alive by people talking about it in here. Local communities will keep post offices alive.

Deputy Robert Troy: If we take away services, how can people use them?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Tom Fleming raised an important point that consultation in advance might be an important element of what the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Alex White, is considering. In other words, if the economics of a post office are in serious decline and it is not being used, the community should be informed before a decision is taken to close it down. That is the kind of consultation needed and the community can then see that it will lose its post office unless people change their ways and use it.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Use it or lose it.

The Taoiseach: It is an unfortunate fact of life and, while we wish to keep them open, communities must support post offices in order for that to happen.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: A disgraceful answer.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: Deputy Tom Fleming has the post office vote wrapped up.

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Cabinet Committee Meetings

1. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on social policy last met. [44835/14]

2. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on social policy last met. [46771/14]

3. **Deputy Joe Higgins** asked the Taoiseach when a meeting of the Cabinet committee on social policy was last held. [3363/15]

4. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on social policy last met. [5533/15]

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Higgins sends his apologies. He will not be present for these questions.

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 4, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on social policy and public service reform last met on 23 February.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Baineann an fochoiste Rialtais maidir le beartas sóisialta le go leor rudaí. Ní féidir liom é a rá go cinnte, ach sílim go gcuireann sé isteach ar shaol achan duine. Ba mhaith liom labhairt faoi chuid acu go háirithe agus ceisteanna a chur ar an Taoiseach. Tá mé ag caint faoin mobility allowance scheme. The Government closed that scheme and brought an end to the motorised transport grant in February 2013. This had an impact on 5,000 citizens and their families. The Ombudsman had advised that the scheme and the grant were both in breach of the Equal Status Act and the Disability Act as a result of the fact that some citizens, namely, those over 66 years of age, were excluded from them. Instead of changing social policy and the relevant legislation in order to ensure that all affected citizens would be eligible for the scheme and the grant, the Government closed both, thereby actively discriminating against disabled citizens. I remind the Taoiseach that this occurred in February 2013. The then Ombudsman, Ms Emily O'Reilly, described the Government's decision as a bolt out of the blue and stated that it had given no indication that it intended to scrap the scheme or the grant. At the time in question, the then Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, and his Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, informed an Oireachtas committee that a review group would be established to examine the scheme and the grant and bring them into line with the law.

I mí Feabhra 2013, dúirt an Taoiseach leis an Dáil nach raibh aon rogha ag an Rialtas ach deireadh a chur leis an deontas do dhaoine nua ar an scéim. Dúirt sé go mbeadh an Rialtas ag obair ar scéim nua a bhunú don chéad cheithre mhí eile. Anois, tá dhá bhliain ann in áit an cheithre mhí sin. What is the reason for the delay in respect of this matter? Two years have passed but the Taoiseach originally promised that the position would be resolved in four

months. At the time to which I refer, the then Minister for Health-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I apologise for interrupting but the Deputy is stretching the parameters of the original question quite a bit. The latter relates to when the Cabinet committee on social policy last met. The questions he is now posing relate to a totally separate matter.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Will the Ceann Comhairle advise me on how to proceed?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should table a parliamentary question containing exactly the words he is using now. I cannot allow a general debate on when the Cabinet committee on social policy last met.

Deputy Gerry Adams: That is fair enough. The Ceann Comhairle will appreciate, however, that there are hundreds of citizens who are being disadvantaged-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I appreciate that but-----

Deputy Gerry Adams: -----and the Government stated two years ago that it would resolve this problem in four months. What conclusions have been reached and what decisions have been taken in respect of this issue? When I previously asked the Taoiseach about this matter I was informed that it would be addressed by means of the health (transport support) Bill. That legislation was supposed to be produced a long time ago but it has not yet been published. It is included on the Government's list of proposed legislation but there is no date provided in respect of its publication. The Dáil can sit through the night in order to resolve issues relating to bankers but drags its feet when it comes to legislation for the disabled. I have raised this issue on a consistent basis with the Taoiseach and I am seeking to discover whether the Cabinet committee on social policy has given any consideration to speeding up the process relating to the health (transport support) Bill. Does the Taoiseach have any idea when that Bill will be published?

The Taoiseach: I already answered the question the Deputy originally tabled. One could ask 1,000 questions in respect of issues of detail and that which he has now posed obviously relates to a serious matter for those affected. The scheme involved was ended for good reason and those who were in receipt of payments continue to be paid. I understand it is expected that a replacement scheme to deal with those who are currently in receipt of payment and those who may be placed in that particular category will be forthcoming. A great deal of work has been done on this matter but it will be after the summer before the new scheme emerges. However, I may be wrong in that regard because I do not have the relevant information in my possession. I will request an update from the Minister and then communicate further with the Deputy in respect of this matter. This is a complex issue and it was necessary to end the scheme because people were being excluded from it. I will advise the House and Deputy Adams further on this matter when I receive an update in respect of it.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is approximately five months since these questions were originally tabled. It would be useful, therefore, if the Taoiseach could indicate the number of occasions on which the Cabinet committee on social policy met during the past 12 months and when it last met prior to the tabling of these questions. Questions to the Taoiseach only take place once a week now as a result of a decision made by the Government when it came to office. Communities in Dublin and provincial towns throughout the country are faced with the brutal impact of a growing drugs problem. This is one of the many instances where the Government has ignored a problem until it has become a crisis. There is no question that this is now a crisis

in many parts of the country. Irrespective of whatever else the Cabinet committee on social policy is doing, it seems to have ignored issues relating to the abuse of drugs in certain communities and to the lack of co-ordination and accountability in terms of providing the relevant services.

One of the key developments in this area in the past was the appointment of a Minister of State who sat at the Cabinet table and who had responsibility for bringing the Departments of Justice and Equality, Health, Education and Skills and Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs together in a co-ordinated way in order that they might deal with the drugs issue through the drugs task forces, the RAPID programme, etc. This had an impact and the relevant Minister of State also had responsibility for developing the national drugs strategy and matters of that nature. Why did the Taoiseach not appoint such a Minister of State in the past four years and why has he not afforded this issue priority? Will he indicate whether the Cabinet committee on social policy will be meeting shortly in order to give this matter urgent consideration?

Another key point which springs from my original question relates to the fact that two years ago the Government took the decision to stop producing social impact figures when publishing the budget. In the preceding ten to 15 years, figures relating to the potential social impact of budgetary measures were provided when the budget was published. The objective in this regard was to facilitate transparency in respect of the social impact of the budget. It appears that two years ago the Government ended the practice of supplying the figures to which I refer in a bid to cover up what most objective people and institutions outside this House would agree have been deeply unfair and regressive budgets. The number of children living in poverty is damning and should not be tolerated.

Will the Cabinet committee on social policy meet in advance of the announcement of the spring statement in order to ensure that social impact figures are published? In the context of the spring statement, it seems that for the first time in our history the full might of the public and civil service will be used to draft a political manifesto. The latter will have no status other than as a document designed to win or buy an election. In a typically immodest piece in *The Irish Times*, the Taoiseach indicated that he will, by means of the spring statement, be setting out a programme for the next five years. Will he provide an assurance that he will supply full information on income distribution as part of the spring statement? Will he also provide the basic information required in order to assess the social impact of what is going to be proposed? After all, the purpose of the Cabinet committee on social policy is to assess that impact. I sat on a Cabinet committee which dealt with social inclusion and which frequently deliberated on issues relating to the proofing of Cabinet decisions.

The Taoiseach: The Cabinet committee on social policy met three times in 2011, four times in 2012, seven times in 2013 and four times in the first half of 2014. It was then merged with the Cabinet committee on public service reform in September of last year. A further six meetings have taken place since then, four in the second half of 2014 and two so far this year. The latter were held on 26 January and 23 February, respectively.

4 o'clock

I am giving consideration to the question of appointing a Minister to deal with drugs but not the appointment of a new Minister. We have already set the number of Ministers. The Minister for Health chairs the oversight forum on drugs which monitors implementation and progress and works to address difficulties that may arise. The Department of Health is preparing a na-

tional drugs strategy for the period after 2016 and this process will involve consultations with all sectors and persons involved.

With regard to the figures for the social impact, in the process of preparing the budget to be announced in October we will issue the spring statement by the end of April. That statement will address the general environment of business and taxation, including the environment into which the country will move for the coming period, and set out our views covering several years. Towards the summer there will be engagement with the various sectors of Irish society on the generality of the budget and the submissions made. We will then announce the budget in October.

The European Commission has confirmed that the Irish economy is the fastest growing in the European Union. That is to be welcomed, but the challenge for the Government and the people is to see the effect filter down to every family and person who are asking me why, if we are proceeding at this rate, they are not seeing it. Our challenge is to make this happen. The more people who are working, the better the contribution to each locality and individual.

In regard to the social impact, the first thing the Government did was to reverse the cut in the minimum wage, which affected 300,000 people. This had a social impact in its own way. We have established the low pay commission which has begun its work by holding a range of meetings. I expect it to report to the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, and the Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Gerald Nash, by July and the Government will respond to it in October. We will take into account the impact on employers if the Government makes a decision in that regard. I have also pointed out that owing to the last budget there are now 480,000 people who are exempt from the universal social charge. With the approval of the Minister for Finance and the Government, we hope to bring that figure to 500,000 this year. I am not going to predict the decision of the Cabinet in respect of the budget, but as the figures are analysed in the coming months, it is the Government's intention to reduce the burden of taxation on people. This has had an impact for several years, particularly for those on incomes of between €30,000 and €70,000.

I do not object to Deputy Micheál Martin's question about basic information being provided.

Deputy Micheál Martin: On the social impact.

The Taoiseach: That will have an impact socially, or deal with the social impact.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It always used to happen.

The Taoiseach: That is a discussion for the House to have in the run-in to the budget. I do not see any reason the Minister for Finance would not be able to set out for the House the options he must consider in preparing his budget. The same would apply to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. It is something I consider eminently feasible.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am amazed at the infrequency of meetings of the social policy committee. I would have thought it would be meeting at least on a weekly basis and, frankly, in emergency session when it comes to what, by any standard, is a central matter of special policy, namely, the chronic and daily deteriorating situation in social housing provision. Today representatives from council estates in Dublin, Limerick and Cork complained to the European Commission about the abysmally unhealthy and completely inadequate quality of

social housing in council estates in our biggest cities. The Taoiseach has gone out of his way to be the best boy in the European class when it comes to doing what Angela Merkel says, paying back bondholders and doing what the financial markets want him to do, but he is certainly not the best boy in the European class when it comes to the quality of social housing provision in Ireland if the case being pursued by these communities is anything to go by. Should the social policy committee not be meeting to discuss this issue and should the Taoiseach not be ashamed of his Government for its abysmal failure to address the social housing crisis?

There has been a considerable spin put on this issue. Last October the biggest social housing programme in the history of the State was announced. I have since been contacted by my local authority on an almost weekly basis to ask whether there is any additional money for social housing, but there is not one cent. Only 19 council houses will be built in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown next year, even though 1,200 people joined the council's housing list last year, bringing the total to 5,200. In the period since I entered this Dáil, the average waiting time on a council housing list has increased from eight to 15 years. In other words, some people will never get a council house. I am dealing with families who are facing unbelievable situations. One man who was recently diagnosed with terminal cancer has been couch surfing for several weeks. He is an emergency case, but he has no idea when he will be housed. Another woman with two children, one of whom has special needs, has been homeless for the past year. She is moving from couch surfing to emergency accommodation which is not guaranteed from one week to the next. She does not even know where she will sleep tomorrow. She is No. 1 on the priority list, but the council cannot even state when she will be given a council house. Someone who is No. 100 or 150 on the list is looking at a wait of seven or eight years before being housed. Despite all of the announcements made last October, not one extra cent has been provided for the budget for social housing provision. That is just in one county. God knows what the situation is like in the rest of the country.

What is the social policy committee discussing, if not the provision of social housing during the greatest social housing crisis in the modern history of the State? Working class communities are going to the European Court of Justice because of the Government's failure to take this issue seriously. What is the committee doing? Is it going to discuss the social housing crisis and are we going to have real policy change when it comes to dealing with the social housing emergency?

The Taoiseach: The assertion Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett made at the start of his contribution is typical of him. I have no intention of looking for credit or thanks. People who do so in this business follow a fool's philosophy. My job is not about being best boy in class; it is about dealing with the legacy of an unprecedented mess that was left to be sorted out. I am proud that the Government has worked with people here and that because of the sacrifices made we are in a better place than we were four years ago. I am proud of the fact that 80,000 to 90,000 new jobs have been created and that we have opened up new markets for Irish companies which are thriving and exporting and creating jobs and contributing to economic expansion. I am also hopeful the recently increased economic confidence which is evident will be harnessed in everybody's interests. I accept that some people will say they hear about 5% growth and a 1.3% rate of interest on borrowings and that we have been able to buy out €18 billion loans from the IMF at cheaper rates but that this does not mean anything to them because they do not see the benefits at the end of the week. It was only in the most recent budget that the Government was in a position to start to reduce the burden of taxation, which we hope to be able to continue.

I am not bound to tell the Deputy what the committee discussed, but at its most recent meet-

ing it considered the progress report on public service reform, the new ICT strategy for the public service to make it more efficient and more responsive to people, the extensive plan brought forward by the Government to address homelessness to deal with a range of unprecedented issues, in Dublin in particular, and the issue of domestic, sexual and gender based violence.

The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government has set out clearly the scale of the Government's decision to deal with social housing and people who have become homeless because of an inability to pay rent, rent increases by landlords or the shortage of housing. The figure of €4 billion, for the period to 2020, is part of his direction to local authorities to allocate a percentage of housing to social housing and the homeless. Allocations of moneys will be made to individual local authorities which will set out and commence implementation of their building programmes to provide quality social housing.

No matter what we do, houses will not be built until we have a process in place that will provide money for building and until planning issues have been dealt with and confirmed in order that competent contractors can move in and start building. A contractor must have a line of finance available in order to be able to build. As the Deputy is aware, in previous years when 100% of funding was put up by the bank, profits were made by builders who then moved to the next build. That is not how the system operates now. Contractors must now provide 40% of the funding and will not receive the type of funding that used to apply. The programme is in place to provide for the provision of social and affordable houses, but the issue is how we can make this happen. I respect the case raised by the Deputy of a person who is facing a number of challenges in this regard and feel sure the Deputy has spoken to the local authority about it. The authority concerned has already been allocated money. Therefore, if the person in question is first on the priority list, it is a matter for the director of services in the local authority to tell the Deputy when a house will be provided.

We are now in a situation where the scale of the problem has been identified. We have allocated a serious amount of public moneys for the next few years and the process must now be put in place to ensure housing will be provided for the homeless and those who are made homeless and to ensure quality social housing is provided all over the country. That is a big challenge for the Government, but I hope we can meet it successfully.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have spent almost 25 minutes on these four questions on when the last meeting of the Cabinet sub-committee on social policy took place. There are 118 questions altogether to the Taoiseach and the next four or five deal with a Heads of State meeting that took place last October. I urge Members to get through these questions in order that we can move some way down the list. Otherwise, this debate is out of control. We spend far too much time on a limited number of questions. I, therefore, ask Members for their co-operation. I will allow them to ask a quick supplementary question but ask them not to make speeches in order that we can move on to the next questions.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I will be as quick as I can. The Taoiseach was unable to answer my question. He is right to say many questions could have been asked about this social policy issue. Questions could have been asked about social housing and cuts in respite care services or the numbers of home help hours, etc. However, my question was focused on the fact that in 2013 the Government had closed two schemes because it had been advised they were in breach of the Equal Status Act and the Disability Act. As a result, 5,000 citizens with disabilities have been denied supports. This concerns equality proofing, an issue I have been raising since I became a Member of the House. Why has there not been equality proofing? It is now two years

since the schemes were closed, but the Taoiseach does not know when the issue will be resolved for the citizens involved.

Deputy Micheál Martin: In his supplementary reply to me the Taoiseach said the Cabinet sub-committee on social policy had met on 23 February, but he subsequently informed me that the sub-committee had been merged with the Cabinet sub-committee on public service reform. Therefore, the questions predate the merger and the Taoiseach should have spoken about the new merged entity in his response. This is important because it involves a relegation of social policy at Cabinet level. In some respects, it is difficult to reconcile the idea that the Cabinet sub-committee on social policy would be included with the Cabinet sub-committee most responsible for the cuts affecting social policy, namely, the sub-committee dealing with public service reform and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

It is clear that the Government lacks a strong social dimension. That the social policy sub-committee has been merged with that on public service reform and that the Government has ended up mixing ICT strategy in the public service with social policy is a mistake. I suggest housing issues should be dealt with separately. The Minister has, for example, made a hames of the issue of rent allowance, which has caused untold misery for families across the country. A properly functioning Cabinet sub-committee on social policy would have alerted the Government and not allowed that to happen. The impact of the decision on rent allowance has been to shove families into appalling and low standard accommodation. If there was a proper social input at Cabinet level, the cut in the number of career guidance hours in schools would not have happened, nor would we have had the discretionary medical cards debacle. I put it to the Taoiseach that social policy deserves to be deal with by a separate Cabinet sub-committee. Is it correct that the meeting on 23 February was a meeting of the merged committees?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: My question was also focused on a particular issue.

Deputy Peter Mathews: May I ask a question?

An Ceann Comhairle: I will call the Deputy in one minute. He has not submitted a question, but the Deputies who are speaking have.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I am a Member of Parliament.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should table a question like everybody else.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The Chair asked for supplementary questions and I have something to offer.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach's response to my question does not give me confidence about the urgency with which the sub-committee is dealing with what is probably the most important issue of social policy facing the country, the provision of social housing. We have an unprecedented crisis in social housing and have now exposed a widespread crisis in the quality of existing social housing which is substandard to the point where it is not safe for the huge numbers of families living in it. Will the sub-committee treat this as an emergency issue? Will it show some urgency and acknowledge that social policy is failing disastrously? The facts speak for themselves. It is getting worse by the minute and there is no sign whatsoever, notwithstanding grandiose announcements that were made nearly six months ago, and nothing is changing on the ground. I want the Taoiseach to say what he is doing about it and what is this committee doing to push up the priority of what is probably the major social crisis facing

this country.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The key question for this Parliament to address is social policy and not just social policy but social awareness, social conscience. The hard-hitting concrete items that have been raised by the leaders of the two main Opposition parties and by Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett, put flesh and blood on the arid statistics. I remind the Taoiseach that the social impact - those are his words - of 100,000 mortgages under stress, of which 40,000 are under extreme distress, represents in the first instance about 250,000 human beings who are Irish people, of which 100,000 are children. Here we are legislating for and having a referendum on children's protection and there are 100,000 children in households under trauma distress. The teachers, doctors and the GPs can talk about this-----

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Peter Mathews: -----and these children are in addition to the 90,000 on the housing waiting list which represents about 220,000 human beings. These are our fellow citizens. These people are traumatised by stress. It underscores-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. The Taoiseach to reply.

Deputy Peter Mathews: It underscores the necessity for Deputy Michael McGrath's Bill-----

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not the time for speeches. Please resume your seat, Deputy.

Deputy Peter Mathews: -----and Deputy Penrose's Bill to take away the veto from the banks.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please resume your seat, Deputy. This is Question Time.

Deputy Peter Mathews: The banking inquiry tomorrow is a farce. On the Order Paper-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Resume your seat, Deputy, or else I will have to ask you again to leave the House.

Deputy Peter Mathews: Please give me one minute. That will be twice. Is it exit Tuesday for me every Tuesday?

An Ceann Comhairle: This is Question Time-----

Deputy Peter Mathews: Yes, and I am asking questions-----

An Ceann Comhairle: ----- and it is not for statements. The Taoiseach to reply to the Deputies who have put questions.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I do not know whether it is worth being a Member of this Parliament-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Put down your questions like everybody else.

Deputy Peter Mathews: -----when one is not a member of a massive majority Government. Will the Taoiseach give me some of his time to expand a little, please? Otherwise it is a farce.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sit down, please Deputy.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I will.

The Taoiseach: I normally give Deputy Mathews time in the corridor when I meet him, as he is well aware.

Deputy Peter Mathews: Fired from committees, fired from everything.

The Taoiseach: In reply to Deputy Martin's question, I have given the dates and the number of meetings that took place. The reason the Cabinet committee on social policy merged with the Cabinet committee on public service reform last September was because it provides a strong cross-departmental co-ordination in a number of areas such as social inclusion, poverty reduction-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: To cut back.

The Taoiseach: -----service delivery, including having a far greater coherence between the range of Departments dealing with many of-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is the Department responsible for cutting medical cards. Medical card probity?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy, we are trying to move on here.

The Taoiseach: -----those target groups and to support the provision and the implementation of the public service reform agenda which is driven by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. That Cabinet committee has the task of driving the social policy and the public service reform commitments in the programme for Government.

In respect of social policy, the Cabinet committee ensures focus on the fairness objectives and the social policy set out in the Government for National Recovery 2011-2016. It assesses and presents the Government's consideration options or any alternative measures to achieve a better outcome or to address barriers to achieving social policy priorities. It also guides the development and the management of strategies and responses across Departments in the social policy area. It considers the impact of programmes or policy measures on disadvantaged or vulnerable groups, including emerging vulnerable groups, and puts forward different alternatives or new approaches as is necessary. It prioritises service delivery, especially through cross-departmental action so that services and programmes for vulnerable people and groups actually achieve the outcomes set out for them.

On public service reform, the committee supports the development and implementation of the programmes set up by the Minister. It implements the Haddington Road agreement which has resulted in substantial savings and improved productivity. It implements the Civil Service renewal plan which was designed to maximise the performance of the Civil Service while increasing its responsiveness. It progresses the public service reform plan which has seen good progress since 2014.

The social housing strategy to which Deputy Boyd Barrett referred, was published last November. It provides for three things: to provide 35,000 new social housing units over a six-year period at a cost of €3.8 billion, involving about 29,000 jobs in construction-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There is no sign of them. It is a mirage.

The Taoiseach: Second, it supports up to 75,000 households through an enhanced private rental sector and third, it sets out a road map to accommodate everyone - 90,000 households on the housing waiting lists - by 2020. The delivery of the strategy is in two phases. The first phase one is a target of 18,000 housing units and 32,000 HAP or RAS units by the end of 2017. The second phase two is a target of 17,000 additional housing units and 43,000 HAP or RAS units by the end of 2020. Deputy Boyd Barrett will note that at least we have identified the scale of the problem and we have put the allocation of money in place to deal with it and we have set out the road map. I advise Deputy Boyd Barrett to go to the chief executive officer of his local authority area-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They tell us they have no money.

The Taoiseach: -----and ask them if they have received their allocation from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, in respect of their social housing commitment, when they propose to commence and when they propose to deal with the first priority on the list which is that good lady to whom the Deputy referred.

International Summits

5. **Deputy Joe Higgins** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the Asia-Europe meeting, in Milan, Italy, in October 2014. [44903/14]

6. **Deputy Joe Higgins** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on meetings he had with other Heads of State and Government during the recent Asia-Europe meeting summit. [44904/14]

7. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach his views on the Asia-Europe meeting he attended in October 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46769/14]

8. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his participation in the tenth Asia-Europe meeting, in Milan, Italy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2148/15]

9. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the tenth Asia-Europe summit meeting in Milan, Italy, in October 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7792/15]

An Ceann Comhairle: With regard to Questions Nos. 5 and 6, the Deputy is not present and he sends his apologies.

The Taoiseach: I propose to answer Questions Nos. 5 to 9, inclusive, together.

The tenth ASEM summit of Heads of State and Government took place in Milan on 16 and 17 October 2014, on the theme of Responsible Partnership for Sustainable Growth and Security. The format of the summit involved two plenary sessions and a discussion session. I attended and contributed to the first plenary, Promoting Financial and Economic Cooperation through Enhanced Europe-Asia Connectivity. The Minister of State for European Affairs and Data Protection, Deputy Dara Murphy, attended the second plenary and the less formal discussion on my behalf. In total, the Heads of State and Government, or their high-level representatives, of 51 Asian and European countries attended, together with then President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, the then President of the European Commission, José Barroso, and the

Secretary General of ASEAN, Le Luong Minh. The summit was hosted by the Italian Prime Minister and chaired by Mr Van Rompuy.

The outcome document of the summit is the Chair's statement which I have circulated with my reply. The main topics covered in that statement include promoting financial and economic co-operation through enhanced Europe-Asia connectivity; Europe-Asia partnership in addressing global matters in an inter-connected world; promoting co-operation on employment, education, social and cultural issues; regional and international issues; and the future direction of ASEM.

On the margins of the ASEM conference I met with the Prime Minister of Vietnam, Mr. Tấn Dũng. We discussed the growing links between Ireland and Vietnam and the possibility of forging closer links in the future, including the restarting of the inter-country adoption process; bilateral trade ties, particularly with regard to meat exports; and Ireland's development aid programme to Vietnam. I also briefed the Prime Minister on Ireland's economic recovery. I had a brief meeting with the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Loong. We spoke about the important role played by Brother Joe McNally in cultural and education policy in Singapore, as well as economic issues, including investment and growth. I also had the opportunity for an informal conversation with the Prime Minister of Japan, Mr. Shinzo Abe, during which I recalled our very productive meetings in 2013 and welcomed the imminent re-entry of Irish beef to the Japanese market.

Deputy Micheál Martin: These questions were tabled approximately five months ago. The Ceann Comhairle noted the long time lag between tabling and discussing them. However, the Taoiseach has reduced by half the number of times he must deal with questions. Before his time, questions to the Taoiseach were taken twice a week. Whenever the Taoiseach misses a session because he happens to be missing on a Tuesday, as is sometimes understandable, the session is never rescheduled.

Fundamentally, the Taoiseach will agree that while ASEM summits do not achieve much directly, they provide an opportunity to meet leaders of many other countries. I presume many of the points of significance touched on at the summit will also have been touched on by the recent European Council meeting, on which we will have statements later. The ASEM process is becoming increasingly in-depth as a result of the sectoral sessions for Ministers. Will the Taoiseach indicate whether human rights were discussed at the summit and, if so, what was the consensus on same?

The issue of trade was discussed and was among the principal topics at a number of ministerial meetings. The push for a new trade agreement through the Doha Round appears to be gaining some momentum. Will the Taoiseach comment on that issue? What sense did he get from the summit that there may be a realistic possibility of the Doha Round gaining increased momentum? Where does Ireland stand on such trade negotiations and what are our aspirations in that regard?

There is a growing concern in society about the lack of debate on trade talks at the international and global level. There is a sense that they are being conducted in a manner that is detached from citizens. The proposed transatlantic trade and investment partnership, TTIP, between the United States and Europe is one example. Many of the issues being raised may not be fair or accurate in terms of what will or will not happen, particularly regarding the capacity of corporations to have recourse to international law that would trump the law of national states

and food issues such as hormones in beef, genetically modified products and so forth. This detachment needs to be removed because there is little connection between much of what is taking place in global and European institutions and the daily lives of citizens in this country and other countries. This is a major issue and I ask the Taoiseach to indicate where he stands on it in the context of the discussions on trade at the ASEM Summit.

Was climate change discussed at the summit? One of the great consequences of the dramatic expansion of Asian economies, particularly the Chinese economy, has been a consequent impact on the quality of life in Asian countries arising from climate change and pollution, including air pollution. I read an article in the *International Herald Tribune* about an excellent documentary made by a Chinese citizen on the impact of economic expansion on the quality of life in China. Initially, the department of the environment in China welcomed the video and praised its author. My linguistic skills do not extend to pronouncing his name. In any case, the video was a significant event in China, one which is being viewed as part of a China spring in terms of environmental awareness and policy. More than 200 million people accessed the video online, which is an extraordinary number. According to the article, the Chinese authorities then decided to suppress the video. Some people believe there is a struggle under way within the Chinese Communist Party, with environmentalists in the department of the environment and other departments seeking to shift the debate from economic growth to one which considers other issues. Economic growth affects the rest of the world in terms of the climate change agenda and quality of life issues. Did the summit discuss pollution and the relationship between economic growth and climate change?

On a related human rights issue, is it not rather disturbing that, despite the video to which I referred being accessed by more than 200 million people, an instruction was issued to all social media and websites to cease facilitating people wishing to view it? This video clearly shows the impact the rapidly expanding economy is having in terms of quality of life, pollution and environmental issues. This impact is applicable across Asia and was also applicable in the West. We must also take our share of responsibility in terms of the earlier phases of economic growth and development in the West and their consequential impact on the environment.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Martin raises a number of interesting questions. I agree that answering questions about a meeting that took place last October is not very good, which is the reason I indicated to the party leaders opposite that I would be happy to oblige them if they were to select a Priority Question during questions. If they want an issue dealt with more quickly, perhaps they will discuss it with the Ceann Comhairle.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The system is highly restrictive, including in respect of the questions we can ask the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Human rights were a major topic of discussion at the summit. Leaders reaffirmed their commitment to protect and promote human rights in accordance with the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights treaties and instruments. They also reaffirmed their willingness to promote further co-operation in ASEM in the field of human rights, including through best practice and sharing experiences.

A discussion took place on the important role of governments, international and national human rights institutions and regional organisations in promoting and protecting human rights. Leaders underlined their commitment to strengthen collaboration to advance the promotion and protection of human rights through the Human Rights Council, particularly the universal

periodic review and its special procedures and mechanisms.

Leaders condemned all forms of incitement to hatred and intolerance, including xenophobia, religious hatred and violence. They stressed the importance of respect and understanding for cultural and religious diversity and promoting tolerance, respect, dialogue and co-operation among different cultures, civilizations and peoples. As Deputy Martin is only too well aware, the events taking place in a number of countries do not reflect any of these aspirations.

In respect of trade, from Ireland's point of view, there has been a great deal of activity to establish and strengthen bilateral connections between Ireland and Asia, including the strengthening of trade and investment links. For example, in 2014, there were 12 ministerial visits to Asia and a State visit to China. These visits show our strong commitment to building our links with Asia and many of them had highly beneficial consequences. For example, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Simon Coveney, has done great work in enhancing agrifood exports to Asia. This has had many positive results, notably the lifting of the ban on beef exports to Japan and the recent lifting of the ban on sales of Irish beef in China. Food and drink exports to China grew by an estimated 40% last year alone, which gives a clear indication of the considerable potential of the Irish agrifood sector in the Asian region. Last week, I had discussions with a number of companies in the United States which are interested in working with Irish companies to increase exports to Asia.

Our educational links with Asia are becoming stronger every year. Many of our third level institutions are developing partnerships and signing bilateral agreements with a variety of institutions in Asia. More than 150 such bilateral arrangements are in place with Chinese institutions alone. During a visit to China last year, the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, secured an agreement that Ireland would be recognised as a country of honour at the Chinese educational expo in October 2016. This provides an opportunity to increase awareness of Irish higher education institutions among the Chinese public. As Deputies are aware, an increasing number of students are travelling to China for full semesters at third level to immerse themselves in what is a difficult language for Europeans to learn and understand. However, our links are not limited to China alone, as two education missions took place to India last year and memorandums of understanding with the Republic of Korea and Japan were signed in 2013 by the then Minister for Education and Skills.

The Government has established a growing investment relationship with Asia. A key objective of IDA Ireland's Horizon 2020 strategy is to win 20% of new name business in growth markets by 2020. Good progress is being made in meeting this target, with a figure of 18% having been achieved by the end of 2013. Asia plays an important part in meeting that target. Japan is a significant source of foreign direct investment in Ireland. There are now more than 50 Japanese companies with a presence here, of which 22 are IDA Ireland-assisted, making Japan the sixth largest contributor to foreign direct investment, with more than 2,500 people employed in assisted companies. The China-Ireland technology growth capital fund that was launched in January 2014 will target investment in both growing Irish technology companies with strategic ambitions to access the Chinese market and growing Chinese technology companies with strategic ambitions to access the European market through Ireland. Moreover, an increasing number of Indian pharmaceutical firms are developing a presence here, while a number of Indian information and communications technology, ICT, firms also are setting up operations in Ireland and now employ more than 3,000 people. In the other direction, companies such as Kerry Group, CRH and PM Group have a strong presence in India. For example, Kerry Group is an important player in the food ingredients sector which supplies Subway, McDonald's and

other catering-related companies.

Deputy Micheál Martin mentioned the international trade agreements, of which the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, TTIP, is one going the other way. I had discussions on it in America last week and, clearly, it is in Ireland's interests, more than any other European country, to see a conclusion being reached on that agreement. While there are difficulties, I hope it will be substantially completed by the end of the year because it is important that it happen during the lifetime of this Administration or there may be a danger that it might not happen at all. As for what I envisage happening in respect of Asia not waiting for international agreements with the European Union, I note that China is signing up to agreements with a number of individual countries. We had a visit from the then Vice President Xi Jinping and I believe the Ceann Comhairle visited China at a different time. However, there appears to be substantial growing interest in doing business with China from here, as well as there being obvious Chinese interest in Ireland. These are matters that should be pursued.

For the information of the Deputy, the statement that will accompany this reply contains 45 points of agreement or, if one likes, the conclusions of the meeting. Point No. 19 refers to how leaders concurred on the seriousness of the challenge posed by climate change. They agreed that further and immediate ambitious action was required on the part of all parties with a view to reducing global greenhouse gas emissions to meet the collective objective of limiting the increase in global average temperature to below 2° Celsius above pre-industrial levels. In that context, leaders supported and called for the success of the 2014 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC, of parties in Lima, as well as the 2015 conference to be held later this year in Paris. Leaders resolved to work towards the adoption at the 21st conference of a protocol, another legal instrument or an agreed outcome with legal force under the UNFCCC applicable to all parties. They also underscored their commitment to work together to address the issues of climate change and environmental protection in accordance with all of the principles and provisions of the United Nations on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities. There is a range of points that I will circulate with the reply for the information of Members.

Deputy Gerry Adams: It is good that there was a discussion about human rights protections. As the Taoiseach is aware, 60% of the world's population live in Asia where there is massive poverty, inequality, child exploitation, as well as sweatshop wages and appalling conditions for millions of workers. I am interested to ascertain what discussions were held on tackling these issues and what the outcomes were. The Taoiseach has also stated there was a discussion on the impact of Asian economies on global warming. Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, Thailand, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are among THE Asian countries that are facing extreme risks from climate change. While it can be seen on our own small island, it is a huge issue in that region. The Taoiseach will recall that last month massive devastation was caused on the Pacific island nation of Vanuatu by one of the most powerful storms ever in that region. I understand the Asian and Pacific Ocean states are planning a major climate change conference to be held in Paris in November or December and that one issue on the clár will be a globally funded insurance pool to aid in the recovery from climate-related weather disasters. Was this issue raised at the Milan conference and what is the Government's attitude to it? Would it look favourably on such a fund to help the region?

The Taoiseach: The answer to the question is there was quite a deal of discussion about the requirement to promote and protect human rights in accordance with the United Nations Charter. A willingness was expressed by everybody to promote further co-operation through

the Asia-Europe Meeting, ASEM, in the field of human rights, including, as I stated, through what is best practice in the sharing of experiences. There was a welcome for the convening of the 13th informal ASEM seminar on human rights which was held in Copenhagen in 2013 and which focused on environmental and human rights. The 14th informal ASEM seminar on human rights took place in Vietnam in November and the 15th seminar will take place in Geneva, Switzerland, in October. The leaders present at the meeting underlined the important roles of governments and international and national human rights institutions in promoting and protecting human rights. They underlined their commitment to strengthen collaboration to advance the promotion and protection of human rights through the Human Rights Council. They emphasised that members of vulnerable groups needed particular attention to enjoy their full human rights. They reaffirmed the important roles of parliaments, civil society and the media in strengthening the foundations of democracy, thereby contributing to the sound basis for sustainable development. In that sense, there was a welcome for the Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership held in Rome in October 2014 and the tenth Asia-Europe People's Forum which was held in Milan. As I stated, there was total condemnation of all issues from xenophobia to religious hatred and violence.

The leaders reiterated their determination to strengthen preparedness and the response to disasters and to build resilience, including through awareness programmes, early warning systems, search, rescue and relief operations and applying innovation, science and technology, as well as reducing vulnerability to and losses caused by disasters. They also stressed the need to build the resilience of the most vulnerable, including women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities, as well as improving the capacities of local communities and societies to adapt to and manage the impact of disasters. There was a welcome for the two ASEM conferences on disaster risk reduction and management held in 2013 and 2014. There was a call for a deepening of co-operation between Europe and Asia on disaster risk reduction and management, while there was an invitation to all ASEM partners to work towards a strengthening of the renewed international framework for disaster risk reduction to be adopted at the third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction to be held this month in Sendai, Japan. There was a call for greater collaboration in dealing with health care for children, women and the elderly, in particular. In this context, there was a welcome for the ASEM workshop on public health emergency management, which was held in Beijing, China, at the end of 2014. In addition, an initiative is to be held in India next month on non-invasive diagnostic technologies for diabetes and its treatment as a lifestyle disease. All of these things were mentioned and reflected upon, and are included in the statement I circulated to Members. In the not too distant future, they might get a chance to follow through on some of these again.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am afraid that the time has expired. I thought I might get Deputy Keating in but unfortunately the time caught up with us.

Deputy Derek Keating: Thank you.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Order of Business

The Taoiseach: It is proposed to take No. 11, motion re referral to joint committee of pro-

posed approval by Dáil Éireann for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council repealing certain acts in the field of police co-operation and judicial co-operation in criminal matters; No. 12, motion re referral to joint committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 (Effective Date for Certain Bodies) Order 2015 and the Freedom of Information Act 2014 (Exempted Public Bodies) Order 2015; No. 39, statements on European Council, Brussels, pursuant to Standing Order 102A(2)(b); and No. 6, Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Age of Eligibility for Election to the Office of President) Bill 2015 - Order for Second Stage and Second Stage.

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. 189, motion re water charges, which shall take place at 7.30 p.m. or on the conclusion of Topical Issues, whichever is the later and shall, if not previously concluded, adjourn after 90 minutes; Nos. 11 and 12 shall be decided without debate; No. 39 shall be taken immediately following the Order of Business and the proceedings thereon shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 85 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply: the statements shall be made by the Taoiseach and by the main spokespersons for Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Technical Group, who shall be called upon in that order and who may share their time, and shall not exceed 15 minutes in each case; a Minister or Minister of State shall take questions for a period not exceeding 20 minutes; 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 with Topical Issues; and the following arrangements shall apply in respect of the proceedings on the Second Stage of No. 6: the opening speeches 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 five minutes.

Tomorrow's business after Oral Questions shall be No. 6, Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Age of Eligibility for Election to the Office of President) Bill 2015 - Second and Remaining Stages (resumed); and No. 13, motion re statement for information of voters in relation to the Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Age of Eligibility for Election to the Office of President) Bill 2015.

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that No. 13 shall be taken on the conclusion of No. 6 and shall be decided without debate.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are five proposals to be put to the House. First, is the proposal for dealing with the late sitting agreed to? Agreed.

Second, is the proposal for dealing with No. 11, motion re referral to joint committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council repealing certain acts in the field of police co-operation and judicial co-operation in criminal matters, without debate; and No. 12, motion re referral to joint Committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 (Effective Date for Certain Bodies) Order 2015 and the Freedom of Information Act 2014 (Exempted Public Bodies) Order 2015, without debate, agreed to? Agreed.

Third, is the proposal for dealing with No. 39, Statements on European Council, Brussels,

pursuant to Standing Order 102A(2)(b) agreed to? Agreed.

Fourth, is the proposal for dealing with No. 6, Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Age of Eligibility for Election to the Office of President) Bill 2015 - Order for Second Stage and Second Stage, agreed to? Agreed.

Fifth, is the proposal for dealing with No. 13, motion re statement for information of voters in relation to the Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Age of Eligibility for Election to the Office of President) Bill 2015, without debate, tomorrow, agreed to? Agreed.

I call Deputy Martin on the Order of Business.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Yesterday, over 100 repossession cases were scheduled for the Circuit Court in Castlebar. Throughout the country there has been an increasing number of such cases in different courts. Given that Castlebar is the Taoiseach's own home town, will he accept at long last that the number of repossession cases is out of hand? It is indicative that the Government's response to the mortgage crisis is not working. The legislation that Deputy Michael McGrath brought forward last week should have been accepted by the Government.

The Taoiseach has repeatedly said that people should only lose their homes as a very last resort. That is not happening, however, because banks continue to have a veto on mortgage resolutions. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, promised to change the legislation. He said that legislation underpinning the personal insolvency schemes would be tweaked and changed. In addition, the Tánaiste has said she supports Deputy Penrose's legislation on reducing bankruptcy from three years to one year.

Two proposals for legislative change have been put forward by Ministers, so can the Taoiseach indicate when the Government will amend the personal insolvency legislation? Can he also indicate when the timeframe concerning the bankruptcy period will change?

As the Taoiseach is aware, the Government subsumed the Consumer Agency into the Competition Authority. Consumers need protection but I hope it will not be diluted in the agency. There are vast differences in the cost of premiums quoted by insurance companies. Can the Taoiseach inform the House when the insurance Bill will be published? Will it contain sections to protect consumers from companies charging exorbitant rates on prices for basic insurance cover?

Last night RTE had a special programme on loyalist and IRA so-called punishment beatings of individuals. It was vicious and brutal according to the testimonies given by family members and individuals. The scale of it would have taken a lot of people by surprise. Not only did the programme represent vicious beatings, but it was also about controlling communities and society. At the end of the programme it was stated that the whole phenomenon has not ended.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, Deputy, but we cannot discuss television programmes on the Order of Business.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I know. I am coming to the Bill. There were approximately 600 beatings in the North in recent years. I wish to ask three questions. First, when can we expect the criminal justice Bill to be published? Second, has this issue been discussed at any stage at the North-South ministerial meetings? Third, will the Taoiseach allow time in the House to discuss the content of the RTE programme and debate it?

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The Taoiseach: The consumer protection Bill is due later this year.

There are a range of criminal justice Bills in the course of preparation. I can give the Deputy an update on that. It might be appropriate to have a discussion on Northern Ireland, including the situation that applies now and elements of the past. We can arrange that through the Whips later.

As regards mortgage arrears and repossessions, clearly the Government does not want people to have their homes repossessed where that is preventable. I am not sure how many were actually approved yesterday. The Government is committed to bringing forward a further package of measures in April to deal with the mortgage position.

I am aware of the Bill put forward by Deputy Penrose to reduce the period of bankruptcy from three years to one year. The Government has not considered this as part of the overall package, but will give consideration to it. However, this is not a magic bullet to resolve matters. It does not apply in the case of mortgages because that is a secure debt.

5 o'clock

The position must be considered that the banks would actually have a greater opportunity to have credit unions and everybody else shoved aside and would be able to acquire possession much faster and the mortgage would still remain. People who might assume that a reduction to one year of bankruptcy is some sort of panacea for all of these difficult problems need to be very careful about what it is that we actually implement here. The Government will consider a range of other measures and bring them here in April. It is in everybody's interest that there be engagement and that people hold onto their houses where that is at all possible.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Tá trí cheist le cur agam faoi reachtaíocht atá geallta. Baineann an chéad cheist leis An tAcht Sláinte 2007. Baineann an dara ceann leis An Bille um Dhóchmhainneacht Phearsanta (Leasú) 2014, the Personal Insolvency (Amendment) Bill 2014, and baineann an tríú ceist le the general medical service Bill 2015.

Maidir leis an gcéad cheann, the Minister for Health last month said he planned to give more power to HIQA and to do this by amending the Health Act 2007. This takes on a particular urgency given the loggerheads between the HSE and HIQA at this time. Part of the problem is that HIQA recommendations in a report on one hospital do not carry across into other hospitals, although they may face the same problems. There is actually no mechanism that I can find within the Department of Health or the HSE to implement recommendations which HIQA makes in reports. When will the legislation to allow the Minister's proposed reform be published and will it put in place a mechanism to ensure that the HIQA recommendations are implemented across the health services?

As regards the Personal Insolvency (Amendment) Bill, there are more than 7,000 orders for repossession sitting in the courts, and the fact is that current Government policy facilitates the repossession of family homes because it provides the banks with a veto over any efforts to find a resolution. According to Central Bank figures, there are now 37,778 homes in the most serious of arrears and these families are most likely to be facing legal actions. This is double the figure from September 2012. The Government says it plans to introduce new legislation - is this in addition to the Personal Insolvency (Amendment) Bill? Was this crisis discussed this morning at the Cabinet meeting? Does the Government intend to change or do away with the veto that the banks exercise?

The general practitioner medical service Bill 2015 was to provide universal GP services to all persons aged 70 years or over. Last year, the Dáil passed the Health (General Practitioner Service) Bill 2014 to provide for free GP care for under-sixes. We were told this would be in place by the end of last year. When that deadline was missed in December last year, the Tánaiste said she was confident it would be rolled out in the new year. It is still not there and now we are told it will be in place by June this year. Can we get some clarity on this? Will the long-promised free GP care be available in June this year and when will the health (general practitioner medical service) Bill 2015 be published?

The Taoiseach: In respect of the over 70s, the Government this morning approved the authorisation for the Minister to draft that legislation. The question of the medical cards for under-sixes is under negotiation between the HSE, the Department and the GPs. They are not concluded yet. I understand there is a further meeting this week and the Minister will report to Cabinet on the outcome of that meeting. Clearly, these depend upon participation by general practitioners to make them work. I do not have a date for the Deputy in respect of the HIQA Act to which he referred, that is, the Health Act of 2007. I will update Deputy Adams on the work that is under way there.

I have already said to Deputy Martin that the Government will bring forward a number of options for further enhancing the situation in so far as mortgages are concerned. I would say to Deputy Adams that 100,000 cases have been settled and agreed and the vast majority of those are able to sustain the commitments entered into in the rearranged position and that is to be welcomed. There are others out there that have a different range of difficulties, and they can only be sorted out by having engagement and a process by which they might be concluded. We will come back to that in April.

Deputy Noel Grealish: In light of the motion that was passed at the recent Labour Party conference to reject the proposed fish farm off the west coast - and I want to compliment the Labour Party and particularly Deputy McNamara, who is in the Chamber - and the issues and concerns inland fisheries have regarding this proposed fish farm and the effect it will have on the angling industry on the west coast, when is the inland fisheries (modernisation & consolidation) Bill, No. 72 on the Government legislation programme, coming before the Dáil? Will the Taoiseach withdraw this proposed fish farm?

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot deal with that on the Order of Business.

Deputy Noel Grealish: It will have a huge effect on the angling industry in the west of Ireland and will not create the jobs that have been proposed by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The Taoiseach: I do not have a date for Deputy Grealish for the publication of the inland fisheries Bill. Perhaps if the Deputy puts down a question to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, as I know he is interested in---

Deputy Noel Grealish: I have done that but he still will not give an answer.

The Taoiseach: I will have a report sent to Deputy Grealish in due course about this matter.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The mediation Bill is promised legislation and has some broader impact, as the name would suggest. Can I ask the Taoiseach what the intentions are regarding bringing it before the House as soon as possible? Similarly, a Bill that is also promised

is the new children's hospital development board Bill. What developments have taken place in preparing that for introduction to the House at an early date?

The Taoiseach: On the second one, there is a great deal of work going on and I will update Deputy Durkan on the different sectors that are involved. I do not have a date for the publication of the Bill. The mediation Bill has appeared on the horizon. It is due in the second half of the year and is coming more and more into focus.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I commend the Taoiseach on raising the issue of illegal Irish in America during the St. Patrick's Day weekend. I agreed with him when he said that immigration reform required political courage. Was the Taoiseach a little bit nervous when he was raising this issue with Barack Obama----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McNamara had better ask the Taoiseach that in the corridor.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Was the Taoiseach nervous that Mr. Obama might question what reform this Government had carried out with regard to illegal immigrants here, who include American citizens? I will ask the Taoiseach the same question I have asked twice before in this Chamber - when are we going to see a Bill reforming the Irish immigration system?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's question should concern promised legislation.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Will we consider the type of reforms we are asking Americans to implement with regard to illegal Irish in America?

The Taoiseach: No, I was not in the slightest nervous raising the matter with President Obama----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: He did not shake hands with him either.

The Taoiseach: ----or indeed with Vice President Biden, the Speaker of the House, the majority leader or the minority leader either. This matter was one that was given consideration by Deputy Stanton as chairman of the justice committee. I am anxious to have a conversation with him and read his report. This is an issue that needs to be reflected upon carefully. Separate from that, Deputy McNamara is aware that Judge Bryan McMahon is looking at the question of those who are here for quite a long time who are asylum seekers or refugees. His report is expected to be furnished to the Minister by Easter, in the next few weeks.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Following an LRC hearing on 3 March, the HSE accepted that Brothers of Charity and Ability West social care staff had a legal entitlement to what was called a twilight premium payment. The money and arrears due have been paid to staff in Dublin, but staff in counties Roscommon and Galway are being told there is no money available. When will we see the industrial relations (amendment) Bill? Will the Taoiseach use his good offices to ensure arrears due to staff in the west are paid to them, just as they were paid to their counterparts in Dublin?

The Taoiseach: There are two Bills. One is in respect of collective bargaining, while the other is in respect of regulatory requirements concerning REAs. Both Bills are expected to be published in this session. Equality should apply across the board.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Recent correspondence between the Taoiseach's Ministers and civil servants has revealed an attempt to play down the housing crisis and the exaggeration of the

announcement of the €3.8 billion plan of the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, to address the housing crisis over six years. The Minister announced plans to deliver 7,400 units this year, some 5,000 of which were to be in the private rental sector, but there is absolutely no possibility of this happening.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is straying a little.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: There are 45 families becoming homeless each month, but we still do not have rent controls. The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, has hinted time out of number that he is considering some form of rent control. Last night he had not even brought-----

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

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I am asking about the housing Bill and also rent controls.

Does the Taoiseach have plans to hold a reception for the Irish women's and men's rugby teams following their magnificent achievements?

An Ceann Comhairle: We all concur on that one.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy forgot about the women's hockey team which also did well.

The Minister has not played down the housing crisis. In fact, he has identified accurately the scale of the challenge and responded at Government level by providing €4 billion between now and 2020. The local authorities have been informed. Many of them have been allocated their moneys and are trying to get on with the job. As I said on many occasions, this challenge cannot be met successfully unless houses are built and that requires a credit line and a planning permission process. The Minister is very exercised in seeing to it that these commitments are fulfilled. One cannot have a situation like the one described by the Deputy. It is not that the Minister has played down the matter. He is certainly not running away from it. The Government has given its full support in dealing with this issue.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It is getting worse. It is absolutely out of control.

The Taoiseach: The legislation will be introduced later this year.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: What about the rugby teams?

An Ceann Comhairle: We all agree with that suggestion.

Deputy Ray Butler: And the cricket team.

An Ceann Comhairle: And the cricket team, as well as the ladies' hockey team. Anybody else?

Deputy Micheál Martin: Ballyhale Shamrocks.

Deputy Ray Butler: When can we expect publication of the criminal justice (community sanctions) Bill, the purpose of which is to provide a modern statement on the law governing community sanctions and the role of the Probation Service in the criminal justice system? This issue was highlighted recently in respect of the poor box system in the courts. We must examine this issue.

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The Taoiseach: It is an important one and it is included in the same package as the Bill mentioned by Deputy Bernard J. Durkan. It will be taken in the second half of the year.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I wish to inquire about two Bills, the maritime area and fore-shore (amendment) Bill and the Environment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, both of which are awaiting completion and will have an impact on my constituency in the creation of jobs at Foynes Port. When will all Stages be concluded and when will they come into law?

The Taoiseach: I expect the marine Bill to be published shortly after Easter. The Environment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is awaiting Committee Stage.

Deputy Frank Feighan: We need to implement updated administration and governance arrangements for the Heritage Council. When will the heritage (amendment) Bill be brought before the House?

The Taoiseach: At the back end of the year. That is three for October.

Deputy Joe Carey: I wish to establish the position on the family court Bill.

The Taoiseach: We do not have a date for it. I will revert to the Deputy on it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Peter Mathews.

Deputy Peter Mathews: Did the Ceann Comhairle call me? I thank him. It is appreciated. I was just wondering-----

An Ceann Comhairle: What does the Deputy mean by "just wondering"?

Deputy Peter Mathews: It was because I did not hear you.

An Ceann Comhairle: Did you not?

Deputy Peter Mathews: I beg your pardon. In a follow-through on some of the contributions made, I ask the Taoiseach to consider reintroducing Deputy Michael McGrath's Private Members' Bill and also that of Deputy Willie Penrose. Between 2001 and 2008, the banks' boards caused the problem.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Deputy back on to banks again?

Deputy Peter Mathews: That can be shown by a balance sheet examination, as shown in No. 191 on the Order Paper. If instead of having the processional nonsense in a committee room, the banking inquiry, there had been a full plenary-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Two Bills. The Deputy has made his point.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: He wanted to be part of the banking inquiry.

Deputy Peter Mathews: -----in a full auditorium, with all directors of all banks in the years 2001 to 2008 present, with the balance sheets of the banks in front of them and the auditors behind them,-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is really tempting me now.

Deputy Peter Mathews: -----one would have had in three weeks the truth of the banking

collapse that had caused the property boom. It was not the other way around.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy will have to learn procedure. I ask him to resume his seat.

Deputy Peter Mathews: I know, but I have been fired from committees, as the Taoiseach knows.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is the Deputy's problem.

Deputy Peter Mathews: It is not my problem; it is a problem with the way this place is run.

The Taoiseach: As I said, the Government will bring forward a number of measures in April to deal with all of the further options for settling mortgage disputes where people are in distress.

EU Regulation on Police and Judicial Co-operation in Criminal Matters: Referral to Joint Committee

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

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council repealing certain acts in the field of police cooperation and judicial cooperation in criminal matters,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 23rd December 2014, be referred to the Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality, in accordance with Standing Order 82A(4)(j), which, not later than 1st April 2015, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 87, and Standing Order 86(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Freedom of Information Act 2014 Orders: Referral to Select Committee

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

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the following Orders in draft:

(i) Freedom of Information Act 2014 (Effective Date for Certain Bodies) Order 2015, and

(ii) Freedom of Information Act 2014 (Exempted Public Bodies) Order 2015,

copies of which Orders in draft were laid before Dáil Éireann on 10th March 2015 and 12th March 2015, be referred to the Select sub-Committee on Public Expenditure and Reform, in accordance with Standing Order 82A(3)(b) and (6)(a), which, not later than 26th March 2015, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 87, and Standing Order 86(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

European Council: Statements

The Taoiseach: I regret the loss of a German-registered aircraft today in the French Alps, with a total loss of life of approximately 148 or 150 people. On behalf of the country, I have sent a message to President Hollande and Chancellor Merkel following the tragedy.

Last week's European Council meeting focused on three very important issues for the European Union, namely, building an energy union, the economic situation in the European Union, including the European semester 2015; external relations, including the situation in Ukraine; preparations for the Eastern Partnership summit in Riga in May; and the current political and security situation in Libya. Before the meeting opened, the European Council held a minute's silence out of respect for the victims of the appalling terrorist attack in Tunisia the previous day. We extended our deepest sympathy to the victims, their families and the Tunisian people and confirmed our commitment to intensifying co-operation with Tunisia to counter this common terrorist threat, to strengthen Tunisia's promising democracy and to assist its economic and social development.

Energy union was the first item on the agenda. Ensuring Europe's citizens and businesses have a reliable, secure, affordable and sustainable supply of energy is one of the five priority strands of the strategic agenda agreed by the European Council in June last year. The Commission has described the free flow of energy across borders as the "fifth freedom" of the European Union. In order to promote and harness the full benefits of this freedom, we must move quickly and decisively, not least given instability in the European Union's neighbourhood and the realities of climate change. The European Council discussed a number of concrete and measurable steps to deliver energy union and ensure affordable, sustainable and secure energy for all member states.

There was a positive response to the clear roadmap set out in the recent Commission communication on a framework strategy for a resilient energy union, with a forward-looking climate change policy. Ireland has very much welcomed the framework strategy. In particular, we value its vision of an energy union, with citizens at its core, taking ownership of the energy transition, participating actively in the market, empowered and protected as consumers.

The discussions of Heads of State and Government were focused on two key aspects of the energy union project: enhancing energy security and reaping the benefits of the internal energy market. When considering energy security, it may be natural to think first of those countries at direct risk of interruption of gas supplies from Russia. However, enhancing energy security is

also of importance to member states such as Ireland which are on the periphery of the energy union, poorly connected to the wider European grid or heavily reliant on a particular source of energy. Diversifying the routes and sources of our energy and putting in place appropriate infrastructure to support that diversification is critical for us.

At my instigation, a specific reference to peripheral regions was included in the section of the European Council conclusions dealing with infrastructure and interconnections. This is important as we work to ensure that citizens in the periphery can enjoy the same benefits from energy union as those living in areas which are already well connected. While Ireland's geographic location on the edge of Europe may present particular challenges in terms of integration with an energy union, it is also a source of great opportunity for developing indigenous energy resources. Ireland has potentially among the best offshore renewable energy resources in the world, including wave and tidal energy as well as offshore wind. For this reason, Ireland strongly supported the inclusion of a reference in the European Council conclusions to the development of an energy and climate-related technology and innovation strategy, including next generation renewables.

The European Council discussed in some detail the important issue of transparency in gas markets. There have been concerns that some member states might be incentivised to conclude private gas deals with external suppliers which are either illegal under EU law or could undermine the building of energy union and principles of energy security. This is clearly not in our collective interest. The European Council urged that the transparency of gas agreements with external suppliers would be reinforced and compatibility with EU energy security provisions ensured. Importantly, it was recognised that this should be done while also guaranteeing the confidentiality of commercially sensitive information.

The European Council concluded its energy union deliberations with a discussion on how best to co-ordinate diplomatic action on energy and climate ahead of the critical climate change conference in Paris in December. We noted the ambitious objective set out in the EU's intended nationally determined contribution, which is fully in line with the conclusions of the October 2014 European Council, and urged other parties to the agreement to submit their own contributions by the end of March.

The European Council also held a wide-ranging exchange of views on the economic situation in the EU. The evidence suggests that Europe is now in the early stages of recovery from a period of deep and protracted recession. The year 2015 is the first year since the onset of the crisis in which all member state economies are expected to record growth. Lower oil prices, the ECB's expanded asset purchase programme and the depreciation of the euro are all having a positive impact. That said, it is clear that much remains to be done by member states to ensure that the current recovery is truly sustainable and not merely a cyclical upswing.

In his presentation, ECB President Draghi underlined the importance of continued progress on structural reforms. The more positive economic data cannot be used as an excuse to take the foot off the pedal when it comes to improving Europe's competitiveness and implementing urgently needed reforms. The importance of boosting investment was also underlined, with the European Council welcoming agreement by finance Ministers on a general approach on establishment of the European fund for strategic investments, EFSI. The EFSI is being designed to provide additional risk-bearing capacity to the European Investment Bank, which will allow them to crowd-in private sector finance for new projects. As Commission Vice President Kattinen indicated, there is plenty of liquidity in Europe but it is not currently being translated into

investment. We continue to see possible opportunities to develop synergies between the new EU investment plan and the Ireland strategic investment fund and the strategic banking corporation of Ireland. These will be considered carefully over the coming months.

I updated European Council counterparts on developments in the Irish economy. The most recent CSO figures point to growth of 4.8% last year. This is our best performance since 2007 and the highest growth rate in the EU. Unemployment continues to fall month-on-month, now down to just over 10%, and we expect it to be back in single digits shortly. Encouragingly, we are seeing significant reductions in both long-term and youth unemployment. There was significant interest from European Council members in Ireland's approach and our experience was cited by a number of colleagues. The recovery we are now witnessing would not have been possible without the willingness of this Government to take and follow through on difficult decisions. It also demanded very real sacrifices by the Irish people. Our priority, looking ahead, is to ensure not just that Ireland's recovery is strong and sustainable but that the benefits can be shared by all.

In my intervention, I also made the point that in developing Ireland's budgetary plans for 2016 onwards, it is important we work with realistic estimates of both the economy's growth potential and future investment needs. I underlined then, and will reiterate here now, that Ireland does not have a problem with the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact. Our issue lies with some of the methodologies and calculations used in the application of these rules. Simply put, our position is that the Stability and Growth Pact rules should support a budgetary stance for Ireland that correctly reflects the outturn and the prospects for the Irish economy. This depends on the sensible application of the rules, ensuring that results are based on reality rather than the application of older trend information. The issue is currently being discussed at a technical level and I hope it will be possible to agree a solution soon. To repeat, we are not trying to bend or weaken the rules in order to get special treatment. The catastrophic experience of our crash must make Ireland among the strongest supporters of the concept of rigorous rules, applied fairly.

The European Council concluded the first phase of European semester 2015, the Union's annual cycle of economic policy co-ordination. The conclusions provide strong political reinforcement, as expected, for the three key pillars of European semester 2015. These are boosting investment, a renewed commitment to both national and EU-level structural reforms and continued fiscal responsibility. Procedural improvements have been introduced for this year's European semester process to facilitate stronger national level engagement, including engagement by national parliaments and other key stakeholders. I would encourage Members of this House to support engagement with the process and to welcome the session organised by the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs with the Minister of State, Deputy Murphy, earlier this month.

The European Council exchange on economic issues included consideration of the current position in relation to the negotiations with the US on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, TTIP. The European Council called on both sides to make every effort to conclude negotiations on an ambitious, comprehensive and mutually beneficial agreement by the end of this year. Leaders also highlighted the need to communicate the benefits of the agreement and to enhance dialogue with civil society. On the latter point, I would mention that an important seminar will take place in Dublin Castle on Friday. Hosted by the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Bruton, Commissioner Malmström will address the seminar. Representatives of trade unions, farming organisations and business groups will also participate. The

event will launch a report by Copenhagen Economics on TTIP's potential impact on Ireland's economy. This is the type of open dialogue which is essential to ensuring that there is a broad understanding among all stakeholders of TTIP's aims and benefits. This report was endorsed by Cabinet today.

During my visit to the US for St. Patrick's Day engagements, I had discussions with President Obama and US Trade Representative Michael Froman on TTIP. I also discussed this with Europe's ambassador, David O'Sullivan, and the other representatives. On the basis of these engagements, I was able to convey their positive sentiments to European Council colleagues. It is important that Europe and America do not cancel each other out. We should work together on both the simple and the difficult issues in order to conclude an agreement which has the potential to create a couple of million jobs either side of the Atlantic.

The current situation in Greece was not on the agenda for the European Council. However, the European Council did get a short read-out on Friday from President Tusk on a meeting the previous evening which was held with Prime Minister Tsipras, the Presidents of the European Council, Commission, ECB and Eurogroup and the leaders of Germany and France. Prime Minister Tsipras had sought that meeting and it is to be hoped that it will contribute to a clearer understanding by Greece of what is required now, following the Eurogroup meeting of 20 February. Greece is to present a list of reforms within the next few days that will pave the way for constructive engagement with a view to successfully concluding the programme. The meeting may have been useful in toning down the rhetoric between Athens and other capitals. I expect that yesterday's meeting between Prime Minister Tsipras and Chancellor Merkel will have also helped in strengthening some trust and confidence between each other.

I spoke directly with Prime Minister Tsipras in the margins of the European Council meeting and I reiterated Ireland's commitment, and that of the other member states, to working with him and with Greece to resolve the crisis. I told him how, in Ireland, we worked with the institutions to ensure that our programme was aligned with the policies of our Government. We not only successfully exited the programme, but have since become the fastest growing economy in Europe. So, I would urge the authorities in Greece to engage now with the institutions in a constructive and swift manner to meet the deadline and return Greece to a sustainable economic footing.

Let me say a few words about Ukraine and EU relations with Russia. It is just over a year since the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by the Russian Federation. The European Council does not recognise, and will continue to condemn, this illegal act. The EU has consistently stressed its commitment to the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Ukraine and its support, including significant financial support, for the reform programme of its Government and in addressing the humanitarian needs of its people.

At the meeting last week, there was an in-depth discussion on the latest developments in eastern Ukraine. There has been a welcome improvement in the overall security situation following the signing on 12 February of a package of measures to implement the September Minsk agreements. The issue of sanctions against Russia was a key element of the discussion. As expected, there was agreement that no basis existed for imposing additional measures at this time, given the recent progress in the ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front line. There was also agreement that there should be no relaxation of existing sanctions, given the fragility of the current situation and the many challenges that lie ahead.

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The question of the early roll-over of existing sanctions, originally adopted in July 2014 and enhanced the following September, was considered. The consensus among Heads of State and Government was that a decision on this should be made and clearly linked to the complete implementation of the Minsk agreements, foreseen for the end of 2015. Necessary decisions in this regard will be taken in the coming months. In addition to that, the European Council sent a clear message that the EU stands ready to take further restrictive reassures if necessary. Many leaders underlined that continued unity in our approach to the crisis remained of paramount importance.

European Council discussion also focused on progress in the implementation of the 12 February agreement. There was broad support for strengthening EU engagement with the OSCE mission to enhance its capacity to monitor effectively and verify the ceasefire. Leaders also reiterated the EU's continued support for Ukraine's reform process.

Concern was expressed at Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns. The European Council asked High Representative Mogherini to prepare, in co-operation with the member states and EU institutions, an action plan by June on strategic communication aimed at countering this Russian disinformation. I was surprised by the apparent sympathy of some Deputies for a Russian approach that had led to actions contrary to international law and the rights of small nations, cornerstones of Ireland's foreign policy since the foundation of the State. I note that similar sneaking regards are to be found on the extreme anti-European left and right across the Union.

Let me conclude my statement here. In his wrap-up statement, the Minister of State, Deputy Dara Murphy, will address the other external relations issues considered at last week's meeting, namely, preparations for the Eastern Partnership Summit and the current political and security situation in Libya, which is quite serious.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Last week's summit involved no significant breakthrough on any of the major issues facing the European Union. While there are very important policies being rolled out or discussed at the moment, they were not on the agenda, rendering the summit itself more of a sideshow than a main event. A defining feature of the last four years has been the Government's non-stop effort to spin everything and to ignore cynically many wider issues that have a big impact here. Developments in Europe have been central to our economic pick-up, yet no member of the Government has ever acknowledged this. There have been banal generalities about wanting Europe to do well, but the direct impact of European decisions on what has happened here has been ignored. This is important because our Government keeps missing opportunities and is denying the people the opportunity to see what could and should be done to relieve debt pressures.

For this summit, a lot of work went into briefing the media about the Taoiseach's agenda, but we know less today than before the summit. In different so-called exclusives, the Taoiseach's staff briefed that he was determined that there would be no pre-election budget giveaways, that there would be major tax cuts and that he wanted the ability to spend up to €1.5 billion more without breaking EU rules. We were told that he was both against extra budget flexibility and in favour of it. That begs the question, which is it. It is just a continuation of the same old trick of trying to be on both sides of the fence at the same time. This is a Taoiseach who voted against the majority of budget changes for which he now claims credit, namely, the budgetary adjustments that underpinned the fiscal recovery, a Taoiseach who spent a decade condemning the failure to spend more and now condemns the fact that so much was spent.

I welcome the additional budget flexibility that has been extended to France and other countries. That reflects the reality of a weak European economy that cannot recover without investment. It is a great pity that the German Government did not also agree to play a part in the necessary flexibility by encouraging more domestic demand.

In a few months, we will witness the next shot in our election campaign through the introduction of a spring Budget Statement. This is an unprecedented use of the Civil Service to prepare a Government's election manifesto, as it will set out four years' worth of spending and tax proposals that have no administrative or legal status other than to serve as an election tool. In fact, the Taoiseach essentially admitted this when he said that it would show what Fine Gael and Labour would do if re-elected.

The Taoiseach: This is on the European Council.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Clearly, the decision to seek room for an additional €1.5 billion is the first move towards the spring statement and is intended to allow the announcement of as many initiatives as possible.

The European semester process that the Taoiseach signed off on last week is designed to give transparency and certainty to policy. Due to the Taoiseach's approach, though, we are getting nothing of the sort. A major question is whether the Government intends to ignore recently introduced legislation on budgetary and financial procedures. The Oireachtas has established the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council to review economic projections and fiscal policy before and after major announcements. Why has it been excluded from the discussion? Why is the Government proposing to announce four years of budgets but not willing to have any outside consultation or review?

Yet again we have a case of the Government having a public relations policy but no clear economic policy, a Government that did not deliver recovery but did everything possible to make it as unfair as it could be. The primary objective for the Government is to claim credit for things and stop the more important debate of helping people to understand what has been happening. The Taoiseach continues to sell a fairy tale of his decisive actions and steely negotiating skills when the truth shows nothing of the sort. In terms of the reduction in interest rates for all bailout loans to all countries, the reduction in borrowing costs and the vital policy changes of the ECB, particularly of its president, Mr. Mario Draghi, nothing in any of these decisions was influenced by our Government. Reductions negotiated by others were automatically extended to Ireland and were four times larger than for what our Government asked. As the Taoiseach admitted at the time, he held no discussion with Mr. Mario Draghi before the latter's appointment.

The implementation of a quantitative easing policy by the ECB in the face of opposition by some countries is a decisive move by an organisation that is now willing to do whatever it legally can to try to spark a wider recovery. It is not enough and it is at best a short-term measure that carries some dangers, but Ireland should welcome it and call for other institutions to do more.

The failure of the Greek economy to recover is the most striking example of the need to change policies. It appears that, as acknowledged by the Taoiseach, all significant discussions last week took place in a smaller meeting, something that in itself is not a good development. The situation today is more serious than it has been at any point in the past five years. Fianna Fáil has been arguing for the past two years that Greece needs further substantial action on its debt if it is to be given a credible path to growth. This is not to say that Greece should be

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allowed do whatever it wants with other people's money, but there is a need for a long-term solution. The evidence is that such a solution is not close. In fact, it is now reasonable to ask whether Syriza wants to find a solution or is just trying to manage the blame game for when the full crisis comes.

The Syriza-led Government's actions in recent weeks have not shown that it is committed to finding a solution which respects other countries. It is fully entitled to seek to end austerity but equally it promised before the election that it had a detailed reform plan ready to implement and that it knew exactly how to ease the debt burden but not endanger Greece's commitments to the euro and the EU. The failure to produce even the most basic reform plan is striking. Slogans which get a crowd going are not the same thing as policies which can be implemented. Wiring tourists to catch VAT fraud is not an initiative which will deliver the type of revenue Greek public services need. It is reported that Prime Minister Tsipras even objected at the summit to international inspectors being able to check the current status of Greece's Government accounts, claiming that this was an affront to sovereignty. He did so in spite of the fact that every member of the IMF has been subject to this scrutiny since the organisation was founded.

The new policy of aggressively attacking and insulting other governments may well simply be part of managing a diverse range of party factions. Whatever the origins, it is undermining the possibility of building a consensus for helping Greece. The statement by a Minister that Greece would unleash immigrants on Europe if it did not get what it was asking for was not only wrong, it was playing to the worst type of fears currently being exploited by extremists throughout the Continent. Another Minister said that Greece wanted €350 billion in reparations for past wars, including €20 billion supposedly still owed under the Treaty of Versailles. This is the type of rhetoric designed to create divisions, not to persuade.

It is clear that the new Government has a mandate to change direction, but other governments also have democratic mandates and they also have the right to represent the interests of their people. It appears that the Eurogroup is willing to change the terms of Greek debts quite significantly and, in doing so, lift the short-term and medium-term impact of these debts. What is not yet clear is whether Greece actually wants to negotiate. For the sake of the people of Greece we should all hope that what we have been seeing is temporary. Prime Minister Tsipras's letter of last week saying that Greece is running out of money is sobering. It may well be that an agreement cannot be reached, but it would serve everyone's interests if the sloganeering and aggression were put aside for a few weeks and there was a genuine effort to find one.

I welcome that the summit discussed and refused to lift current sanctions on Russia for its invasion and partition of Ukraine. The real substance of the Minsk accords revolves around whether Russia will allow Ukraine to regain control of its own international border. It is ominous that the Russian-installed rebel leaders announced last week that they want Russia to lead a so-called peacekeeping mission to Donetsk and Luhansk. They have rejected the proposal that a genuinely independent peacekeeping force from the United Nations or the OSCE be sent, and they continue to deny OSCE monitors access to many areas. In the four other frozen conflicts which have involved the *de facto* partitioning of states formerly under the imperial control of Russia, the installation of Russian peacekeepers has been the moment when the sovereignty of the state was ended in the enclave. In the occupied parts of Georgia this has gone even further.

The sanctions have had an impact. Kremlin-linked oligarchs are the ones who have suffered the most and the sanctions have shown that Europe is not willing simply to do nothing in the face of the invasion and partition of Ukraine. We should also note that the deterioration of

human rights in Crimea continues. Two people have been convicted for the crime of flying the Ukrainian flag. The Tatar minority is being suppressed. Freedom of speech is disappearing. In the face of this, President Putin has confirmed that he and the Russian state invaded Crimea before the illegitimate referendum. He has also continued his recent bullying policy towards other states, making trial bombing runs against a number of neutral states including Ireland and Sweden. At the weekend his Government announced that Denmark would be the target of nuclear attacks if it went ahead with a missile shield.

Sinn Féin has, of course, maintained its policy of refusing to stand with Ukraine against its partition by Russia. It continues to use the weasel words of blaming the United States and Europe while steadfastly refusing to make the simple statement that Russia should get out of Ukraine. As predicted a fortnight ago the massed ranks of Sinn Féin representatives that went to the United States last week did not repeat their attack on the Obama Administration while they were busy collecting cheques. Deputy Adams even took the time to have a hissy fit over the fact that the US Administration was not making a senior enough official available to receive him in Washington.

It remains the case that there is an extremist alliance in Europe standing with Russia against the citizens of neighbouring countries. Last week a Kremlin-funded group held a conference in St. Petersburg where the British National Party, Golden Dawn of Greece and other fascist parties spoke up in favour of Putin's actions. At the weekend the French Front National used an €8 million soft loan from Russia to fund regional election campaigns. There is, in fact, almost no hard right or hard left party in Europe which does not support the increasingly authoritarian and aggressive Putin regime. I welcome the element in the Taoiseach's statement relating to the concerted effort by Europe to deal with Russian disinformation on the Continent.

Deputy Boyd Barrett need not take this as applying to him as he did in our last session. He is unusual in the Irish left in having protested outside the Russian Embassy in the past. However, he too is guilty of applying false equivalences in this case. Nothing Europe has done in any way justifies what Russia has done to Ukraine. The Ukrainian people want to live in a free, united, democratic and European country. They have voted for this time and again and they have voted for the EU association agreement in overwhelming numbers. They gave up their nuclear weapons in return for a promise that their borders would be respected. It is our duty to stand with them and we should support a significant expansion in direct aid.

On the subject of energy, the summit moved the agenda along in a formal way. I recognise the central and vital necessity of an energy union because unity of purpose across the European Union is essential for our energy security into the future. I also welcome the additional focus on the conclusion of bilateral agreements outside of the European energy union itself. However, the focus is not yet active or urgent enough to tackle the twin crises of climate change and energy blackmail, which go to the heart of a lot of the political instability and geopolitical challenges which Europe and the European Union currently face.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Brian Walsh): Deputy Adams will share his time with Deputy Peadar Tóibín. Both speakers have seven and a half minutes.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Once again Greece was a focus in the most recent European Council meeting. Although, as the Taoiseach acknowledged, the issue was not officially on the agenda because of the refusal of some countries to formally discuss the matter, an important side meeting dealt with it. The Greek Prime Minister, Mr. Alexis Tsipras, briefed French and

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German leaders about the humanitarian crisis in Greece. He made it clear he wants to establish common ground in tackling this humanitarian crisis. He is also dissatisfied that officials from the creditor institutions have reportedly drawn red lines which are preventing Athens from making progress. It is clear that Mr. Tsipras is concerned that the ECB is attempting to strangle the Greek economy and handcuff the Government.

Greece's debt is completely unsustainable. So was ours, but instead of focusing on how to tackle Greece's debt and the humanitarian crisis the EU institutions are attempting to force the Greek Government to impose austerity. The ECB is not acting as a lender of last resort as it should. Instead, it is imposing restrictions which prevent Athens issuing more short-term debt to tide itself over.

This State and Greece have both had unfair debt burdens imposed on their citizens, in our case with the compliance of our Government. Instead of standing with the Greek Government in its attempts to tackle its humanitarian crisis the Taoiseach has consistently taken the side of the European elite and the ECB against the people of Greece. He has moved from being an architect of austerity in our own island to being an adviser on how it can be imposed on other European states. The Taoiseach said he told Prime Minister Tsipras that he worked with the institutions to ensure his programme was aligned with the policies of his Government, but did he tell him that he was elected to implement totally different policies? Did he tell him that he was elected with a mandate which is significantly different from the policies he is now imposing upon people here? Prime Minister Tsipras is acting on the basis of the mandate he received.

The Taoiseach: We reversed the minimum wage, reduced VAT and reduced unemployment.

Deputy Gerry Adams: An bhfuil an Taoiseach ag éisteacht liom?

The Taoiseach: Tá mé ag éisteacht go cruinn leis an Teachta agus tá mé ag tabhairt freagra.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Iarraim ar an Taoiseach a bheith ciúin agus a bheith ina thost.

The Taoiseach: Ní raibh an fhírinne á rá ag an Teachta ar chor ar bith.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The Taoiseach's approach at EU level, and this has been consistent since he became Taoiseach, has never been in the interests of the citizens of this State and his attitude to the Greek Government, and it was echoed by the Fianna Fáil leader, is clearly motivated by his own narrow electoral interests. His approach does not represent the sentiments of the majority of Irish citizens. Sinn Féin has been very clear in extending our support and solidarity to the Greek people who have stood up against the vested and powerful interests in the EU and the ECB. It is a pity that the Taoiseach's Government did not show the same confidence, the same sense of self-respect and the same sense of duty to Irish citizens as the Greek Government has shown to theirs.

The Taoiseach's reported comments to Prime Minister Tsipras in which he tried to peddle Ireland's two-tier economy, which is facilitating growing inequality and social disadvantage, as some sort of positive model - bearing in mind that earlier the Taoiseach could not answer a question from me as to how citizens with disabilities have been left waiting for two years to have very modest support - show, in many ways, the conservatism of this Government.

Just before the European Council meeting took place there were elections in Israel and the right wing Likud Party received the highest share of the vote and Benjamin Netanyahu is

attempting to form a coalition government this time. However, in the run up to last week's election he stated that he will continue to do everything he can to deny the Palestinian people their right to independence and self-determination. On the morning of the vote Mr. Netanyahu also released a video condemning Arabs for turning out in high numbers to vote and blaming this on foreign funded non-governmental organisations, NGOs. This was both racist and anti-democratic. The EU and other countries worldwide have an important role to play in ensuring the two state solution is supported and promoted, and I understand this is the view of the Taoiseach's Government. Were Mr. Netanyahu's comments discussed at the Council meeting? I welcome the recent visit there of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Flanagan. The Irish Government has been vocal in its support for the two state solution but has sat back for far too long on the recognition of Palestine.

Towards the end of last year, as the Taoiseach will recall, motions were unanimously passed in the Dáil and the Seanad calling on the Taoiseach's Government to urgently recognise the State of Palestine. He has yet to do this. Why is that the case? Are Mr. Netanyahu's comments not a call to action? Do we not need to send a clear message to the outgoing or incoming Prime Minister of Israel, whoever he or she might be, that they do not control or own Palestinian sovereignty? That right belongs solely to the Palestinian people. Will the Taoiseach now, as a matter of urgency, set the wheels in motion to ensure that this State becomes the 136th state to recognise the State of Palestine?

Recently, my party colleague and the chairperson of the European Parliament's delegation to Palestine, Martina Anderson MEP, was denied access to Gaza by the Israeli authorities. This is the second time she and delegations of European parliamentarians have been denied access to that part of the Palestinian territories. It is unacceptable that an official EU delegation to Palestine is refused entry to inspect the dreadful situation there. I know the Taoiseach was there some time ago and we all know that the situation has deteriorated since then. It is unacceptable given that the EU is the largest financial donor to the Palestinians and that a delegation of the European Parliament should not be allowed to visit it. I was also denied access on my last visit to that region. Will the Taoiseach formally complain to the Israeli ambassador in Dublin about their continually refusing entry to Gaza to Irish political representatives?

I also note the Taoiseach's remarks on the conflict in Ukraine. Sinn Féin welcomes the Minsk agreements, the ceasefires and the potential bridge to a genuine peace process but there has been firing from both sides on the front line which is undermining the ceasefire. Will the Taoiseach agree that the onus is on all sides and on international actors to reduce tensions in the region, to focus on resolving the conflict and to urgently tackle the humanitarian crisis that has been created in Ukraine?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: From reading the conclusions of this European Council meeting it is welcome that Europe is both promoting the use of renewable energy among member states while also respecting member states who choose to use a different energy mix within the state that is tailored to their own needs. The White Paper on Energy Policy in Ireland, which is currently being drafted, will hopefully show that while wind energy is an effective source of renewable energy, we need diversity in the supply of renewable energy. We need to investigate the development of solar, wave and tidal energy. It is also welcome that a focus is being put on energy storage. As Ireland is an island nation, we have a lack of grid interconnection with the rest of Europe. It is important we focus on the development of energy storage systems, which would be of major significance to this country.

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The improvement in energy efficiency in the housing sector is also a massive issue. The improvement in the level of energy efficiency to date has been very poor. It is also very important in tackling fuel poverty. I urge the Government to focus resources on alleviating fuel poverty with regard to energy efficiency. The most vulnerable in society should not be sacrificed during the transition to renewable energy. There needs to be a European-wide definition of fuel poverty and a sufficient strategy on how it should be tackled.

We learned recently that following years of loyal and unstinting commitment to the EU's austerity rules, regardless of their effect on the social and economic fabric of the State, the Government has now got a problem with the EU's budgetary rules. It is a little late in the day for the Minister, Deputy Michael Noonan, to be worried about the EU's austerity rules. What is shocking for most of us on this side of the House who have argued that those rules have been inefficient and unfair in the effect they have had on the poor and vulnerable is that the concern about the rules and the tough talking that is now taking place is due to the fact that the Government has made the promise of a tax cut to a certain income bracket, one that the members of Government inhabit. Where was the concern when the austerity rules were leading to a third of a million people emigrating? Where was the tough talk with the troika when the troika-inspired cuts were shrinking the economy? It is a little late in the day for the Taoiseach to be getting worried about austerity rules. He campaigned for them and implemented them in this State regardless of their social and economic cost during the past four years.

Last summer, Italy and France started to campaign for some flexibility and we in Sinn Féin called on the Government to back them, but all we heard was stony silence. As always, the Government follows; it is simply incapable of taking a lead in this issue. I imagine the Taoiseach's EU counterparts raised an eyebrow or two when they heard that suddenly Ireland wants to object to these rules. The Taoiseach and the Government have loyally implemented austerity rules on cuts and reductions without protest. I am more inclined to believe that this sudden turn of face, this new road to Damascus conversion by the Government has all got to do with the issue of expenditure benchmarks. This rule, which will apply to Ireland's budget in October, will, according to a reply from my colleague, Deputy Pearse Doherty, limit Ireland's new expenditure to €400 million.

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Given that the Government has promised it in another irresponsible and unfair tax cut targeting higher earners, it is scrambling for some leeway to fulfil commitments to its narrow sector of society.

The Government is one of the most divisive in the history of the State with regard to the two-tiered society it has created. Over the past years it is very clear that we have a Government of the haves against the have-nots, with a Government of private health against public health care and the Government of bank debt and bond debt against household debt. This is a Government of high-paid earners against low-paid earners and these are totally in line with the Government's approach to the next budget.

We should have leeway. Sinn Féin is the party of self-determination. We should have leeway with regards to improving our public services, abolishing regressive and unjust taxes and tackling homelessness. Over Christmas, the Dáil was inflamed by the need to tackle homelessness. In my county, the budget meant to build new houses has not arrived at the end of the first quarter of the year. The Government had no difficulty in undermining access to public services.

People have bad access if they want to access public health services through the accident and emergency units because they must wait on trolleys. People also have problems with access to elective surgery-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Brian Walsh): I remind Deputy Tóibín that these are statements on the European Council.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This is connected to the European semesterisation, which is connected to the budget.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Brian Walsh): The Deputy has one minute remaining.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Perhaps that can be extended because I have been needlessly interrupted by the Acting Chairman.

The European Council called on the EU to make every effort to successfully conclude TTIP negotiations in 2015. The rush to complete this agreement is unprecedented. A massive tide of popular opinion is turning against TTIP across Europe. Is that why the European Council called for the EU to hurriedly finish negotiations? It is happening in the dark, as there is no transparency. The rush to finish it will create a further lack of transparency. The Taoiseach is shaking his head but the European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, made a recommendation on 7 January 2015 that there should be greater public access to key TTIP negotiating documents. In response to a question raised by Sinn Féin in the European Parliament yesterday, the Commission stated that documents setting out the position of the EU on key aspects of the TTIP negotiations, such as public procurement, will not be made public. Is the Taoiseach not concerned that the European Commission is ignoring the Ombudsman's advice? The simple fact of the matter is that the European public have a fundamental right to access those documents, to know what deals the European Commission is making on our behalf and what lobby groups have the inside track on these negotiations.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I propose to share time with Deputies Clare Daly, Catherine Murphy and Boyd Barrett.

The departing Taoiseach spoke in glowing terms about TTIP, calling it an ambitious, comprehensive and mutually beneficial agreement. Recently, a legal document from the regulatory co-operation chapter of the agreement was leaked, which makes the Taoiseach's statement seem naive or willfully deceptive. The leaked document clearly outlines how TTIP is being used to undermine democracy by putting the concerns of corporations before the interests of the people Governments are supposed to be serving. Business Europe and the US Chamber of Commerce, as far back as 2012, have been lobbying for the regulatory co-operation mechanism. They want to establish a private forum that will come into being after TTIP has been implemented, where any legislation or regulations proposed by any EU member state that affects their profits can be brought to their attention before the legislation or regulation comes into effect. To quote Corporate Europe Observatory "This means businesses, for instance, at an early stage, can try to block rules intended to prevent the food industry from marketing foodstuffs with toxic substances, laws trying to keep energy companies from destroying the climate, or regulations to combat pollution and protect consumers."

On top of this, laws and regulations that affect trade will have to pass an impact assessment. If it is found that the interests of corporations are infringed in any way, a report by the proposed regulatory co-operation body will cite a detrimental impact on transatlantic trade. The new

rules also outline how a regulatory exchange must take place if a party requests it on the basis that planned or existing regulatory acts of member states are likely to have an impact on trade and investment. While it was pointed out by the director of trade policy today that the leaked document has yet to be finalised, striking articles are contained in the chapter as it stands and they pose grave questions about the value of democracy in the western hemisphere.

In another attack on democracy coming from the EU, which is repeatedly and publicly supported by this Government, Greece is denied the autonomy of a breathing space to construct an alternative to destructive austerity. Any economist worth his salt and not in the pay of the financial sector knows that austerity only serves the short-term interests of the elite and furthers the gap between rich and poor, which serves no one in the long term. The newly elected Greek Government was given a clear mandate by the public to find an alternative to austerity. Syriza is trying to place the will of the people before the interests of the elites and the banks and is paying a high price for it. The rules of engagement in the eurozone are rigid and the masters in Berlin and Brussels allow little space to negotiate a path between the extremes of austerity or euro exit. The Greeks are looking at a situation where they must choose between denying the democratic mandate and breaking all their promises by submitting to the demands of the unelected yet most powerful institutions in Europe or staying true to the ideals of democracy as best they can in negotiating the turbulent waters of an exit from the eurozone. What is frightening is the manner in which the Brussels group, the troika and Germany have behaved. They show little or no mercy and no compromise. The brutality of the response to Greek demands illustrates that the EU no longer has an interest in democracy. Whenever there is an election and whoever gets elected and whatever they promise their people, they must subordinate everything to uphold the logic of the markets as dictated by the only true sovereign these days, which resides in Frankfurt, Brussels and Berlin. God be with the days when Europe was a place where all nations were treated fairly.

Deputy Clare Daly: I am not the only one who was embarrassed beyond belief by the conduct of this Government in its approach to our colleagues in Greece. The Government is behaving like the teacher's pet, sitting up in the front row sniggering and delighting in the teacher turning on the poor boy at the back of the class and giving him a beating. It is pathetic. I thought it was unrivalled until I listened to Deputy Martin. The attitude of Fianna Fáil is even worse. Not content with the teacher giving the young fellow a beating, they want the young fellow to be blamed for it.

The attitude is in sharp contrast to the attitude of ordinary Irish people. Instinctively, they feel solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Greece, which was graphically displayed on the protest on Saturday, where many Irish people who marched against this Government's austerity draped themselves in the Greek flag. It was an instinctive solidarity and it captured the real idea of what the EU ideal was supposed to be, a Europe of equals and where opportunities were given to those who need the most, the weakest. We have come a shocking way from that.

I want to make a couple of points about Libya. We heard the Council discussed the idea of supposedly stepping up support for Libya, even with the idea of sending in a security mission, which could even possibly involve troops from Ireland. This would be almost beyond belief when some of those going into clean up the mess were directly responsible for it in the first place, with the active role of the French and British in the bombing and decimation of that country. We must look at what the liberation has caused. Libya is a hellhole and the centre of ISIS activity, including a public beheading of 21 Egyptian fishermen and workers one month ago. The video showing it was released on the fourth anniversary of the so-called Libyan revolution.

In that context, all of the things the west accused the Gaddafi regime of being responsible for are being repeated by that which has replaced it. I refer to massacres, the shelling of residential areas, car bombings, mass arrests, torture, the theft of oil and other natural resources, etc. There are even two governments in place there and these comprise warring factions. The first of these is led by a stooge of the CIA who supposedly is fighting against an Islamic threat now and who fought with that agency against Gaddafi in the past. Libya was previously the wealthiest country in Africa. Its people had a high standard of living, access to free health care and education and there was a good electricity supply. All of these have been utterly decimated as a result of the conflict.

Some 1 million refugees have fled the country and entered Tunisia and a further 400,000 Libyans have been displaced. I understand the Council discussed the number of illegal immigrants fleeing into Europe. Some 200,000 people entered Europe illegally last year, as opposed to 60,000 in 2013. Why do the members of the Council think all of those immigrants are coming here and seeking sanctuary? It is because of the horror that has been unleashed in their own countries. President Obama told us that this is the new humanitarian model but what is now in place is absolutely reprehensible. The idea that the EU is going to go in and save the day and that Ireland might play its part in this regard is a joke.

My final point relates to Ukraine. I really do not want to start talking about this issue because I could be here for the remainder of the evening. I do not support President Putin in any way but the remarks made by Deputy Martin were unbelievable. The idea that NATO is blameless is just not acceptable, particularly when one considers that 26 out of the 28 NATO countries are located in Europe and that 12 of these are in eastern Europe. Deputy Martin indicated that he is upset about an extremist far-right alliance supporting Russia but he had absolutely nothing to say regarding the far-right fascist elements inside the Ukrainian Government. What we criticise is the lack of balance relating to and inconsistency of these programmes and the fact that those in Europe support one side when they should stay out of other people's business.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I wish to focus on two aspects of the matters discussed by the European Council, namely, energy union and jobs and growth. I am trying to square the circle in respect of those issues and the fiscal policy being pursued by the European Union. Rigid adherence to debt-to-GDP ratios in the context of dealing with the debt issue is actually undermining any prospect of delivering a different type of economy that will be less carbon dependent into the future. There is an urgent need for a European debt conference that will deal with this issue in a more comprehensive way. I, too, am embarrassed by the way in which the Government is interacting with Greece. Ireland should show solidarity with a country which is in such difficulties, particularly as we understand the impact those difficulties can have on citizens. Like Greece, France and Italy have serious levels of debt.

Let us consider the kind of fiscal expansion that is going to be needed in order to facilitate the development of a different kind of Europe that will deal with the issue of energy. I refer here to what is going to be required in areas such as transport and retrofitting of buildings. In Ireland's case, it is going to be necessary to invest in the development of an offshore energy industry. The raw materials are there in abundance to allow Ireland to deliver but it cannot do so because it does not have the ability to raise the kind of capital necessary to facilitate the kind of fiscal expansion required. A development such as that to which I refer would change this country radically - not just for now but in the years to come - deliver the jobs and growth that are needed and give us hope for the future. The NESC report on transitioning into a carbon-neutral society identifies offshore wind and wave energy as a source of major opportunity into

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the future. At present, we import €7 billion worth of oil and gas each year. Our dependency rate in respect of fossil fuels stands at 90%, whereas across the European Union the average stands at 55%. We need to take urgent action in respect of this matter or we will be obliged to pay in hard cash when we cannot meet the international obligations up to which we and the European Union have signed.

In practical terms, if we were to invest in developing a DART underground service, this would transform the public transport system and deliver on some of our commitments in respect of the area of transport. If we opted for the underground option, then the number of passenger journeys would rise from 33 million to 100 million. This could make the single biggest difference to the transport system in this country. We only ever talk about retrofitting homes. However, we could reduce our oil and gas imports if we were to take action in this area.

That to which I refer will not be achieved in the absence of a rational fiscal policy at European level, where debt is treated in a more long-term way and where some of it is either parked or written off in order that we might develop a different kind of Europe. We must take the shackles off if we are going to do as I suggest and deliver jobs and growth in areas in which they really do need to be delivered.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach's demeanour and behaviour in respect of Greece at the most recent Council meeting were nothing short of despicable. Regardless of where this all ends, the Greek Government has at least challenged the narrative of austerity that has done such damage, crushed the ordinary people of Greece and given rise to a desperate humanitarian crisis and asked that the possibility of introducing alternative policies that will not require future suffering on the part of ordinary people be considered. Instead of stating that the Greeks are absolutely right - particularly in light of our own humanitarian difficulties, namely, the unprecedented housing crisis, the unbelievable increase in child poverty levels and a similar increase in the number of suicides related to the economic crash - showing solidarity with them and appealing for relief, latitude and an end to policies which cause human suffering, the Government chose to stab them in the back. We have aligned ourselves with austerity bullies such as Angela Merkel and Mario Draghi, and the remainder of the financial, corporate and political elite throughout Europe, who are willing to sacrifice the livelihoods and well-being of ordinary people in Greece and, for that matter, in Ireland. That is absolutely shameful and treacherous and not just in the context of the Greek people but also regarding our own citizens.

Deputy Clare Daly referred to the demonstration which took place at the weekend. The Minister of State really should have been in attendance because he would have seen people holding aloft the Irish flag in one hand and the Greek flag in the other. It was fantastic and demonstrated both instinctive internationalism and the sense of international solidarity between people in this country and their counterparts on the other side of Europe.

The Taoiseach, Chancellor Merkel and all the rest of them are playing with fire in terms of what they are doing. If the people who are opposed to austerity and who stand on the tradition of solidarity between different nationalities against austerity do not prevail, then that will create the space for the far right to grow. I was interviewed by a German journalist who is based in Saxony in recent days and I must admit that what he told me was terrifying. Immigrants are now afraid to walk the streets of the major cities in Saxony, such is the level of growth among Pegida and other organisations on the fascist far right. It is scary for immigrants to walk on the streets. The fascists are able to mobilise up to 60,000 people on the streets in Germany. We have not seen figures like that since the 1930s. The growth of the far-right in Greece and other

parts of Europe is a direct result of austerity. In the absence of an alternative being offered by the political establishment, the anger and despair at austerity is beginning to express itself in the most disgusting and frightening ways. The Minister of State is playing with fire. He should stand with the people who are fighting austerity rather than stab them in the back.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Brian Walsh): We will now take questions from lead spokespersons.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Notwithstanding the concerns expressed by a number of colleagues about the comments from my leader regarding those who have been supportive of Russia's position in Ukraine, the Ukrainian people have on several occasions voted to be part of the European Union. They voted for EU association agreements in overwhelming numbers. It is clear that the democratic wish of the Ukrainian people is to be part of the European Union. The comments from Fianna Fáil Members should be understood in that context. I do not ask the Minister of State to espouse Fianna Fáil's position but will he confirm that the position he and most other people are taking is based on a recognition of the democratic wishes of the people of Ukraine?

Deputy Dara Murphy: I was here for the debate with the Ukrainian ambassador and the other ambassadors. We have long espoused the view that the opportunity afforded to us in the 1970s should be shared with others. It is a noble ambition to share our common values of democracy and freedom. Deputy Martin's comments were in line with the views of the Government. I am disappointed that some contributors ignored the aggressive role that President Putin and his Government have played. The people of Ukraine will need to make significant steps in reforming their country's structures, and they are working with the European Union on the accession agenda. This will be discussed in the context of the eastern partnership talks which will take place in Riga in May. The scenes we saw in Ukraine, with the European Union flag being flown, represent a noble ambition on the part of the people of that country. We have an obligation to support that ambition and to stay united. The majority of opposition parties across the European Union support a united approach to sanctions against Russia. It is important that we stay united because that approach is bearing fruit.

Deputy Mick Wallace: It is hard to be here some days. The Minister of State, Deputy Dara Murphy, and my good friend, Deputy Dooley, seem to have forgotten that the trouble in Ukraine began when the elected government was overthrown, with serious financial assistance from the US. That was when most of the turmoil in Ukraine began.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Deputy Wallace's solution is to take Russian money.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I do not recall interrupting Deputy Dooley when he was speaking. The Taoiseach referred to the fact that Russia has broken international law. I agree with him. Russia often breaks international law. However, I do not think it has had quite as many opportunities to break international law as the United States. If one considers the number of countries that have been invaded, bombed or had their sovereignty challenged by the US in the past 50 years, Russia pales by comparison. We break international law by allowing US military planes to pass through Shannon Airport. We allow the place to be used as a US military base. It is a landing pad on the way to war. We facilitate the use of Shannon for military purposes.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: He is Putin's representative in Shannon.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Would he close it down?

Deputy Mick Wallace: The original invasion of Iraq in 1991 led to the death of more than 1 million people. It was horrific. Not happy with bombing the country, the US bullied the UN into introducing sanctions of such severity that Denis Halliday, who was in charge of the UN's humanitarian campaign, resigned on the grounds that his programme was complicit in genocide. The US invaded Iraq again in 2003, with Irish support. We were part of the coalition of the willing. Bertie Ahern told us we were not really participating but we allowed Shannon to be used by the US while it killed another 700,000 civilians in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. During his term of office, Barack Obama has bombed seven, predominantly Muslim, countries. This is a man who won the peace prize because he promised to put an end to the nuclear arms race. He cannot even get Israel to sign up to non-proliferation agreements. He has now agreed to expand the nuclear arms race again.

Blair and Bush are guilty of war crimes. Obama is guilty of war crimes. Putin is guilty of war crimes. Assad and Netanyahu are guilty of war crimes. We take sides. They are all bad people who have caused unmitigated disasters around the planet. We should not take any side. I have no respect for any of these people but we are getting involved, and we are not neutral. How can the Taoiseach give out about Russia's breaches of international law without bringing a balance to the issue? He was over in New York kissing Obama's backside and there was not a word about the fact that the man is guilty of war crimes. Where is the balance?

It breaks my heart that we cannot stay out of these matters and take a neutral position of working for peace. The arms race and the militarisation of the planet is causing untold disaster for millions of people. Old people, women and children suffer the most because they occupy most of the buildings that are destroyed by bombs. Able bodied men are not usually in the buildings when the bombs drop on them. Women, children and the elderly are the ones who most commonly die. It is crazy. I urge the Minister of State to bring balance to these matters by restoring our neutrality.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Brian Walsh): I do not know if there was a question.

Deputy Dara Murphy: The European Council did not discuss our relations with the United States of America. It is frustrating, when we are discussing serious issues for elderly people, children and citizens generally in Ukraine and the difficulties arising for everybody in trying to de-escalate the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, to repeatedly hear about every other alleged improper act by other countries.

In regard to countries on the European Continent that share the ambition to be part of the European Union, it is in Ireland's interest that their borders, their integrity and their democracies are protected and assisted in being protected. As Deputy Wallace pointed out, we are a neutral country and have always said we do not believe there can be a military solution to the problem in eastern Ukraine. That said, the EU has significant economic tools at its disposal as a family of nations to ensure that the rule of law and the democratic rights and ambitions of the people of Ukraine are protected. We will continue to play our part in that.

In respect of Shannon, the Deputy will be aware that for almost 50 years the arrangements relating to the use of Shannon Airport have been in place and do not form any part of a military alliance. The arrangements are governed by strict conditions which are employed to ensure compatibility with our traditional approach of military neutrality, which involves non-participation in military alliances. As I have said here previously, as a family of 28 member states, and notwithstanding our neutrality, the position regarding Ukraine is different. The EU must

be more engaged with crises and conflicts that take place on our borders, because these impact our partner member states that border with Russia and other accession countries and eastern partners. Therefore, the Government fully supports the unified approach we have seen to date.

That is not to say we feel there is not potential for reform regarding actions in Ukraine, whether structural or economic. The EU is working with Ukraine and I have attended meetings where reform and supports are encouraged. Indeed, Ireland and the EU have given significant financial aid to date. I believe it is unhelpful to try to muddy the waters by suggesting some excuse or rationale whereby there can be some blurring regarding who is the aggressor and who is the victim in this instance. It is the shared view of the EU that Ukraine and the Ukrainian people are the victims and that as a smaller state, they need and will get the protection of the EU.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Other issues raised at the Council related to future energy policy and jobs and growth. How can these possibly develop in the economic environment that now pertains throughout the EU and with the level of debt in so many countries, even larger countries like France which has a debt to GDP ratio of approximately 93%? How can we have the kind of fiscal expansion required into areas that will deliver on a carbon neutral economy without investing in retrofitting housing, developing an offshore energy industry and upgrading public transport to a beneficial level? How can we square that circle?

I am looking at this from an Irish perspective, but we could make a similar case for most other European countries. How can we live up to the obligations we have signed up to in terms of being carbon neutral in the future while being so hamstrung by the level of debt? Does the Minister not believe that a debt conference is critical so that we can examine the issues more completely, rather than to look at the issues from the point of view of debt? Should we not look at how we can grow in a different way in the future?

Deputy Dara Murphy: Deputy Murphy raised this point earlier and I fully agree with the sentiment and the point she is making. In Ireland and across the European Union we have had a protracted period of under investment in renewable energy sources and the targets we set ourselves a number of years ago will not be achieved. The energy conference in Paris in December will present an opportunity for the world to look again at the direction we are taking in regard to achieving a more sustainable environment.

The Deputy made a valid point regarding the complementary nature of the ambition of achieving our energy targets and achieving growth. I believe the recently announced investment package by Jean-Claude Juncker should be targeted at energy and renewable projects. At the European Council last Friday, the Taoiseach succeeded in having a clause inserted in the text that proposes that poorly connected and peripheral countries should be given extra consideration in respect of projects. Therefore, there is potential within the new fund to consider the complementary ambitions of addressing areas where Europe and Ireland have under invested and of helping achieve the type of growth that will come from that spending. The interconnection project between Ireland and France could benefit in this regard. I believe the application on this project is at an advanced stage and it could supply energy for up to 500,000 people.

A number of weeks ago, we had an interesting discussion in Ringaskiddy with the French Minister for European Affairs on the potential for the development of marine energy, whether from wind or wave. This was not just in regard to the Irish coast. France has an extensive coastline itself and shares our ambition.

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Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): As we are approaching the end of the time allowed for this discussion, the Minister of State may want to make his concluding statement.

Deputy Clare Daly: Are we not just coming towards the end of time for questions?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Yes, but we have a time limit.

Deputy Dara Murphy: I believe I have two more minutes for questions and then five minutes to wrap up.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): A Member cannot raise a question while sitting, but must offer a question.

Deputy Clare Daly: It is customary for the Chair to call the next speaker. The Chair was not at all democratic.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy got the opportunity to rise. I looked in her direction, but she remained seated. If she wants to use the last minute, she has her chance now.

Deputy Clare Daly: The Minister of State seems to be wearing his rose tinted glasses to-night. He mentioned several times that the European Union had a unified approach on Ukraine and, in particular, the sanctions. Is that not a little bit of a glossy version of the truth? Is it not the case that the Czech President, for example, has come out and said that the Union should recognise the Russian takeover of Crimea and that a number of businesses, in Germany in particular, are strongly lobbying that the sanctions be lifted? The cracks are emerging in that regard.

Second, will the Minister of State clarify that the types of reform he says are necessary for Ukraine relate to the privatisation of everything, something the Prime Minister has already purported to be in favour of? The issue raised about the history of the crisis there is not about muddying the waters, rather it is simply the reality that one cannot solve a problem if one does not know the origins of the problem to begin with. The roots of what happened in the Ukraine go back to the overthrow of the government there and interference from external forces for their own benefit and not that of the Ukrainian people. I ask if the Minister of State could also address the point about Libya in terms of what was discussed and whether any security arrangement might involve Ireland.

Deputy Dara Murphy: The conclusions on Ukraine were unanimously adopted. I will briefly address the issue of Libya within the time constraints. Last week the Heads of State and Government decided that as soon as the agreement to form the government of national unity is reached, the European Union stands ready to contribute by making full use of all its instruments. It is important, notwithstanding the recent terrible events in Libya, that the European Union should play a very strong role in supporting the Libyan people. The EU high representative, Federica Mogherini, is working on proposals including possible options under the common security and defence policy. I do not wish to prejudge the outcome of her deliberations but if in due course there is an agreement at EU level on the need for CSDP activities in support of security arrangements in Libya, Ireland will give careful consideration to any request it may receive from the EU with regard to participation in those activities. The triple lock will apply on this or any future intervention by our Defence Forces. The triple lock consists of the UN,

the Dáil and the Government.

In the time available to me I will make my concluding remarks. On St. Patrick's Day I attended the General Affairs Council which prepared the European Council meeting which took place two days later and included an extensive discussion on the draft conclusions. On the subject of energy union I emphasised the importance of interconnections with peripheral regions as we discussed earlier. The Taoiseach also discussed this topic. It is very important that this acceptance of our peripheral status is included. The Taoiseach referred to my recent attendance at the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs on the European semester. At the General Affairs Council I emphasised the need to make the process more open and inclusive and to ensure stronger engagement at national level. There is a much longer process for the European semester. Members may recall last year it was only a number of days. I was a member of the finance committee last year and there was quite a high level of dissatisfaction at that fact. Hopefully this year there will be greater engagement. It is not just a matter for the finance committee and we would encourage other sectoral committees to engage in the European semester process. The extension of time has been made available for more national debate and we urge as many committees as feel it is appropriate to engage with the process.

The European Council also discussed the Eastern partnership in view of the upcoming summit in Riga. The Heads of State and Government reaffirmed the European Union's commitment to the Eastern partnership which provides a framework for the EU's relationship with six countries of Eastern Europe, including Ukraine. The leaders committed to strengthening EU relations with each of the six Eastern partners on the basis of differentiation and taking into account each country's individual level of ambition for its relations with Europe and also bearing in mind that these are in line with the European Union's interests and values. This was the point to which I referred earlier in the debate about the importance of engagement with countries involved in the Eastern partnership.

The European Council also urged member states to complete their ratification on EU association agreements with the three partners, Georgia, Moldova and the Ukraine. The House approved the terms of these association agreements following a debate last January and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade will ensure that formal ratification procedures are completed in advance of the Riga summit. The EU will continue its discussions with the three other Eastern partners, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, to further the EU's bilateral and multilateral co-operation, as appropriate, under the Eastern partnership umbrella.

Leaders agreed that the summit will be a key opportunity to convey the message that the Eastern partnership is not directed against any third country and that the EU is not seeking to create dividing lines in Europe. The European Council also looked to the future of the Eastern partnership and called for enhanced co-operation in a number of areas including, state building, mobility and people-to-people contacts, market opportunities and interconnections in the transport and energy sectors.

The conclusions adopted by the European Council clearly illustrate the commitment of the European Union to Libya in this time of crisis. The EU is considering how best it can respond to this crisis and I refer to the EU high representative, Federica Mogherini. The most recent round of the UN-brokered political dialogue commenced in Morocco last Friday. Bernardino Leon, the UN special representative, expressed his view that we are now in a decisive moment and this is clearly the case. As he pushes for an inclusive agreement on the establishment of a unity government and related security arrangements, Mr. Leon has Ireland's full support and

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that of the European partners. The continued fighting and the actions by groups affiliated with ISIS, which we have witnessed in recent days, are very grim warning signs. If unresolved, the crisis in Libya will lead to a catastrophic impact which will not be limited to Libya's frontiers but rather will be felt across north Africa, the Mediterranean, as well as the rest of Europe.

I thank Members for their questions.

Topical Issue Debate

Foreign Conflicts

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Minister of State and I will both agree that Syria is in a terrible situation with 3.3 million refugees, 5.5 million displaced within the country and another 3 million who have left the country to look for work. This amounts to approximately 12 million people in total. The people are starving with four out of five people said to be living in dire poverty and suffering hunger.

It is very difficult to know what Ireland can do but one thing we should encourage is the realisation that there will not be a military solution to the crisis. All the turmoil started out of the bombing of Iraq beginning in 2003 which in turn led to civil war in Iraq between Sunni and Shia and the creation of ISIS. The recent bombing campaign by the US in Iraq and Syria is unlikely to help the situation. The flow of arms from western allies and from the Saudis through Turkey into Syria will not help things. There will not be a military solution. We must encourage the US to sit down with the Russians and the Iranians to stop the massacre and the violence because it is too horrific for words. Those parties are the most powerful and they can make a difference. The work must be towards securing a truce. While work towards achieving a truce in Syria is worthwhile, the flow of arms to Israel must stop and Palestine must be recognised as a state in its own right. Much of the trouble in the Middle East emanates from the problems in Palestine and these problems will continue until justice is achieved for the Palestinians.

Deputy Clare Daly: It is difficult to speak in two minutes about the unending horror being faced by people in Syria. We tabled this topical issue on the fourth anniversary of the start of the conflict because after four years of unrelenting struggle, desolation reigns and there is no end in sight for the country's citizens. It is not that Syrian people support one political faction or another but that they are simply exhausted and war-weary. Millions are living in refugee camps where their basic needs are not met, while others starve. More than 200,000 people have been killed, yet nobody remembers the dead because there are no morgues and no functioning state to register their deaths. The economy has shrunk, poverty is everywhere and ISIS holds sway in large parts of the north and east of the country. Syria is in an unmitigated humanitarian disaster.

While it is necessary to look forward, we must also look back. When President Obama decided to arm the Syrian opposition Deputy Wallace and I argued in this Chamber that his decision would make matters worse rather than better. I do not feel good making that statement but it is true. Two years ago, Oxfam issued a statement in which it pointed out that sending arms to the Syrian opposition would not "create a level playing field." It continued:

Instead, it risks further fuelling an arms free-for-all where the victims are the civilians of Syria. Our experience from other conflict zones tells us that this crisis will only drag on for far longer if more and more arms are poured into the country.

This militarisation of the conflict is the nub of the issue. Military support by external forces, including bombing raids, must stop to create a space amid the desolation that would allow Syrians to try to grapple with a solution. As a neutral country, Ireland should be spearheading this call.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Dara Murphy): I welcome the opportunity to reflect on the appalling tragedy which unfolds daily in Syria. I fully concur with the Deputies' analysis of the extent of the tragedy in Syria and the terrible loss of life that has occurred. This issue has been raised to coincide with the fourth anniversary of the start of the conflict. On 15 March 2011, brave young Syrians began to protest against the corruption of the Assad regime, calling for reform and better government. The leadership of the Syrian regime chose to refuse these demands and acted to suppress the popular protests by murdering and torturing civilians, thereby initiating a fight against its own people.

The horrific conflict that ensued has led to the deaths of more than 200,000 Syrians and almost 4 million refugees have fled to neighbouring countries. Of the 7.5 million people displaced inside Syria, more than half are children who have been traumatised by the violence they have witnessed. Life expectancy in Syria has fallen by a scarcely believable 24 years since the beginning of the conflict, proof, if it were needed, of the horrific hardship and suffering borne by the Syrian population.

Ireland stands with its international partners in supporting a political solution which draws on the principles set out in the 2012 Geneva communiqué, namely, an end to violence, the formation of an inclusive transitional governing body with executive powers and the initiation of a constitutional process for a democratic Syria which preserves Syria's multiethnic and multi-religious character.

Ireland's humanitarian assistance for the people of Syria since 2011 has already reached €31 million. Working with trusted non-governmental organisation partners, United Nations agencies and the Red Cross, our support has met a range of emergency needs, including food, water and sanitation, shelter and other forms of protection. Humanitarian access within Syria remains hampered by regime restrictions on aid agencies, the disunity of the armed opposition and the intensity of the conflict. I repeat the Government's call for safe and unhindered humanitarian access.

Ireland will continue to provide humanitarian assistance in response to ongoing needs in Syria and neighbouring countries hosting Syrian refugees. We have already provided €1.8 million to support the work of UN agencies in 2015, most of which targets the needs of children. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Sean Sherlock, will attend a pledging conference for Syria in Kuwait next week, at which he will set out how Ireland intends to support the Syrian people in 2015 and will pledge further funding.

I repeat Ireland's condemnation of the multiple war crimes suffered by the Syrian people at the hands of all parties to the conflict. I also reiterate our call on the Security Council to refer the position in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

Ireland is also working on the implementation of measures to address terrorism and violent

extremism, which are a threat to the peoples and countries of the Middle East and Europe. We are committed to protecting all victims of violent and extremist ideology and determined to respond to these threats, while strengthening the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms. With our international partners, Ireland remains fully committed to doing everything in its power to end the terrible suffering of the Syrian people.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Minister and I agree that both sides in the Syrian conflict have been guilty of horrific crimes. The use of arms and bombing by both sides is not helping matters. When Pol Pot started his campaign he had an army of 5,000 men, yet within four years the actions of President Nixon and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, through the use of B52 bombers, had increased this figure to 200,000. ISIS is similar to Pol Pot's crowd in that its members are also a bad shower that has grown out of the violence in the region. We need to stop this violence and advocate for the bombing campaign in Syria and Iraq to stop. ISIS will not be beaten by bombing them from 30,000 ft. The bombing campaign does not solve the problem as it causes even greater misery for the citizens who must live under it. We must call on everyone to stop supplying arms and munitions to Syria.

The Minister of State is dead right; Assad is an animal. However, when people took to the streets in Bahrain the Saudis, using US munitions and arms, stopped the protests because the Bahraini Government could not handle them.

Deputy Clare Daly: While we could all sign up to the aspirations set out in the Geneva communiqué of 2012, they are a million miles away from the reality on the ground in Syria. The communiqué refers to a constitutional process and calls for a democratic Syria, yet it is no longer certain that Syria exists as a country. It is certainly not multiethnic or multi-religious in character and is falling apart in the most traumatic way. One year after the communiqué was issued, the United States and other countries decided to arm the Syrian opposition, including jihadists. This decision contributed to the problems being experienced by the country and I expect that, in retrospect, the countries in question regret their decision given the crisis it helped to spawn. This vindicates our point that one cannot hope for good to come from external military intervention in such conflicts. Only bad things come from such an approach, of which the mushrooming of ISIS has been a by-product. Therefore, I strongly support the call that Ireland, as a supposedly neutral country, should be arguing for an end to both the arms that are going in from external sources and the bombs that are being dropped, as well as a facilitation of peace on the ground.

7 o'clock

Deputy Dara Murphy: There is broad agreement that the only possible future to what is the most dangerous and destabilising crisis in the Middle East, given the number of people who have been displaced or killed, is work that will deliver de-escalation. To that end, the United Nations special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, is working to attempt the extremely difficult task of promoting a graduated de-escalation proposal based on local conflict freezes, almost to break off pieces of the conflict to ascertain whether they can be addressed. It is hoped this will create conditions for political negotiations that may lead to ending the conflict. However, the Deputy is correct. This initiative is proving extremely difficult to implement on the ground in the face of military actions by all parties now concerned. The aspirations of the communiqué are a million miles away from what is happening on the ground and the collapse of the legitimacy and authority of state institutions across much of Syria, just as happened previously in Iraq, has created conditions that have allowed for the emergence of radical non-state groups and in par-

ticular the violent extremist Sunni groups known as ISIS or ISIL. One must hope that Staffan de Mistura can achieve his ambition. There was significant discussion on the matter recently at the Foreign Affairs Council, as well as support for his ambition to try to create these conflict-free zones to allow some attempt at conflict negotiation.

Garda Stations

Deputy Frank Feighan: I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Dara Murphy, to confirm the opening hours status of Boyle Garda station and to provide an update on the matter. There has been local speculation about changes to Boyle Garda station's opening times and I ask the Minister of State to provide reassurance and clarity in this regard. I am aware that the chief superintendent of the Longford-Roscommon Garda division has moved to allay concerns by stating these changes are not a retrograde step and will help make more gardaí visible in the community out on patrol and will ensure they are mounting more checkpoints. I also am glad to note the chief superintendent stated there would be no reduction in the number of front-line gardaí. All Members agree that it is vital to have a visible and effective police service on which families, businesses and communities can rely. All Members are aware that An Garda Síochána is undergoing reform and central to this reform is that the operational strategy is aimed at freeing up more gardaí from desk duties, increasing the number of patrols and enhancing visibility in rural areas in particular on a 24-7 basis. This allows gardaí to respond even faster to incidents and especially in the more remote areas, this must be welcomed.

The question must be asked as to whether this strategy is working. As the Minister of State probably will note, the evidence indicates it is working extremely well in County Roscommon. The data for 2014 indicate that Roscommon is the safest county in the country, with crime rates that are 53% below the national average. In comparison, the crime rate in Dublin is four times that of Roscommon, which has the lowest rate in the country at just 234 crimes recorded per 10,000 of population. While these figures are extremely positive, the sterling work of the Garda in Roscommon, as in every county, must continue on a daily basis to protect communities.

As for what the people seek, they are deeply concerned that the lack of opening times may affect people's access to Boyle Garda station. The Minister of State should relay this point to the Garda authorities to try to ensure its opening times remain the same. Two years ago, a commitment was given by the superintendent that the station's opening times would remain the same and the Garda should look into this and should live up to its commitment. Regarding the expectations of a 21st century police service, I make the point that it must retain the trust and confidence of the public and I believe it has done this to a great extent. Again, I understand that the Garda district in which Boyle was the main station amalgamated with Castlerea and there has been much speculation over the past two or three years that this might undermine people's security in rural areas. I am aware that many Garda stations have been closed in other areas and this has not had a negative impact on crime but has helped to reduce crime in those areas. I am not one of those politicians who will shout for the sake of shouting. I am not one of those politicians who will go about putting the fear of God into everybody. I understand that change must be made but on this occasion, I really believe that reducing the opening hours of Boyle Garda station is a drastic step. I believe the reduction from being open on a 24-hour basis to being open for six hours on one day and for two hours in the evenings is far too much. I ask the Minister of State to talk to the superintendent and to the Garda authorities to try to ensure they will consider this issue to allay the fears of the people on the ground.

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Deputy Timmy Dooley: While he is at it, he might find out whether the former Commissioner was sacked.

Deputy Dara Murphy: The Minister, Deputy Fitzgerald, has asked me to thank Deputy Feighan for raising this matter and to acknowledge his concern and measured approach in these matters. Members will be aware that decisions in respect of the allocation of resources, including station opening hours, are a matter for the Garda Commissioner in the context of her operational requirements and that the Minister has no direct function in this matter. The Minister has been advised that the Garda authorities continue to identify and achieve organisational and operational efficiencies with a view to maintaining a robust and flexible organisation designed to meet existing and emerging policing challenges. Accordingly, decisions in respect of the allocation of resources are subject to ongoing analysis and review by the Commissioner and her senior management team to ensure the best use is made of available Garda resources. In this context, the Garda authorities completed a comprehensive review of their district and station network in 2013. The review was undertaken by An Garda Síochána to identify opportunities to introduce strategic reform to enhance service delivery and to increase operational efficiencies across the organisation.

The revised structures continue to support the Garda's community policing philosophy through the clustering of services at policing hubs. In a point made by the Deputy in his contribution, the centralisation of services facilitates the introduction of an enhanced patrolling system that is operational and intelligence-led. This patrol system will ensure that a high visibility and community oriented policing service continues to be delivered nationwide. It is designed to ensure there will be increased Garda visibility and patrolling hours, as well as increased mobility and flexibility within an area, resulting in an improved policing service to the public. In addition, the system will facilitate an enhanced co-ordination of Garda activity resulting in greater visibility and presence in communities, more effective use of the limited resources across a wider area and hopefully a continued Garda presence in communities.

The Minister has been informed that local Garda management has reviewed the hours during which Boyle Garda station currently is open to the public. In the context of providing an enhanced policing service to the newly enlarged district of Castlerea, these arrangements are designed to free up Garda personnel for outdoor policing duties who otherwise would be engaged in keeping the station open to the public. It is important to note the Minister has been assured that Boyle Garda station will remain a fully functioning station with Garda members providing a 24-hour service seven days a week. There will be no reduction in the number of Garda personnel assigned to the station. The same level of resources and Garda patrols will continue to be deployed in the area. In addition, the Minister has been informed that the new times during which the station is open to the public will continue to be reviewed to ensure the revised arrangements are delivering an enhanced policing service.

The Minister has been informed by the Garda authorities that the new public opening hours for Boyle Garda station will take effect from Monday, 6 April. They are set out in the table which I have circulated. The Minister has been informed by the Garda authorities that they are satisfied that a comprehensive policing service will continue to be delivered in the area concerned and that the proposed structures will ensure the delivery of an effective and efficient policing service to the community.

Deputy Frank Feighan: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I take some consolation from the fact that there will be a fully functioning Garda station 24 hours a day, seven days

a week, and also that there will be no reduction in the number of frontline gardaí. I will be keeping an eye on the opening hours at Boyle Garda station, which are open to review. As a community we can work closely together to ensure that we get the best possible result from this.

I come from a community that is very proud of its gardaí. My grandfather, James Feehily, was one of the first gardaí to join the new force at the foundation of this State. I come from a family and a community that has utter respect for the work, professionalism and integrity of the Garda Síochána.

Sometimes, however, I find it difficult to accept that gardaí can be an easy target in difficult times. We must remember that the Garda Síochána has defended the institutions of the State. Its members defended the country when there was a threat to the security of the State. I, for one, will always support the gardaí in their work. I understand there have been some difficult situations over the years and I am delighted that they have been addressed. As a politician, I will not take cheap shots at the men and women who protect this State.

Fine Gael is the party of law and order that has always tried to maintain the institutions of the State. I reiterate my total respect for and thanks to the hard-working, courageous men and women of An Garda Síochána.

Deputy Dara Murphy: I strongly share Deputy Feighan's sentiments concerning the support we need to give to our gardaí who do a very difficult job on our behalf. It is sometimes a thankless task. We are lucky to be well served in this country by our gardaí. The Garda Síochána is internationally recognised as being an excellent police force, particularly in how its members engage in community policing, reaching the fabric of Irish life at all levels.

These matters will continue to be kept under review both locally and nationally by Garda management. As I said, Boyle Garda station's opening hours have been examined with the express view of improving policing services in the area. The proposed new arrangements will free up gardaí for operational purposes. There will be no reduction in the number of Garda personnel assigned to the station. The same level of resources and Garda patrols will continue to be deployed in the area. That is a fluid situation which will be reviewed on an ongoing basis. The Minister has been informed by the Garda authorities that they are satisfied a comprehensive policing service will continue to be delivered in the area concerned and that the proposed structures will ensure the delivery of an effective and efficient policing service for all of the community.

Industrial Disputes

Deputy Joe Costello: I compliment the Minister of State, Deputy Nash, on the good work he has been doing in this general area over a period of time. The particular issue I am addressing is a serious one. A date for strike action has been agreed for 2 April by Mandate after every effort was exhausted to try to bring Dunnes Stores to the table to negotiate and use the industrial relations machinery.

I request the Minister of State to use his good offices in whatever way he can to try to persuade Dunnes Stores management to address the issues of conflict between the parties, come to the Labour Court and enter into what would be regarded as normal industrial relations discussions. That is the nub of the matter and it is not unprecedented. Over the last 20 years, Dunnes

Stores has been before the Labour Court six times. Therefore, while the company is reluctant to do so at the present time, nevertheless there is a precedent.

The workers at Dunnes Stores are campaigning on four key issues. They are seeking secure hours and incomes, which they do not have at present. Virtually everything is precarious, given the number of hours involved, including zero hour contracts and low pay. They are seeking secure jobs, fair pay and the right to be represented by their trade union. Unfortunately, none of these elements is available at present. The precarious nature of their employment makes it impossible for employees to earn enough for a decent standard of living or to plan for their families' future.

Some 70% of Dunnes Stores' employees are women. Earlier today, we had a meeting with the workers and their Mandate trade union. They informed Members of this House about the issues at stake. One of the women said that of the 69 people working in her Dunnes Stores premises, only one had a permanent contract. All the others are on part-time, low-hours or zero hour contracts. It is incredible in this day and age that there is that level of uncertainty about the work place in a major outlet. We are talking about a huge workforce comprising 10,000 employees in 122 stores in the Republic of Ireland. It is an Irish company that has roughly 24% of the market in this country. The company should be exemplary in showing the way forward on pay, working conditions and industrial relations.

I am bringing these issues to the Minister of State's attention to see how best we can address them. The decision to embark on industrial action was taken as a last resort when Mandate balloted its members. Some 67% of the members voted in the ballot, of which 67% voted for strike action. Therefore, this industrial action has strong support among the workforce which mainly comprises women. In that sense there is a further gender gap in low pay that needs to be addressed.

I acknowledge the Minister of State's work in the area of precarious employment, including zero hour and low hour contracts. He has established the Low Pay Commission to deal with minimum pay. In addition, the Cabinet has agreed to ensure that legislation on collective bargaining mechanisms will be introduced. All of these come together as regards what we are talking about today. Specifically, we need to ensure that every effort is made in order that Dunnes Stores would come to the negotiating table and that there would be a satisfactory solution without having to embark on industrial action. Certainly, if there is industrial action on this issue with this cohort of people, I do not see any reason everybody in this House should not be in favour of the workforce.

Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Gerald Nash): I thank Deputy Costello for raising this important matter and articulating very clearly the experiences of some of the employees, which he outlined earlier. A presentation was made to Oireachtas colleagues today by members of the Mandate trade union, many of whom are working in Dunnes Stores. I also want to acknowledge the Deputy's recognition of the work I have carried out with Government colleagues in terms of the dignity at work and dignity of work agenda, enhancing employment rights and making sure that work always pays.

I understand that the current dispute revolves around a range of issues, including the introduction of banded hours contracts, individual and collective representational rights and a review of the use of temporary contracts. Mandate trade union is seeking to engage with the company on these issues and the matter was referred by the union to the Labour Court under

section 20(1) of the Industrial Relations Act 1969 in October of last year.

The company was not represented at the Labour Court hearing. In this regard, the court found it regrettable that the company declined to participate in the investigation of the dispute or to put forward its position on the union's claims. In its recommendations of 14 November 2014, the Labour Court reaffirmed earlier recommendations it had made by noting that the company and the union were parties to a collective agreement signed in 1996 which provides a procedural framework within which industrial relations disputes and differences arising between the parties can be resolved by negotiation and dialogue. The Labour Court pointed out that the dictates of good industrial relations practice requires parties to honour their collective agreements in both spirit and intent.

I am disappointed that the company decided against attending the Labour Court hearing, contrary to good industrial relations practice. In my view, the experience and expertise of the Labour Court offers the most appropriate and effective avenue for resolving such issues. I urge both parties to avail of the services of the State's industrial relations machinery, which remains available to assist the parties if requested. It is my opinion that engagement with the State's industrial relations machinery offers the best way whereby the parties involved in this dispute can hope to resolve their differences. As the Deputy knows, neither the Labour Court nor the Minister can compel a company to comply with such recommendations. Ultimately, responsibility for the settlement of a trade dispute rests with the parties to the dispute. However, I would like to see an early and fair settlement to this dispute.

As regards zero hour contracts, in accordance with the statement of Government priorities, the Deputy will be aware and has acknowledged that I recently commissioned the University of Limerick, UL, to carry out a study into the prevalence of zero hour and low hour contracts and the impact of such contracts on employees. The appointment of UL follows a competitive tendering process. This is the first time that any Government has taken such a keen interest in this area. Without pre-empting the outcomes of the report, if there is a need to legislate to address issues raised, we will do so.

The key objectives of the study are to fill the gap in knowledge that currently exists in terms of the data and information that is available concerning the prevalence of zero hour and low hour contracts, to assess the impact of zero hour and low hour contracts on employees and to enable me as Minister of State to make any evidence-based policy recommendations to Government considered necessary on foot of the study. The study will have a broad scope, covering both public and private sectors, with a particular focus on the retail, hospitality, education and health sectors. The study will also consider recent developments in other jurisdictions, including the UK in particular. The study will also identify how the information gap might be addressed in future.

Unlike the position in the UK, section 18 of the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 provides that where employees on zero hour contracts suffer a loss by not being given the hours they were requested to work or be available for work, they can be compensated for 25% of the time or 15 hours, whichever is less. There is no equivalent provision in the UK, where employees on zero hour contracts are only paid for time spent working and if they are not given hours by their employer, they receive no compensation.

It is worth noting that while the proportion of Irish workers who are on temporary contracts rose slightly during the recession, reaching 10.5% in 2011, it has since fallen back to the pre-

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recession level of 9.5% and remains significantly below the EU average of 14.4%. The Central Statistics Office data for February 2015 indicates that the share of casual and part-time workers on the live register was down by over 11% when compared to February 2014, equivalent of over 9,000 workers. The cumulative decrease is 17,625 workers since February 2013. Of the jobs that were created last year, 94% were full-time jobs.

The Deputy will appreciate that I cannot anticipate the outcome of the study or the Government's consideration of the study's findings.

Deputy Joe Costello: I thank the Minister of State for his reply and am delighted he has indicated he is pressurising both sides to come together in so far as he can, to attend the Labour Court and resolve their difficulties and the gap between them as quickly as possible and in a fair manner.

The message that should be coming tonight is that there is excellent industrial relations machinery here that can resolve virtually any situation if it is adhered to by the companies involved and if they participate properly. On this occasion, Dunnes Stores has refused to go to the Labour Court despite the criticism by the Labour Court of its refusal to do so. It is not too late to do it - there is until 2 April and I urge Dunnes Stores strongly to attend the Labour Court and to seek a resolution to the matter. The alternative is industrial action or strike that could go on for a considerable period and put in jeopardy employment prospects for the future. Recognising the fact that 76% of the workers in Dunnes Stores are on either part-time or flexible contracts throughout the country, there is clearly an issue to be addressed.

There is the immediate issue and then the broader issue of low pay and I am delighted the Minister of State is addressing that in a comprehensive fashion. The situation that arises is totally unacceptable because it means that so many people in the workforce are vulnerable. They are vulnerable to bullying, threats, intimidation and loss of hours. They cannot have the proper dignity of the workplace if they can be called in to work but are paid nothing and sent home if there is no work there, or if there is variation in work from day to day and week to week. It is an inhumane fashion of treating people and it is high time there was a proper structure put in place to ensure that people are treated in a reasonable and dignified fashion and that they can have a career in the retail industry that allows them a living wage with decent conditions.

Deputy Gerald Nash: In these types of circumstances, of course the question will be asked as to how the Government can help to address a situation like this where an employer refuses to engage with its workforce. It is to address these very kinds of circumstances that I am drafting new collective bargaining legislation which we will enact as a Government in mid-2015. Deputy Costello will be only too well aware that this is a key commitment of the Labour Party and indeed Fine Gael in government, which was reflected again in the Taoiseach's and Tánaiste's statement of priorities as recently as last July.

I will legislate for an improved framework for workers who seek to improve their terms and conditions where there are no arrangements in place with their employers to do so through a collective bargaining system. This new system will give confidence to workers in employment where there is no collective bargaining. They will have a robust and effective legal system that will ensure they can air their grievances about pay, terms and conditions and have these determined based on comparators with relevant and similar companies and, crucially, where they cannot and will not be victimised for doing so. I understand the Labour Court, a key labour relations institution in this State which we all know commands the respect of employers, trade

unions and the public, made this point as recently as last November: “The Company, contrary to the terms of the 1996 Collective Agreement, has refused to engage with the Union on those grievances either in direct talks, through the LRC or at the Labour Court.”

I understand that Mandate trade union has referred matters concerning the effective non-utilisation of what is now a 20 year old agreement to the court on several occasions in the past five years or so. What has occurred does not serve the interest of anybody. It certainly does not serve the interests of society or the economy or serve the promotion of harmonious industrial relations broadly where any party to any dispute of any description, regardless of whether it is an employer or trade union, might run the risk of being accused of treating the State’s highly developed industrial relations institutions in a cavalier fashion. The Deputy will agree with me that nobody takes lightly a decision to take industrial action, and certainly strike action. Strike action hurts both workers and businesses and it is a decision of last resort. I can understand the frustration of the workers involved and their trade union representatives.

This dispute can certainly be avoided. I would like to see it avoided, as would everybody, but it should be in everyone’s interest to seek an early, just and fair resolution to it through the professional, respected and trusted industrial relations machinery of the State. The institutions of the State that deal with industrial relations stand available to engage with the parties involved to assist in the delivery of such an outcome.

Road Safety Data

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Minister will be familiar with the survey released today that demonstrates road users are more likely to lose their lives in counties where the fewest penalty points are issued. County Monaghan, for example, has one of the lowest rates of penalty point issuance in the State but it has had more fatal accidents than any other county, with 13 per 100,000. County Kerry has had relatively few penalty points issued but its roads are among the most dangerous. There were nine fatal accidents per 100,000. There is a similar pattern in County Donegal. The Minister and I are well aware that speeding is by far the most common cause of the issuing of penalty points, and it is usually at the root of death and injury on the roads. The Road Safety Authority was unable to comment on the figures. I hope the Minister will be able to shed some light on them.

The county I am most familiar with, County Clare, is the one where penalty points are most likely to be issued to motorists. As a result, it has one of the lowest rates of death and injury on the roads. The figures suggest that a falling off in Garda enforcement in recent years is the main reason behind the statistics that have been put forward. AA Roadwatch is also of the view that there has been a reduction in the level of enforcement.

The Minister is very familiar with the interest group PARC, which has done excellent work highlighting the concerns of citizens, particularly those affected by death and injury on the roads. It continues to make the point that the falling off in Garda numbers, particularly in the traffic corps, is affecting significantly the rate of death and injury on the roads. The latest figures from the Garda suggest there was a 7% decrease between 2013 and 2014 in the size of the traffic corps. There has been an overall decrease of approximately 21% since 2011. That sets the stage for what is happening.

The survey brings into very clear focus a correlation between the issuance of penalty points

and a reduced rate of death and injury on the roads. That was always expected to happen. It is the reason the Gatso vans were introduced initially, and then the GoSafe vans. It was a way of bolstering or increasing the level of detection. It was not meant to be the only method of detecting poor driver behaviour: it is meant to work in conjunction with an effective traffic corps as part of the work of the Garda.

While the GoSafe vans are working reasonably well in some counties, there are issues. The Minister is familiar with them, including those associated with the application of penalty points and the fact that, in some instances, District Court judges are interpreting the law in a particular manner, resulting in many of the cases being thrown out. If one considers the issues associated with the GoSafe vans and the associated litigation, in addition to the reduction in the size of the traffic corps, one realises they are leading to circumstances in which the Government will have to intervene, both by bolstering the law from the perspective of the GoSafe vans and by increasing the level of enforcement. An increase in the size of the traffic corps is warranted at this stage. I am anxious to hear the Minister's views on how he believes the matter can be addressed.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I thank Deputy Dooley for raising this matter. I will address each of his points in turn, having regard to the very valuable research published today in *The Irish Times* by Carl O'Brien. I read it this morning. I will answer some of the questions the Deputy has put to me on the resources available to An Garda Síochána and other bodies concerned with road safety. Before doing so, I will set out the context.

The penalty points system has worked well since its introduction in 2002. As the Deputy will be aware, over 70% of those who receive a fixed-charge notice pay the specified amount within 28 days. The main objective of the system is not to penalise people but to make them more aware of unsafe driving behaviour and to influence and change their behaviour. The year 2012 marked the tenth anniversary of the system. The review of the system at that landmark point resulted in the making of recommendations for the introduction of new offences and for changes to the number of penalty points to be applied to certain road traffic offences. When the review was completed, it was forwarded to the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications. This led to some very important and helpful changes, which were signed into law last year through the Road Traffic Act 2014. The penalty points proposals in the Act represent the product of significant consideration and input from a wide variety of people and organisations. The offences for which penalty points were increased include speeding, driving while holding a mobile phone and dangerous overtaking.

The number of deaths on our roads is of major concern, particularly in the context of the increase in fatalities in 2013 and 2014, which marked the first increases in fatalities since 2005. We are well aware that the main causes of road crashes are distraction, excessive and inappropriate speed, intoxication and fatigue. We are examining these areas on an ongoing basis to identify measures that can be taken to address the causes of loss of life and injury on our roads.

There is no single reason that can be identified for the increase in road deaths in the past two years. Older and younger pedestrians are the most vulnerable. According to statistics produced by the RSA, urban roads are the most dangerous, with crossing the road emerging as the most dangerous situational factor. For these reasons, we need to treat statistics in this area with some degree of care. That said, the body of analysis assembled by Mr. O'Brien in *The Irish Times* today is very valuable and has led to an action step. I had discussions with the Road Safety

Authority on this work today.

I must point out a potential flaw in the analysis while by no means seeking to denigrate the work in any manner because it leads to some points I want to consider further. One aspect of care that we should take on board is that the points data, although broken down by county, do not correspond to where the original road traffic offences actually took place. The points data just state where the driver is domiciled. Therefore, it is not possible at this stage to state definitively that points awarded in a specific county have been incurred while committing an offence in that county. To use the Deputy's example, a driver may have been detected committing an offence in Dublin but, because the address on his or her licence is in County Clare, where the authority originally issued the licence, the points will be attributed to County Clare.

An Garda Síochána is committed to continuing to work closely with all road safety agencies to target enforcement in areas where fatalities are more likely to occur. I spoke to the road traffic authority about the conclusions developed by Mr. O'Brien in today's edition of *The Irish Times* and I have asked for these to be examined further to see if there are any insights which can be used in our efforts to make our roads safer.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I am pleased the Minister has issued the clarification on where the penalty points might be obtained by a particular driver. Neither the statistics nor the report suggests that someone who is killed in a particular county is necessarily killed by someone from that county. The statistics can be over interpreted.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Yes.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: It is fair to say that it provides a good basis for risk profiling and it should feed into the RSA's approach to attempting to deal with the greatest risks. Where the level of penalty points issued is significantly below what the standard or mean average might be, enforcement in that county needs to be examined. When the correlation is done between an increase in deaths versus a reduced number of penalty points as a percentage basis in a county, it is worth looking at enforcement in the county rather than taking a general nationwide approach. A significant amount of work could be done in this area.

I wish to continue to support the approach taken by the Minister both in opposition and in government, which is a non-partisan approach to the issue of road safety. This should be done without getting into a political bunfight. No one has a monopoly on good ideas. However, we must look at the enforcement methodologies which are in place. This is the first time I have seen what I believe to be strong evidence linking death and injury with detection of poor driving activity by certain motorists. I hope the RSA will act on it in a manner which has the potential to be beneficial to all road users and that we will again see a gradual decline in the number of deaths and injury on the roads.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: On the use of the information and the observation I made on the link between where an offence could be committed and where the person is domiciled, that observation by no means gets in the way of my saying that this is a very good piece of work and it could well lead to observations and insights that might well be of help in making our roads safer. This is why I have asked the Road Safety Authority to look at the conclusions in today's report to see if they can be used. However, the authority did not need prompting on my part. As the Deputy knows, the authority is as committed to this objective as any of us and it will do this work.

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I did not answer the Deputy's question on the level of resources available to the traffic corps and An Garda Síochána. It is my expectation that the size of the traffic corps will increase as the amount of resources and number of people available to An Garda Síochána increases over time, which will happen because An Garda Síochána has recommenced recruitment. Our roads are getting busier. They will get even busier in the future. The risk of injury and loss of life exists and will increase in response to the amount of additional activity on them. As the amount of resources which are available to An Garda Síochána grows, I expect to see the availability of staff and resources to the traffic corps grow in line with this.

Water Charges: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

- that from 1 April, one week from now, the first bills for water charges will start to be sent out to householders around the country;

- that water charges are another austerity tax arising from the bailout of major banks, bondholders, developers and the European financial markets system from their disastrous gambling in the property bubble in pursuit of super profits;

- that the imposition of water charges is the beginning of a process of the market commodification of water that would, if accepted, lead to the privatisation of water distribution and supply;

- that the Labour Party was elected on a platform of opposing the imposition of water charges;

- the massive opposition to the imposition of the water charges and to any steps toward privatisation of water supply;

- that opposition to the water charges has been graphically manifested since 11 October last year in the massive national and local demonstrations calling for the abolition of the charges and of Irish Water-Uisce Éireann;

- that this opposition was forcefully manifested in the result of the Dublin South-West by-election when candidates opposed to the water charges won 60% of the vote and the candidate advocating a mass boycott of the charges was elected to Dáil Éireann;

- that widespread protests are ongoing against the installation of unwanted water meters around the country; and

- that hundreds of local campaigns against water charges have been established the length and breadth of the country;

strongly condemns:

- the arrests following an anti-water charges protest in Tallaght in November 2014; and notes the jailing of four anti-water charges activists for peaceful protests against the installation of water meters and the widespread use of the Garda Síochána against residents opposed to water meters in their communities; and

- any move by the Government to make private landlords, local authorities or voluntary housing associations into collectors of water charges for Irish Water by obliging them to deduct the charges from tenants' deposits or increase rents in cases where tenants are boycotting the charges;

demands:

- the immediate abolition of water charges;

- progressive taxation, including on wealth, corporate profits and financial markets' transactions, to fund the upgrading of the water supply services including remediation of the leaking national infrastructure (for example, based on an effective corporation tax rate of 11 per cent in 2013, every 1 per cent increase would yield €388 million while the European Commission estimates a financial transaction tax would yield in Ireland between €490 million and €730 million per year);

- the abolition of Irish Water-Uisce Éireann, with responsibility for water services to be vested in democratic local authority structures involving national co-ordination, and unlike previously, adequate investment in water infrastructure to meet society's needs; and

- a major grants scheme to retrofit homes with water saving devices and technology that would save billions of litres of quality drinking water being discharged needlessly into the wastewater systems each year; and

calls for:

- mass non-payment by householders of the water charges bills when they are delivered in April and May since the Government will have proved it is not prepared to abide by the clear wish of a majority to abolish the charges;

- water charges, and the demand for water to be in public ownership, to be made central issues in the forthcoming general election if not resolved pre-election; and

- local anti-water charges campaigns to discuss standing candidates in the general election opposing the charges and austerity and based on an advocacy of mass non-payment, of actively mobilising the opposition to these charges and for a real alternative to the parties of austerity."

I move the motion on behalf of the Deputies from the Socialist Party and the Anti-Austerity Alliance.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Is the Deputy sharing time?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I will speak for ten minutes and Deputy Paul Murphy will then speak for ten minutes.

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Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): It is ten minutes followed by ten minutes, then five minutes followed by five minutes. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: In moving the motion on behalf of the Anti-Austerity Alliance and the Socialist Party this evening, we are offering the Government the chance to withdraw the water charges, which are hated and reviled throughout the country. We are also offering it the chance to disband Irish Water. It is a bottomless pit which has eaten up €539 million in water meters, €85 million in consultants and millions more in other expenditure. We are offering the Government the chance to retreat in an organised fashion from this debacle and to pull back its troops, in a disciplined way, from a battle it is clearly losing.

The Government has made many mistakes. One of them, of late, is believing its own propaganda that people had accepted the discounted water charges introduced in a panic last November and that somehow the protest movement had ebbed and retreated and is now a small group. Since when has tens of thousands of people filling up O'Connell Street during a Triple Crown victory been a protest movement in retreat or dwindling?

The Minister, Deputy Kelly, yesterday claimed that people were now coming on board and that they were jumping onto the water charges train. If people are jumping on board, why did the Minister feel it necessary to push them today by issuing threats of deduction at source of the water charges, a threat which the Minister knows is idle? The water charges have become a lightning conductor for the suffering by ordinary people of six years of austerity in this country. In many ways, the charges are no worse than other austerity measures which preceded them, such as the universal social charge, the property tax and the housing and mortgage debt which has been left hanging around people's necks. However, there is one major difference with the water charges. People have control over them and we can win on this issue. People have the power to withhold payment and to engage in a mass campaign of civil disobedience, without needing the permission of anyone such as a trade union leader or anyone else.

The Minister, Deputy Kelly, spoke of fairness and said that everyone must pay and make a contribution. The water charges are a highly regressive measure. A millionaire pays the same as a minimum wage worker. How can this be considered in any way progressive? In the budget in 2015, the Government saw fit to give a tax cut of €405 million to the top 17% of earners and to levy a water charge of €290 million on the rest of us. We have tax cuts for the wealthy and water charges for the poorest. The water charges can never be fair or democratic. The Minister was out bullying and threatening today but he said something different four years ago when he opposed water charges and got elected on that basis.

People have marched. People have been demonised by this Government and have been arrested and jailed. Now people have to use the best and only way we have to win and get the water charges abolished. That is a mass collective refusal to pay the bills in one week's time. This is essential to defeat the water charges and to make Irish Water financially unviable, to deprive it of revenue and to make it politically impossible for this or a future Government to maintain the water charges. A general election is most likely to occur in a year's time when non-payment of water charges could be at its peak. Four or five households out of every ten canvassed by Government parties might not be paying and many others might also oppose the charges. After one year of non-payment, a new Government will have to abolish the water charges. Let us be clear. Regardless of the promises of parties to the effect that they will abolish the charges, a new Government will maintain them if people have been paying. It will have its arm twisted and come under the same pressure from the troika that the current Government has for the past

six years with arguments about having spent a great deal of money etc. Mass non-payment of bills will render those threats useless. There are no penalties for one year and three months of non-payment. Nothing can happen until after a full year of non-payment, by which time there will have been a general election.

At the 11th hour today, the Minister and some in the compliant media, owned by billionaires, some of whom have a vested interest in pursuing the water charges agenda, have put out the spin that new legislation is being introduced to deduct water charges at source. The water charge is a utility, not a tax. If the Government wants to deduct utility bills from people's earnings, it will have to bring major legislation through the House. Even if it does so, it will have to bring people to court and persuade judges to impose attachment orders on their wages or welfare payments. How can this or any Government bring 500,000 or even 1 million non-payers through the courts? It would be impossible. This is why mass non-payment is key to abolishing the charges.

If the Minister dares to tinker with this legislation for a third time or to introduce such a law, other utilities might as well get into the queue - Electric Ireland, the television licence and Bord Gáis. A precedent will have been set by the Government deducting payment for bills that people cannot afford from their earnings. The threat that we saw in today's *Irish Independent* about fast-tracking court hearings to address this issue is in contrast with the Government's hands-off attitude towards the bankers, developers and wealthy who brought this country to ruin. There were no fast-tracked courts, or any court, for them.

The Government's big brother approach, for example, turning landlords and councils into debt collectors for Irish Water, is obscene. I received two letters today from council tenants. One is 80 years old and, like many, is a tenant of a housing agency, in this case Túath Housing. He had received a letter to the effect that his details had to be handed over by the housing agency and that, if he did not pay his bill, he would not be in fulfilment of his tenancy agreement. In other words, it was threatening an elderly man with eviction. This is outrageous carry-on by the Government. I was also sent a letter from someone who had received it from Clúid, which is legally bound to pass over its tenants' details. It is unbelievable that people, the very ones that the Labour Party in particular promised to protect, are being scared.

I have one or two words for the Labour Party. Its treachery towards working class people knows no bounds. Neither does its political stupidity, in that it has taken on the most savage roles in government - water, the housing crisis and the Ministry of social destruction. Today's threats are its obituary. People are reacting in outrage at the contrast in treatment between ordinary people and the well-heeled in society. The Labour Party deserves everything that is coming its way. The Minister has threatened the poorest people. Four years ago, the Labour Party said it was going to protect people from Fine Gael cuts-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I remind the Deputy that displays are not in order in the House.

Deputy Ann Phelan: I never campaigned against water charges.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----and a €238 water charge. In actuality, it has introduced a €260 water charge, a higher figure than what it claimed Fine Gael would stand over. Labour has given people that and broken every other promise that it made. I strongly advise Fine Gael and, in particular, the Labour Party to avail of this opportunity to withdraw the water charges

and to vote for our motion, which is giving the latter an opportunity to save itself from political extinction.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Government spokespersons have not failed in recent months when presented with cameras or microphones to express their full confidence in the fact that people will accept and pay the water charges and that the protest movement is a diminishing minority. They have constantly been confident in their words, but actions speak more loudly. Their actions in recent months, particularly the past 24 hours, demonstrate that they are not confident.

Consider the incredible State repression that is being meted out to anti-water charge protestors. Consider the jailing of four people for two and a half weeks simply because they protested peacefully within 20 m of water meter installations. Consider the dawn raids involving six, eight or ten gardaí on the homes of more than 30 people, including teenagers, in Tallaght for their participation in a peaceful protest relating to the Tánaiste. Consider the use of private security contractors hired by GMC-Sierra, which is looking for Irish Water and, inevitably, the taxpayer to pay for them, who are bullying and intimidating peaceful protestors. Consider the large numbers of gardaí sent into working class communities to ensure that water meters are installed against the wishes of the majority of their residents. These are not the actions of a Government that is confident that water charges will be accepted.

Separate from the State repression, consider the delay in the deadline for registration. It is incredible that, on the morning of the deadline, a Labour Party spokesperson announced that it was no longer a drop-dead deadline and had been extended to the end of this year. We are on our fourth deadline, such is the enthusiasm for getting on the train of Irish Water. Consider the delay in the EUROSTAT test, which should have been occurring in or around now but will instead happen this summer at the earliest. Consider the incredible bluffing, bluster and bullying by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Kelly, in the past 24 hours. These are all the actions of a Government that is scared, particularly of the massive non-payment that will sink their water charges and Irish Water. The Government is also scared that this will sink it and its austerity agenda. It is scared of knocking on doors at elections when a significant number of people have refused to pay. It is also scared of this movement's political potential. This morning, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, stated that some of those involved in the anti-water charges movement were just interested in bringing the Government down. No, we are not "just interested" in that. We are also interested in smashing the entire austerity agenda, showing that there is an alternative to austerity and bringing down water charges.

We make no bones about it, though. We are interested in bringing down this Government, which has implemented such savage austerity and betrayed election promises, and the system of austerity and neoliberal capitalism that operates in the interests of the 1%. Irish Water is a microcosm, where the role of Denis O'Brien at the heart of a nexus of politics, money and media-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I remind the Deputy that persons outside the House should not be mentioned.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That is rubbish.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): It is not in order.

Deputy John Halligan: It is a known fact.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is a microcosm of the way our society-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I am sorry, but it is not a microcosm.

Deputy John Halligan: But it is a known fact.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is a microcosm.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I am sorry, but for the benefit of the Deputies still to speak-----

Deputy John Halligan: It is recognised in the public debate. You are wrong again.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I am sorry, Deputy, but I am not wrong.

Deputy John Halligan: You were wrong the last time and you are wrong again. I checked with the Ceann Comhairle.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Deputy, I just want to remind you-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Could the Acting Chairman stop this talking? We want a debate.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): If Deputy Halligan wants to erode the time, that is good enough, but-----

Deputy John Halligan: You are eroding the time.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): -----the Member in possession shall keep to order.

8 o'clock

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is a microcosm of a system in which things operate for the 1% against the interests of the 99% and where power is concentrated economically, in the media and politically in an extremely small number of hands.

Out of the movement against water charges comes the potential to change politics in Ireland utterly. It has already changed politics significantly but this issue has the potential to build the biggest, most significant, radical left challenge that has ever been mounted. The movement must have a political reflection, particularly in the context of all the bullying and the threat of court cases. In this motion we are calling for non-payment campaigns across the country and for discussions about standing candidates against the parties of austerity on a platform of non-payment of the water charges. We are calling for a principled stand against austerity and we rule out coalition with any of the establishment parties. We will use the platform of the Dáil to mobilise the power of working class people from below, to bring an end to the logic of austerity and of capitalism. Our challenge can involve existing left groups and existing left Independents but, most important, it can involve new, fresh forces who have not previously been involved in politics. Such people may not consider themselves as being in politics right now but they could stand and take seats from the austerity parties in this election so that we have a stance in almost every constituency in the country with perhaps over 20 Deputies being elected.

The other issue the Government is scared of is the EUROSTAT test. The latest manual of how the EUROSTAT test will operate makes it clear that to determine whether a producer is a

market producer it must sell its products at an economically significant price which in practice would be assessed if the sales of the producer cover a majority of the production costs, that is, over 50%. It also states that this 50% test should be applied by looking over a range of years and only if the test holds for several years should it be applied strictly. In other words, the test will have to be redone whenever non-payment kicks in. An objective look at this will indicate that if there is any significant level of non-payment the Government is in trouble in respect of the EUROSTAT test. The whole model of off-balance sheet financing will be in crisis and the Government will itself face a political crisis.

This gets to the heart of what this is all about. It is a bit strange that, just a week out from bills coming out, we have to ask what the real agenda is but we have to do it because the numbers involved in Irish Water do not add up in terms of raising revenue, either for the State or Irish Water. During a debate in December it became clear that if everybody paid and everybody applied for the water conservation grant it would raise €90 million, not taking into account the cost of actually getting the money which itself will be greater than €90 million. The Government is introducing a charge that will lose money rather than raise it. Water charges are a revenue-losing exercise so why is it happening? What is the agenda behind them and why is the Labour Party willing to face complete annihilation over this issue? One reason is that it is part of shifting taxation in the longer term away from taxing profits, wealth and high income towards regressive taxation on working class people. Second, it is about privatisation, which is a long-term strategic goal of Irish Water.

Where did Irish Water come from? It came from a memorandum of understanding signed by Fianna Fáil and the Green Party in 2010. In other words, it came from the troika - the same troika included in the memoranda with Portugal and Greece to privatise their respective water companies. It represents a clear agenda coming from the European establishment. In Ireland we did not have any charges and our water was not commodified so a vital precondition before privatisation was introducing those charges. It is the dark forces the former Minister referred to. The major water corporations, including some of the biggest companies in the world such as Veolia, are profit hungry and ruthless in pursuing those profits. Privatisation is not just a future threat - it is happening right now from below with design, build and operate contracts given to the same companies, including Veolia, which operates large parts of the water infrastructure on a for-profit basis. It is also happening from above with off-balance sheet funding of Irish Water.

People should ask themselves why the Government is doing it. It is not because there is any money for free, though one would get the impression from the Government that there was, as the fact that it is off balance sheet means any money borrowed by Irish Water will have to be paid for by us through water charges. It is not because bringing it onto the balance sheet would mean Ireland would be over the deficit requirements of the EU because it would not mean that. It is not because it would bring in any more money for investment because it will not, as the money could be invested straight from Government or through Government borrowing at a lower rate than Irish Water would be able to borrow. So why is it happening? What is happening is the privatisation of the income stream of Irish Water. That is exactly what happened in the case of Detroit Water, which was owned by the city but whose funding was through the bond markets. The bond owners are interested in only one thing, which is their return, and that is why they were able to apply massive pressure to demand that water was cut off when people did not pay on time. The Government's plan is off-balance sheet financing to sell off the bonds and the income stream on the international financial markets.

The Government suggests that those who are not for water charges are for dilapidated water

infrastructure. That is not the case. It is not our fault in the Anti-Austerity Alliance that we have a crisis in water infrastructure - it is the fault of this and the previous Governments which have not invested. One does not need water charges to have investment and if there are water charges there is no guarantee there will be investment. There is a choice here. It is a choice between regressive taxation and the privatisation of an income stream, leading to a charge that will take 2% of the disposable income of the bottom 10% and less than 0.2% of the income of the top 10%, or a central, progressive taxation where those who have more pay more, through corporation tax, a financial transaction tax and tax on the highest earners.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have to call on the Deputy's colleague to speak.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak in this very important debate on the major issue of water and on the broader issue of public services and the huge hardship our people are suffering. I am amazed that this Government still does not get the message despite the huge protests and marches and the widespread suffering in broader society. It has also failed to see the huge hurt and anger at what is happening in this country. It is up to all of us in Leinster House to stand by these people and not look the other way on this issue.

This issue is bigger and broader than just water. When a Government resorts to threatening and intimidating its own people to appease unwanted and overfunded quangos like Irish Water there is something seriously wrong in Irish politics. There is something seriously wrong in Irish society. Is it now the intention of the Government to attempt to take more payments for water, already paid in general and other taxes and squandered by incompetent politicians, from the pensions of our elderly, the social welfare payments of our poor and the wages of our struggling workers? Such a group of struggling workers were in this House today. I speak of the Dunnes Stores workers who are being hammered in respect of their working hours and their rates of pay. It reminds me of my history lessons about how we dealt with 1913. Now this Government wants to dip into their pockets and take more money from them. We also need to highlight the issue of the exploitation of lower paid workers in this society.

This motion highlights the fact that the water charges are another tax arising from the bail-out of major banks, bondholders, developers and the European financial markets following their disastrous gambling on the property bubble in pursuit of profits. We also need to highlight the fact that the Labour Party was elected on a platform of opposing the imposition of water charges.

There is massive opposition to the imposition of water charges and to any step towards the privatisation of the water supply. In broader society there has been the harsh reality of cuts to blind children and cuts to the respite care grant and the Government still wonders why the people are angry and why they are fed up with it. It is an absolute scandal and we need to face up to the fact that there is a complete lack of equality or social justice in this country. I am not the only person saying this. The European Anti-Poverty Network in Ireland stated in a recent report that 1.4 million people, almost 31% of the population, suffered from deprivation. One quarter of the population cannot afford to heat their own homes adequately. Some 37% of children suffer deprivation. The worst deprivation was felt by lone parents, the unemployed and people not at work through illness or disability. That is the stark reality, yet the Government wants to dip into their pockets again.

The numbers at risk of poverty, that is, below 60% of median income, have fallen slightly,

although they are still above 2008 levels. The number experiencing consistent poverty has doubled since 2008 to 8.2%, while the Government needs to remove nearly 193,000 people from poverty and halve the current number to meet its target of 4% for 2016. That is what is happening in broader society. The Government and mainstream political parties ask from where the money will be obtained and how services can be funded. According to the Department of Finance, the top 1%, or 21,650, of earners have an annual gross income of €8.7 billion, with average earnings of €403,703 per year, or more than ten times the average industrial wage. Also, according to the Revenue Commissioners' latest available statistics, corporate profits are also increasing, with gross trade profits increasing to €73.8 billion in 2011, up from €70.8 billion. There is wealth in the country, but there seems to be a lack of emphasis in challenging that wealth.

I strongly support the motion. We have to make a decision and stand up for the people, raise this issue and create a proper, fair and equitable society.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I took part in a demonstration in the city centre on Saturday. It was one of a number of demonstrations in which I had participated. It is useful to walk along with the crowd to get a sense of who is there and why they are there. Essentially, there were friends and citizens. I met neighbours; they were ordinary people, not a bunch of revolutionaries. There was a very large crowd there and they know why they were there. This is about water, but it is also deeper than that. They knew that this was an introductory offer and that once it was introduced, it would increase, including debts, where the money raised would have to be paid back. They knew that, had they not demonstrated in the first instance, they would have had bills coming through their letter boxes that would be in excess, significantly in some cases, of the bills that will drop through their letter boxes next week. They are struggling to make ends meet. Many ordinary families have had their incomes hollowed out and have no reserves. They wonder for what the universal social charge is being collected, why they cannot see anything additional for the property tax they pay and where their PAYE and other taxes are being spent. They see it as a one-way street and that all is taken. That is what people will say on the doorsteps and what those taking part in the demonstrations will say. They know that the language of the Government is fundamentally dishonest.

The Government stated this was about saving the State money, but it is about the Government balancing the budget at the expense of the citizen in picking it up as a customer on the other side. They see the Government acting tough against them but not where we want them to act tough with our so-called political partners in Europe. This is also about political reform, golden circles and the same faces emerging and re-emerging and doing better every time, while this same group of people are poorer. We saw the same group of people coming across from RPS after the Poolbeg fiasco and emerging in Irish Water. We saw shareholders being paid when Siteserv was sold, even though €100 million of taxpayers' money was written off, and they also got a dividend. Small businesses are struggling. People are not able to get a night's sleep with the worry of debt and they see the same individuals emerging with a company debt-free, capable of making a fortune. I refer to Siteserv, which is owned by Mr. Denis O'Brien. It has been like pulling hen's teeth to try to get information on the sale of Siteserv to Millington where other entities made bids. An Australian hedge fund, Anchorage, made a bid of €52 million, but it wanted a greater level of due diligence. Altrad, a French company, made numerous bids to purchase Siteserv, but it was told it was not for sale. Its representatives turned up at the annual general meeting the day before it was sold. Other underbidders have complained about the process.

A lack of accountability and transparency is at the heart of the issue in that people expected the Government to be different in that respect. They expected to see political reform, not the moving of the Adjournment debate to the middle of the day and calling it a Topical Issue debate. They wanted to see fundamental change to bring to an end the golden circle that kept on appearing and reappearing. We saw this at the weekend in a headline in *The Sunday Business Post* which indicated more money would be sought because time had been spent monitoring people at the water meter protests. A discussion is taking place among Siteserv and other companies, or GMC-Sierra and Irish Water. We see the same people being asked all the time to put their hands in their pockets and bail out the likes of the banks and the developer classes. That is where their taxes are going. This, therefore, is about more than water. It is about the entire political system and goes to the heart of democracy. If the Government thinks the people are just in the mode of saying they will not pay and that this is a frivolous matter, I advise it that this is a very determined and committed group of people. The Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, added to the determination with what came out in the past 24 hours. He has hardened the position.

Deputy John Halligan: It is interesting that a Europe-wide survey released last week found that almost two thirds of Irish people were struggling to pay their household bills. This was a finding of the Eurobarometer report. Since last week Ireland has been ranked the fifth highest in the European Union in people admitting to struggling to cover their typical household costs during the past 12 months. This is at a time when the economy is supposed to be recovering and things are supposed to be getting better. The survey was carried out of households during the past 12 months. We all know that the average household budget has taken a hammering since the recession began and that the Government's austerity policies have crippled what little remaining spending power families have.

People dread the 2 million or so water bills that are due to start coming through letter boxes shortly. Many of us have spoken *ad nauseam* in the Dáil about the disillusionment among the population at the cost of establishing Irish Water, with senior management earning bonuses of up to 9%, even if they were assessed as needing improvement. That was outrageous. Senior staff were receiving an annual car allowance of €10,000 and health insurance cover worth up to €2,700 a year, yet the controversies continue to surface. We have now heard that no notes or records were kept of over half of all crucial meetings regarding Irish Water between the former Minister, Mr. Phil Hogan, and Bord Gáis during which many key issues were considered.

The public is expected to accept that the Commission of Energy Regulation, CER, which oversees Irish Water now needs €900,000 for advice on how to regulate the utility in the next two years. Is the Government serious about this? Serious questions need to be asked about the well paid advisers who stood by while successive Governments failed to address the 19th century water infrastructure and ran down the existing service by reducing funding. Fianna Fáil Deputies who were part of these Governments also need to explain why outdated treatment plants that are causing almost 150 pollution incidents every year were not modernised while they were in office at the height of the boom. Many councils that had sought funding to deal with this problem were refused it.

More than €300 million has been invested in the utility, which equates to 21% of the money committed by the Irish Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, to date. My understanding is that the fund was established to earn a return for commercial investment. This suggests the Government foresees a viable return from Irish Water in the future from the €50 million that has gone into Irish Water. I would like to hear the views of the Government on this. It is incredible that 21% of the money committed to the ISIF has gone into it.

Irish Water is one of the reasons badly needed public funds are being diverted from more productive uses. I can think of better uses for €50 million. It would cost approximately that amount to provide free medical cards to every child who has cancer. I wonder where our priorities lie.

Inequality has never been much of an issue with this Government. Analysis released last week by the Nevin Economic Research Institute found that one quarter of employees earn an hourly wage that is less than the living wage of €11.45 an hour. We all know that low pay is endemic and entrenched in the economy. Firing out statistics that so many people have registered and might pay is irrelevant in two senses. I know thousands of people who have registered but will not pay. Does the Minister seriously think the people who have paid are delighted to do so and to pay double taxation? The Government is taking advantage of people who consider themselves to be decent people and law-abiding citizens and, through fear, intimidation or otherwise, feel they must pay. This does not mean they agree with it. The Government is kidding itself if it thinks that is the case, and it will find that out shortly after a general election is called. Apart from the hundreds of thousands of people marching because of distress, fear, intimidation and because they do not want to pay, there is a huge silent majority, many of whom have paid, who will come after the Government parties in the next general election.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: It is obvious from the changes that have come about from the time when Irish Water was introduced to where it is now that the Government has been listening. There is a need for more attentive and continued listening because the protests are not going away. For some, it is a matter of principle not to pay for water and for others it is a matter of economics, that they simply cannot afford it. Others feel they are already paying in the taxes they pay. There is no doubt that mistakes have been made with Irish Water and it is difficult for anyone, even those who agree with the water charge, to take seriously the entity that is Irish Water. We were supposed to have a new way of doing business and new politics but the way Irish Water was set up, with legal fees, consultation fees and bonuses, indicates that nothing has changed.

There are problems with water in this country. We know about boil water notices, leaks, poor piping, lead piping, water shortages, wasted water and the fact that not all our magnificent beaches have blue flags, which they should have. Some of them have lost blue flags and there are massive problems. We know we have an ageing and creaking water system in dire need of investment and improvement, so it was vital to get it right. However, there are genuine concerns that the Government cannot be trusted when it comes to ownership and there are fears that Irish Water could be sold. These fears have not been adequately addressed.

The EU water framework directive of 2000 provides in Article 9 that “Member States shall take account of the principle of recovery of the costs of water services”. That will open the way for the sale of Irish Water, ostensibly to complete the Single Market or to promote competition in the so-called interest of the consumer. Is this the reason the Government is so resistant to a constitutional referendum to retain Irish Water permanently in public ownership?

The Green Party secured a derogation for Ireland from the full cost recovery effect of the 2000 directive. Last December, the Government had the opportunity to renew it for a further five years. Will the Government clarify whether the derogation has been renewed?

The second obstacle to the Government holding a referendum to retain Irish Water in public ownership is the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership deal that the USA and the EU

are trying to negotiate. Both sides have made clear their intention to use TTIP to get access to what they call public monopolies, meaning public utilities like water. Under the TTIP deal, water services will be much more vulnerable to outsourcing, private tendering and, ultimately, full privatisation. It will also make it virtually impossible to nationalise or renationalise our water. Incredibly, multinational water companies will be able to sue for loss of future or expected profits in the case of nationalisation. This is because of the controversial investor state dispute settlement, ISDS, clause. If the TTIP deal goes through, private water companies will be able to sue the Government for the loss of forgone profits if water is renationalised. The ISDS provides for a supranational kangaroo court. Opposing Irish Water on its current road is also opposing TTIP and is about keeping public goods in public hands.

As an example of ISDS, within a few years of the Azurix Corporation taking over the water of Buenos Aires in Argentina, the water was undrinkable and unaffordable. The Argentine Government tried to force the company to make the water drinkable and affordable. Azurix objected to interference in its private business and sued Argentina through an ISDS. The Government lost and had to pay \$165.2 million in compensation. The US negotiator for TTIP, the Office of the United States Trade Representative, has its eye on our water. Its factsheet states: “We seek to obtain improved market access in the EU on a comprehensive basis, and address the operation of any designated monopolies and state-owned enterprises, as appropriate”. It is obvious what could be coming down the line.

There are viable alternatives. While we have our holy grail of the corporate tax rate at 12.5%, I do not believe countries that say they have rates of 20% or 25% pay that because companies can claw it back in other ways. A simple 1% increase in corporation tax would not drive away foreign direct investment but could have secured funding to sort out problems in Irish Water and to set up an efficient and viable structure. Speaking to people from other countries about water issues, they were given a liveable allowance and they were able to conduct their lives with that liveable allowance. Anything over that was charged and that is the way forward.

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Alan Kelly): I move amendment No. 1:

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

“supports:

- the establishment of Irish Water as a long-term strategic investment project to deliver the necessary water services infrastructure and quality of services required to meet statutory compliance and demographic needs;
- the management of our water resources effectively to ensure Ireland can continue to attract major overseas investment and employment; and
- the view that metered charging is the fairest form of water charging with benefits in proper management of this vital resource;

notes:

- that the Programme for Government provides for the introduction of a fair funding model to deliver a clean and reliable water supply which will involve the installation of water meters in all households;

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- the introduction of water meters for households promotes the sustainable use of water and has been recognised by the OECD as the fairest way to charge for water services;

- the new funding model based on domestic tariffs and metered usage will allow for expanded investment and is aligned with the requirements of the Water Framework Directive;

- that the Government has introduced measures, which include the capping of annual charges at a maximum of €160 for single adult households and €260 for all other households until the end of 2018, that will provide clarity and certainty and ensure that water charges are affordable for customers;

- the announcement of the water conservation grant as a means of addressing water issues for all households on equal terms and which will reduce households' outlay on water services;

- the prioritisation by Irish Water of the elimination of boil water notices and the fact that by April of this year over 17,000 people will no longer be subject to boil water notices;

- the Government's intention to bring forward further legislative proposals to underpin the collection of charges; and

- that well over 200,000 jobs in Ireland are dependent on water-intensive processes including the agri-food, pharma-chem, ICT and tourism sectors, and therefore need a secure water supply; and

welcomes:

- the fact that the number of customers that registered with Irish Water is 990,000 out of a total of 1.237 million households that have responded;

- the progress with the roll-out of the domestic metering programme being delivered by Irish Water, with over 625,000 meters installed to date;

- the achievement of greater economies of scale in running water services by Irish Water, with €12 million in procurement savings alone achieved in the company's first year of operations, in the context of an annual operating costs efficiency target of 7 per cent per annum set by the Commission for Energy Regulation;

- the increased capital investment in water and waste water services by Irish Water, with investment in the period 2014-2016 to amount to almost €1.4 billion, excluding metering and establishment costs; and

- the clear commitment given by the Government that Irish Water will remain in public ownership and the provision in the Water Services Act 2014 that will require any future proposal to change public ownership of Irish Water to be put to the people via a plebiscite."

I am pleased to move the Government's amendment to the motion from some Technical Group Members. I will start by making a distinction between those politicians who believe in empowering people through anger, those who espouse a sense of failure and hopelessness for our great country and who at all times try to articulate that Ireland is a failed country and a failed state and that we should be more like Greece. I believe differently. There are politicians who enjoy failure, who stand in the way of progress in order that they can enhance their political

profile and make their names on the airwaves, and who cannot accept that progress can ever be made in this great country because it is against their agenda.

That is not the politics of this Government, nor should it be the politics of any Government. We want to empower people through work, not through victimhood. We want to ensure Ireland is a success. Ireland was a failed state but it no longer is. The challenge now is about sharing the recovery, making people feel it, not establishing it. Economic progress is based on stability and creativity, not destruction, populism and scaremongering while ignoring future problems that are staring us in the face.

Irish Water will create, retain and sustain 40,000 jobs in this economy out to 2020. This is what many Opposition Members want to abandon and they are real jobs.

Deputy John Halligan: The local councils could do it.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Irish Water will lift the boil water notices on 17,000 homes in the coming months. This is what the Opposition, in many cases, wants to abandon. Irish Water is identifying and fixing leaks and finding where lead is in our water system. It is a major public health issue that the Opposition sees fit to ignore. Irish Water has 385 capital projects under way throughout the country at present. Again, many of those in opposition seem intent on abandoning these. With the city of Dublin facing water shortages in ten years' time, securing the recovery means that we need a national infrastructure manager. I expect the Opposition to criticise the costs of Irish Water but its members must realise that the economic cost to a water shortage will be €78 million per day. This is the cost which would be borne by hotels, restaurants, families and industry that lose out on business as a result of a lack of water. In one week, this city could lose almost €400 million. That would be the cost of not having Irish Water in place in the future.

If the past seven years have taught us anything, it is that we need to plan for sustainable economic development in the future and not allow upcoming elections dictate policy. We need to create a national network of water infrastructure, something similar to the rail network, that will sustain economic development. This can only be done by a single public utility which can access its own borrowings. Just as a family requires a mortgage in order to build a home, the water system needs finance to be effective. Many of those across the floor have questioned whether there is a recovery. They do not see that recovery because they want people to feel like victims. Some 40,000 full-time jobs were created in this country last year. Over half of these resulted from the efforts of IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland. The salaries of those who obtained the jobs in question are significantly above average income levels. Unemployment is falling at a rate not seen since the era of the Celtic tiger. This will only continue if it is underpinned by continued investment in our water infrastructure, which is so vital to economic development, to our pharma, high-tech and ICT industries and for clean-tech firms, which have a massive future.

I wish to point out certain inconsistencies in the arguments put forward by the anti-water charges brigade. When the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, reports on drinking water and sewage systems quality were published last January, there was a deafening silence from many in the Opposition. Apart from the 23,000 people currently on boil water notices, some 1 million individuals are considered by the EPA to be at risk of having such notices applied to their water supplies in the future. It is very strange that a group which believes in the right to water should flatly ignore such vital facts. Another inconsistency relates to the fact that well

over 20% of Irish people have been paying for their water for many years. I have yet to see a march to or a protest outside any of the group water schemes in this country. The people who are members of such schemes have been paying for and managing their water for generations. Is it acceptable for rural people to pay for water if it is not acceptable for their urban counterparts to do so?

Many of the problems that exist in the context of the public water supply, such as the presence of lead pipes and leaks, do not affect group schemes such as those at Lissycasey in County Clare or Donaghmoynne in County Monaghan. These are two fantastic schemes. How many of those who are opposed to water charges have visited places such as those to which I refer? Have they ever heard of them? Have they ever travelled past the Red Cow roundabout? I sincerely doubt that many of them have done so.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Has the Minister ever heard of the Labour Party?

Deputy Alan Kelly: I encourage those to whom I refer to visit the Lissycasey group scheme in order to discover what will be the reaction of the people who live there.

What about the myth that is continually trotted out with regard to double taxation? The State provides transport services, yet people pay for train tickets. The State builds libraries, yet people pay to take books out on loan.

Deputy Paul Murphy: No, they do not. That is ridiculous. Is the Minister announcing the introduction of a new tax?

Deputy Alan Kelly: The State builds houses, yet people pay subsidised rents. If water is a human right, then surely food and housing are also human rights. However, the Opposition seems to be amenable to people making a contribution towards the costs relating to both. I have not seen any protest at a bus stop in respect of double taxation. Of course, the Opposition believes that nobody should ever be obliged to pay for anything. That is the real issue. Those in opposition also believe that we live in a utopia in which everything is free.

Deputy John Halligan: The Labour Party previously stated that people should not be obliged to pay for water.

Deputy Alan Kelly: They sell the absolute lie that people can have everything they want for absolutely nothing. The citizens of Ireland know full well that this is not the case.

Have those in opposition considered the fact that virtually all social democratic, left-wing governments throughout Europe have some form of water payment? Even countries such as Cuba have water charges. I am quite sure that those in Syriza in Greece, the supposed heroes of the left in Europe, are not proposing to abolish water charges. Let us watch the biggest climb-down in modern European history unfold in front of our eyes in Greece.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: You are not doing well over there at the moment lads.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I welcome the opportunity provided by some of those in the Technical Group to debate again this important issue of the future funding of public water services and the management and operation of our water and sewage networks by Irish Water. The Government has invested considerable time, energy and resources in the water sector reform programme. We have established a single national utility that has assumed responsibility for water services across the country. Irish Water is now identifying the network's problems and

making improvements in a way that 31 separate local authorities never could. The company is increasing infrastructural investment, which is so essential for repairing and upgrading our treatment plants, reservoirs and pipes. It continues to install an estimated 30,000 meters per month. These meters are vital for water conservation and reducing leakage. As stated previously, Irish Water is making changes for the better of our water services and thereby investing in the future prosperity of our nation. In that context, some 40,000 jobs will be either created or sustained in water services right through to 2020.

People have faced many difficulties during Ireland's recession and I understand that new bills, no matter how small, are never welcome. I have accepted on many occasions that mistakes were made along the reform path. The Government has held up its hand and has dealt with the issues with which we were faced. However, all we are faced with in the Opposition's motion is further encouragement towards protest, obstruction and non-payment. That is it. There is not one constructive idea in the motion and it does not provide one viable alternative with regard to achieving all our objectives in respect of a water services system that is fit for purpose. The reforms to which I refer are happening because we can no longer sit back and let our water infrastructure deteriorate further.

The Government has listened to people's genuine concerns. We reviewed all issues last autumn and produced a revised charging system that is certain, simple and affordable and which incentivises conservation. There are now only three tariffs. Households with meters can beat the capped charge levels if they use less water than the capped charge equivalent. Metering data estimates that 35% of households can beat the cap based on current usage levels. Unmetered households, whose usage is proven to have been below the capped charge equivalent through one year's metered usage, will be entitled to a rebate from Irish Water. The revised charging levels are among the lowest in Europe. If we consider the position in England and Wales, we discover that households there have paid and will pay an average charge of €540 per year during 2014 and 2015.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Exactly. That is our point.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I wonder what will happen in Northern Ireland, where a metering programme is being put in place. Our colleagues from Sinn Féin are not here to debate that matter.

As part of our review of the water charging system and water sector reform programme, the Government responded to people's concerns about issues of Irish Water's governance and the customer experience. A single unitary Ervia board has been established and this comprises members chosen for their expertise and particular competence. Performance-related pay rewards are not being applied and a review of the pay model is under way. PPS numbers are no longer required as part of the customer application process and additional services, apart from those relating to meter reads, meter tests and charges for connection to the system, are being provided.

One issue in respect of which there is near unanimous agreement on both sides of the House is that which relates to the absolute imperative to keep water services and infrastructure in public ownership. The Government responded to calls in relation to this matter in November. Above and beyond the commitment to public ownership enshrined in the 2013 legislation, the Water Services Act 2014 requires that any future proposal to change public ownership of the utility be put to the people via a plebiscite. This Government is fully committed to keeping Irish Water in public ownership. I do not know of one person in the Oireachtas who wishes to

privatise water services or infrastructure.

One of the main objectives of the Government's water sector reforms has been increased conservation. High levels of leakage in the public water network and on the customer side need to be tackled. Households can play their part in conserving water, and the introduction of the water conservation grant will play an important role in increasing and encouraging conservation. The less water we waste the more we can protect our environment, lower household bills and reduce the cost of managing the public water and wastewater systems.

The €100 grant which will be paid to households that have registered with Irish Water can be used towards buying some of the many devices available to conserve water, such as water butts to recycle water, water displacement devices to reduce water flow in toilets or aerators to reduce water flow from taps. The grant can also be used towards repairing a household plumbing system, thereby reducing leakage. Even households that do not use Irish Water's services are entitled to this grant, which will ensure the conservation drive extends to all households. Those with a private well or in a group water scheme, or with a septic tank, can use the grant towards testing the quality of their well's water or de-sludging septic tanks. I can confirm that 30 June 2015 will be the deadline for registering with Irish Water in order to be eligible for receipt of the water conservation grant this year. If a household has not registered by this date, it will not be able to receive the €100 grant from the Department of Social Protection from September 2015. The Department of Social Protection will be communicating separately with households from July onwards in this regard. The final date of 30 June for 2015 payments has been chosen to take account of the fact that there will be some changes in residency up to that point. More details will follow throughout the month of April.

Irish Water is almost two years in existence and it has been the national water services authority since January 2014. Within this short period of time it has begun to make inroads into addressing some of the deep seated deficiencies within our public water and wastewater systems. It is making improvements to the quality of services the public now receive. One of the major reasons this reform programme has been necessary has been the need for a sustained increased infrastructure investment to upgrade and improve our water networks. This is now happening and I expect those on the Opposition side who have long called for more investment will now welcome the fact that Irish Water is delivering this increase. This year investment will increase by 26% on last year, from €340 million to €430 million. Over the course of Irish Water's first capital investment programme for 2014 to 2016, some €1.4 billion will be spent on improving existing water infrastructure and delivering new projects, including the first fix scheme. This average of €450 million per annum compares with the €310 million invested in the final year of local authority delivered services and projects.

The decisions on where to invest are linked with decisions on how to manage assets. The longer an asset can function effectively, the longer we can defer new builds and control the capital investment requirements. The utility is already taking new approaches. Central strategic planning is now based on accurate asset performance data and full control of all investment decisions. It involves planning investment consistently across the asset base rather than on large scale, once off investments. An example of this is the proposed Ringsend wastewater treatment plant upgrade, in respect of which an alternative approach to the treatment plant extension will save the company €170 million in capital investment. That is almost as much as the entire cost of establishing the new water utility.

The company is also achieving greater economies of scale by acting as one national utility

rather than separate 31 separate water services authorities. This is reducing the costs of water services for customers. Some €12 million in procurement savings have been realised in the company's first year alone. In the area of electricity supply, a major cost in the production of drinking water, Irish Water's current renewable and efficient energy initiatives aim to reduce costs by 33% by 2020. The high national leakage rate in our public water network is something that has been well documented. All sides agree that the current rate of 49% is unacceptable. Irish Water is developing a regional shared service model approach to key challenges such as this. Annual improvement targets with local authorities are set as part of annual service plans. The domestic metering programme is identifying where leakage exists through active constant flow alarms on water meters and Irish Water will prioritise fixing the largest of these customer side leaks between the boundary of the property and up to a metre from the dwelling through the first fix free programme. The Government has allocated €51 million for this programme with the aim of reducing customer side leakage, which amounts to approximately one seventh of all unaccounted for water. Under the programme, Irish Water will provide customers with free leak investigation and repair of external supply pipe leaks identified on their property, subject to the terms of the scheme. It will prioritise notifying the largest leaks first because they offer the greatest potential for water savings. Currently the largest 1,000 leaks account for over 20 million litres of water per day. One thousand leaks account for over 1% of all water produced every day in Ireland. The utility has completed a trial of first fix repairs in Kildare and Dublin city which provided important information on leaks, including the finding that 39% of leaks were on external supply pipes and 61% of leaks were attributable to internal issues. A total of 140 repairs of external leaks were completed under the trial, with estimated savings of 819 cu. m expected through these repairs. This is equivalent to the normal usage of approximately 2,700 houses. I welcome the interim allocation by the Commission for Energy Regulation of €3.4 million to cover the initial three months of operation of the first fix free scheme and look forward to the outcome of the commission's public consultation on the terms of the scheme, which will run in parallel with the first three months of the scheme.

One initiative which illustrates the kind of long-term approach to water services delivery that did not occur before is the work Irish Water has done on producing a draft 25 year water services strategic plan. This plan contains the following six key themes - customer service; clean safe drinking water; effective treatment of wastewater; a sustainable environment; supporting economic growth; and investing for the future. It sets out a strong and ambitious vision for the high standards Irish Water aims to achieve for the public water system between now and 2040. It demonstrates the new approach Irish Water is adopting to ensure the country has a reliable, high quality supply of drinking water and satisfactory wastewater services to protect public health and the environment. It is not just big on vision but also grounded in tangible goals aimed at improving the services the public expect. In the area of leakage, for example, Irish Water aims to significantly reduce the levels of unaccounted for water from 49% to less than 38% by the end of 2021 and to between 18% and 22% by 2040, which is an acceptable economic level of leakage. The plan contains the following goals - make boil water notices a thing of the past; upgrade wastewater treatment systems; identify customer leaks to help households manage water usage; identify lead in homes with a view to removing lead piping in the network; and improve customer service. Irish Water also wants to reduce the number of treatment plants from 856 to 780 by 2021, with a further reduction in time. This will provide water for large geographical areas and reduce operating costs. I urge everybody who has an interest in the future of water services to have a say on the plan and provide comments before the closing date of 17 April 2015.

Another example of the utility's long-term approach is its publication of the recent needs report for the proposed eastern and midlands region water supply project. The report showed that projected demand for water in Dublin alone is expected to increase by over 50% by 2050, which is well beyond the existing supply capacity of the region. Even after fully utilising available water supply from existing sources, and with a parallel drive on water conservation and leakage control, approximately 215 million litres per day in excess of existing capacity will be needed by 2050 for the Dublin region alone. This figure rises to 330 million litres per day when the surrounding region is included. The report's findings are the result of the inadequate investment in water supply infrastructure in the last half century, despite the fact that the need for comprehensive action to address future water supply needs in Dublin and its surrounding region has been recognised since the mid-1990s. Water outages are highly disruptive to communities and the economy, which depends on more than 200,000 water intensive jobs. The report estimates that recent outages in the Dublin water supply area between 2010 and 2014 typically cost the Irish economy in excess of €78 million per day. We all recall the international spotlight that fell on Dublin during the 2013 Web Summit, when restaurants, hotels and bars catering for the needs of thousands of visitors to Dublin faced water shortages. I welcome this report and the current public consultation on the issue. Irish Water's focus on delivering a new water source for the eastern seaboard and the midlands is welcome and represents another step in the right direction. I am not trying to suggest that Irish Water has not had its problems - far from it. However, it is only fair that we should acknowledge what it has achieved and what it has done well in such a short period.

The new funding model for water services, including the introduction of domestic water charges, is also being implemented. Irish Water has secured agreement with several financial institutions on lending facilities. This is critical in ensuring Irish Water accesses the level of third party funding needed to invest the required €600 million per annum identified.

One of the Opposition's main arguments against the introduction of water charges has been that central taxation should fund water services. The decades of under investment in water infrastructure in this country has shown us the consequences of central taxation being the main provider of water services. The legacy is one of boil water notices, high leakage and inadequate water treatment capacity and wastewater treatment facilities. Also, numerous water supplies are at risk of non-compliance with drinking water regulations, a problem currently affecting almost 940,000 people.

The only way we will make the necessary investment in our water infrastructure is by having a dedicated funding stream for water services. This has been created through ensuring that those who use the system pay directly for the services and investment required. When State loan finance, which will be repaid, is excluded, the financial support to Irish Water from State sources in 2015 will be less than would have been provided to the services if they had remained with local authorities, despite the fact that the capital programme is almost 40% greater. It is the new utility model and the new domestic charges that are driving this increased investment. This financing model ensures that critical water infrastructure projects do not have to join the waiting list of priorities that already includes housing, education, health and social protection payments.

We are making progress, but the journey to transform the sector is far from complete. The next milestone will be reached in April when Irish Water begins billing its domestic customers. This complex and large task requires the billing of 1.5 million domestic customers. Never before has a single utility had to develop a customer billing database for so many customers. In a project of this scale, despite the intensive work and planning, it would be unrealistic to

expect the process to advance perfectly. However, Irish Water has assured the Department that customer service will be at the heart of this endeavour and that it will work with all customers to ensure that any issues arising are resolved as quickly as possible.

A key element of the process of building an accurate customer database has been the engagement between Irish Water and customers and I urge all households who have not registered with Irish Water to do so as soon as possible. Without registering, households will not be assured of an accurate bill, but will automatically receive the default multi-adult household bill of €260 per year. Nor will they be eligible for the Government's €100 water conservation grant. Some 1.24 million households have now responded to the Irish Water customer application campaign and I would encourage the remaining households that have not registered to do so as soon as possible.

It was not sustainable to continue with the water system as it was. Future generations would not thank us for creating even more critical problems in the future by not addressing issues we must now address. The suggestions in the motion moved by the Technical Group that we abolish Irish Water and water charges will do nothing to help the 940,000 people who depend on water treatment plants that are at risk, and neither will they improve the lives of those in 44 urban areas throughout the country who live with the reality of untreated sewage being discharged into local bodies of water. The people and businesses of Dublin would not thank us for abandoning a reform programme that could expedite a more secure water supply for them. Abolishing water charges or the utility driven improvements in the system would be of little comfort to any of us while we endure countless more reports of leakage levels amounting to almost half of all drinking water produced, and nor would such rash decisions help us in explaining ourselves to the European Commission against charges of insufficient progress in the EU infringement case against Ireland over the need for improvements at 66 wastewater treatment plants across the country.

There are many problems within our water systems. From lead pipes to leakage and from pollution to water source protection, the journey to secure our water supplies and wastewater treatment into the future requires a long-term strategic approach. The economic regulatory process will play an important role in ensuring that Irish Water's progress in delivering an efficient water system is benchmarked against international competitors. There can be no question of abandoning the progress made to date. This would mean putting capital projects concerned with delivering drinking water, fixing leakage and constructing new pipes and sewage treatment plants back onto the long list of demands competing for finite public resources.

The alternative to the Opposition's motion this evening is a sustainable funding model for a public water system that is fit for purpose and is managed and operated by a single national utility. By embedding the reforms we have implemented, we can remove the risks and deficiencies within the public water system and ensure a secure water future for our country. We need to make the investments and improvements now that will ensure that we and generations to come have a secure, high quality drinking water supply. We need this for families and to ensure public health and industry are protected. This will help deliver more jobs and industry and will protect our agriculture and food production so that our economy can continue to expand.

When we think of the over 200,000 jobs in this country that rely on water intensive processes, be they in ICT, pharma, clean-tech, agrifood or the tourism industry, we should be aware how vital a secure supply of quality water is, and, likewise, plans for economic growth, perhaps in the tourism sector, rely on our clean, green image. Plans for the agrifood sector, through new

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beef export markets or the ending of milk quotas, also rely on secure water supplies. In supporting these reforms, we can increase investment in wastewater infrastructure to ensure less pollution going into our rivers, lakes and seas. This, too, is vital for protecting public health and the environment.

By entrusting our public water system to a single national utility, we can secure a future based on sustainable management of water as a vital and precious resource. We can have confidence in our ability to address new challenges facing our public water system arising from a growing economy, a rising population and a climate that is changing. We can make Ireland a water secure country and economy that will attract even more water-intensive industries here as other countries become more water stressed.

The Government's water reforms are about securing investment in our water system so that the public can receive a reliable, secure supply of quality drinking water and satisfactory levels of wastewater treatment for our long-term future. I urge everyone in the House to think about this issue and to support the Government's amending motion, which favours long-term thinking and solutions for a more water secure and prosperous future rather than support a short-term proposal that offers no answers or security for future generations.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: I am sharing my time with Deputy Barry Cowen.

If Irish Water had been conceived as a Netflix series, we would currently be on series seven. What we are seeing and witnessing is slapstick comedy that lacks idealism. It looks like something along the lines of "The West Wing", but smells more of "House of Cards" in respect of the contempt with which the Government is approaching the introduction of its water policy. Sadly, the joke is not Netflix, but the Government approach.

Last weekend, we saw approximately 100,000 ordinary people protesting against water charges on the streets of Dublin. Their demonstration poses a significant difficulty for the Government. These are ordinary decent people, mothers, fathers, friends and neighbours and the difficulty for Fine Gael and the Labour Party is that their attempt to demonise these people for exercising their democratic right to protest against what they believe is an unfair and unjust situation is a particular low blow. The Government parties have attempted to ignore and downplay the situation and have ridiculed those protesting and tried to cover and camouflage their own nerves in regard to the situation. However, they know well that Irish Water is dead and that the game is up. They know Irish Water has failed as a policy, but have not got the courage or humility to accept this situation.

Instead, we are seeing a situation the Government intends to drag to a bitter conclusion through the use of tricks and the media.

9 o'clock

None of these tactics has worked to date. Indeed, they all seem to have rebounded back on the Government resulting in the damaged relationship with decent people in this country, the relationship between citizens and the State. There has been an increase in the level of public cynicism as a consequence of the election of this Government and the introduction of this policy.

I wish to raise the issue of the numbers game. The Minister has informed us this evening that 1.2 million households have returned their forms to Irish Water. We can reasonably assume that over 200,000 of those households are in group water schemes which means that we can

now declare the details about the number of paying customers. A total of 1.9 million households registered for the local property tax. This would leave 700,000 households which have not returned forms to date. These are people who have taken great issue with the Government. They have not registered and they will not pay. I can guarantee that their numbers will increase significantly as a consequence of the Minister's latest tactic of threatening to bring decent ordinary people to a specialist court to screw them to the end of the wall. These are the people who are hanging on by a thread.

Yesterday evening in a carefully choreographed manoeuvre the Minister attempted to scare and to intimidate decent people by threatening to reach into their salaries, their pensions and their social welfare. He was threatening to pickpocket these people. I find that appalling. No utility is being treated the way Irish Water is being treated. The Minister may as well grant the same privileges to the ESB, to Bord Gáis and why not to Vodafone or Eircom. This is a Government that could not come up with a legislative provision to reach back in time to put its hands in the pockets of retired politicians but it is going to put its hands into the pensions of retired citizens who were out on the streets last weekend. It is farcical. It is also dangerous.

The Minister has no idea that the ultimate result of this policy will be a privatisation of Irish Water. The Government does not intend to privatise Irish Water this side of a general election but at some point if it is re-elected I am sure it will discover some crisis somewhere to justify the sale of Irish Water. I refer to the Minister's attempt to intimidate the population and a Government resorting to the soft propaganda, a billboard advertising campaign costing €650,000. That is taxpayers' money while the Government continues to pulverise disability services in the west.

Irish Water was set up by the Government of Fine Gael and the Labour Party. It is a case of two political parties, one saying one thing in 2011 on the doorsteps and the other saying something else. Why does the Government not go to the country? The parties are joined at the hip on this policy. The Government should go to the country on this policy; it should call a general election and put political party money into the billboards for selling Irish Water rather than using hard-earned taxpayers' money that is being sucked out of public services in order to sustain this farcical policy.

As far back as 2009, Fine Gael had been planning the introduction of the privatisation of Irish Water. In fairness, the party was up-front from the outset about its intention. The Labour Party on the other hand, made public play about being opposed to water charges. That was the message on the doorsteps but behind the scenes they published the Every Little Bit Hurts advertising campaign. We know now that in 2010 a memo was doing the rounds about water charges and it was circulated among the upper echelons of the Labour Party, including to the leader and the deputy leader - who is now the leader - and their advisers. The memo set out clearly the details of setting in place the process of the privatisation of water. Both Fine Gael and the Labour Party had plans from the outset to introduce a memorandum of understanding around accelerating the privatisation and the removal of services from local authorities into an Irish Water entity. Fine Gael was honest. The Labour leadership never intended to maintain a promise. It did not come as a surprise. Deputy Gilmore was caught in a different type of leak as WikiLeaks revealed duplicitous engagement with the American ambassador on the Lisbon treaty. Another former leader, Deputy Ruairí Quinn, was happy to sign pledges on third level fees knowing that he was going to break them at the first available opportunity. In 2010 they knew that this was going to be a position. Of course, the Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, is delighted with this new policy and he has to stand over it. He has owned this policy for years.

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I ask the Minister to look at the reality that this policy with respect to Irish Water is a catastrophe. It is farcical and it must be ended.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I thank the Technical Group for tabling this motion which gives the House an opportunity to discuss the issue yet again. Every time we discuss it we hear of another deadline and again tonight the Government has not failed to oblige in that regard. The Minister said earlier that he has a new deadline, which means that beyond June the €100 grant will not be given for turning on the tap for as long as one likes.

My party and I acknowledge that funds need to be invested in water services. I ask the Government to also acknowledge that €5.5 billion was spent on water infrastructure and water services during the years 2000 to 2010. It is a myth to say that there has been no spending by previous Governments in this area.

I acknowledge that there was and continues to be a need for an authority to oversee, adjudicate and prioritise development in the water services sector. Such an authority should be along the lines of a national infrastructure directorate, a much slimmer, leaner entity than the cumbersome overpaid and bonus-driven quango that is Irish Water. I suggest it should be a body similar to the NRA, which has proved to be successful and which has delivered within budgets and on time. Many people have recognised the input of the NRA in improving our infrastructure and connectivity throughout the country. This example might be taken on board by the Government at some stage in the near future in order to address the imbalance between the eastern seaboard and the rest of the country.

Such a structure could be funded by general taxation, by public private partnership and by the European Investment Bank in partnership with the local authorities who have been subject to ridicule by various sectors of this Government who continue to say that the local authorities and their staff could not do the job effectively of managing and maintaining our water systems and services. This is despite the fact that having established this €1 billion quango and the new tier above that very system, the Government has retained the services of the local authorities until 2025. Yet, it thinks this new tier is a good policy.

Rather than rehearsing many of the failures and disasters that have ensued since the rushed establishment of Irish Water, in the short time available to me I wish to concentrate on the construct, the model that is Irish Water. What is this bonus-driven, oversized super-quango with its bonuses and everything else associated with it? It has cost over €1 billion to date to put it in place and not one cent is in excess of what was put in place annually by the previous Administration for the delivery of water services. We have been consistently told that this funding model, this Holy Grail, to get off the balance sheet, is the only way in which future investment can be made in our water infrastructure. We have been told they will be able to borrow at affordable rates and off-balance sheet. However, it is clear that this construct, this Holy Grail, is in great danger. From the outset it started to crumble to the point where, thankfully, the Government climbed down but not to the extent envisaged or sought by the Opposition parties. The Government reduced the excessive charges of between €500 and €600, which were the figures being bandied about. If these charges had remained in place, it could have argued that with such high revenue from charges, interest rates on loans would be low. However, interest rates on loans increase the day income declines.

Irish Water tells us it has successfully borrowed €300 million on the markets this year at an interest rate of 2.5%. The National Treasury Management Agency is borrowing on behalf of the

Government at a rate of 1%. This means funds are being borrowed for Irish Water at 1.5 times the rate being paid by the NTMA. Does anyone consider that it is members of the public who pay for these borrowings, irrespective of the interest rate or charge that is levied?

We were led to believe that borrowing by Irish Water would safeguard Government investment in other areas, for example, in the housing programme. The Taoiseach stated at his party's recent Ard-Fheis that billions of euro would be invested in rural areas. The Minister of State with responsibility for rural affairs informed us, however, that the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas, CEDRA, which is chaired by Mr. Pat Spillane, will not invest another red cent over and above what has already been invested in rural areas. This type of spin and rubbish is coming home to roost. The more we drill down and investigate the spin about investments, the more we find that there is little behind it.

The Minister stated the country is in recovery mode. While that is true of some parts of the country, many areas have not seen any sign that recovery is in prospect. We are informed the country will meet its financial targets, including the 3% of GDP deficit target. If that is the case, the borrowings required for investment in Irish Water could be made on balance sheet at an interest rate of 1% as opposed to 2.5%.

Speaking on a radio programme last February, a Labour Party Senator let the cat out of the bag when she stated legislation could be introduced to take funds directly from wages, social welfare payments and pensions. She was ridiculed at the time and we were told nothing could be further from the truth. We heard yesterday, however, that special courts will be established to address this issue and the long arm of this right-wing Government will take the charge from people. We were told a couple of weeks ago that the EUROSTAT decision on the arrangements pertaining to Irish Water has been delayed for up to two months. The Government has been advised that without a definite income stream, Irish Water will not stand up to EUROSTAT's rules. People with Sky television must pay for the service or face being cut off. They cannot expect a charge will be levied on their property to pay for the service at some point in future, yet this is the type of approach the Government was advocating.

When the Fianna Fáil Party and other Opposition parties tabled amendments to the legislation on Irish Water providing for the introduction in law of an ability to pay mechanism, we were told the proposal was rubbish. Yesterday, however, the Minister informed us that the courts will take into consideration a person's ability to pay when cases come before them. We were sold a pup, a pig in a poke and the Government's accountancy trick is coming home to roost, having blown up in the Minister's face. The ridiculous aspect of this issue is that while Irish Water could be funded from general taxation or NTMA loans charged at an interest rate of 1%, the Government has decided to go off balance sheet and have Irish Water borrow at an interest rate of 3%. It believes members of the public do not understand what is going on. One either borrows at low rates and imposes high charges or one imposes low charges and covers the costs using revenue from general taxation. It is time to call a halt to this by disbanding Irish Water, abolishing water charges for the moment and going back to the drawing board.

Deputy Gerry Adams: For the record, this is not a Sinn Féin Private Members' motion.

Deputy Barry Cowen: My apologies.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Ná bí buartha.

Deputy Barry Cowen: It is sometimes hard to distinguish between Sinn Féin and the mov-

ers of the motion.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Water is a human right and while water services must be paid for, this must not be done through a double tax on hard pressed citizens. The water charges, coupled with other taxes and charges imposed by Fine Gael and the Labour Party, will cripple households and families. From the outset, Irish Water has been mired in scandal. It is a toxic entity, which has become synonymous with everything that is wrong with this Government, namely, cronyism, political manipulation of State boards, threats to citizens and escalating taxes on struggling families. For these reasons, the organisation cannot be left with responsibility for the delivery of water services in this State.

It was revealed at the weekend that there are no records or minutes available of important meetings that were held in 2012 between the former Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Mr. Phil Hogan, and key players in Irish Water. This is extraordinary when one considers the scandal surrounding the huge sums of public money spent on consultants by Irish Water. It is simply not believable that meetings attended by the then Minister and the chairwoman of Bord Gáis were held to discuss the establishment of a major new public utility without notes being taken. Considering the issues at stake, there needs to be an Oireachtas inquiry into the issue. The Taoiseach dismissed this proposal but that is the nature of this Government. Right-wing governments behave in this way when they are under pressure.

On the other hand, a real democratic revolution is taking place in the Right2Water campaign, a genuine grassroots citizens movement which has raised the political consciousness of communities across the State. The vast majority of protests against water charges have been family friendly, good humoured and highly effective and have succeeded in forcing major concessions from the Government. However, a tiny minority of groups and individuals believe the anti-water charges campaign is an opportunity for the promotion of their ultra-left politics, while others view the protests as a platform against all politics and politicians as well as An Garda Síochána. Their irresponsible actions do not reflect the views of the tens of thousands of families who have come out to protest against the imposition of this unjust tax. More important, their behaviour has played into the hands of the establishment which uses it to discredit the anti-water charges protests. Protests must be peaceful and safe and must encourage the largest number of citizens to participate. It was for this reason that I was delighted to see so many people on the streets of Dublin on Saturday.

Ultimately, the only way water charges will be scrapped will be by a decision of the Government. Sinn Féin is pledged to achieve this objective. My party stopped the imposition of water charges in the North and, in government, we will scrap them in this State. The Government has for months claimed the anti-water charges campaign is on its last legs. However, the huge turnout at Saturday's protest disproves that claim. Contrary to the Government's assertions and Minister's protestations, citizens are more determined than ever on this issue. Why did the Government not listen to the hundreds of thousands of people who demonstrated by scrapping water charges? Instead, anti-water charges protestors have been jailed, local authorities and landlords have been forced to hand over details of tenants, €600,000 has been wasted on a new advertising campaign, €85 million of public money was given to private consultants and €539 million was wasted on water meters. Today, the Taoiseach made clear that he supports the Minister's threats to take water charges from wages and social welfare payments.

I agree with the element of the motion calling for the ending of water charges, water to remain in public ownership and these issues to be made central in the forthcoming general elec-

tion if they have not been resolved beforehand. However, the motion also calls for a boycott of water charge bills by householders. This is not the Sinn Féin position. We will support those who cannot pay and those who have decided not to pay. However, our position is the same as that adopted by the Right2Water campaign in that we do not call for a boycott. We have adopted this position for a very good reason. We have seen in the past, both North and South, the folly of political leaders advising householders not to pay certain taxes, however unjust, and subsequently being unable to defend the same citizens when governments drag people through the courts, as this Government has threatened to do this week.

Sinn Féin will offer serious and principled political leadership which provides an alternative to austerity and defeats this tax. We advocate the immediate repeal of water charges legislation. In that regard, it would be interesting to find out if the Fianna Fáil Party, which created water charges in the first instance, is willing to make a similar commitment. We also advocate the holding of a constitutional referendum to keep water services in public ownership and the dismantling of Irish Water and its replacement by a new model of governance, funding and delivery within full public ownership and with democratic control and accountability. Nobody should be in any doubt that water charges can and will be defeated. What we need is to maintain the unity of the Right2Water campaign and the determination of citizens who are showing the rest of us the way forward.

Debate adjourned.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.20 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 25 March 2015.