



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 30 Aibreán 2015

Thursday, 30 April 2015

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 9.30 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

National Monuments

1. **Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht her plans for the Moore Street area in Dublin 1 in the wake of her announcement of 31 March 2015; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16943/15]

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: With just eight months to go before 2016, the question seeks to establish what the Government will be able to achieve with regard to the development of the Moore Street site and the national monument there. It acknowledges the fact that the State has correctly taken the property into ownership but seeks to establish what will be done about the birthplace of our republic between now and 2016.

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My primary function in this case arises from the preservation order that was placed on Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street in 2007 under the National Monuments Acts and to protect No. 16 as the site of the final council of war and final headquarters of the leaders of the 1916 Rising. The area surrounding the Moore Street national monument is largely in private ownership and is not covered by the provisions of the National Monuments Acts. It is the subject of a grant of full planning permission by An Bord Pleanála. Dublin City Council has statutory responsibility under the planning and development legislation for all planning and development matters in the area. With regard to the national monument itself, the position is that the preservation order requires the consent of the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to be obtained for any works affecting the monument buildings. After extensive deliberations, ministerial consent was given to the owners in April 2014 for the creation of a 1916 commemorative centre in the monument buildings, involving the full repair and restoration of the structures, both internally

and externally.

Proposals that subsequently went before Dublin City Council late last year would have allowed the exchange of two modern 1990s buildings at Nos. 24 and 25 Moore Street, currently used as a cleansing depot, in return for full ownership of Nos. 14 to 17 being transferred to the city council. The transfer would have been accompanied by NAMA funding to cover the full cost of the restoration project and the proposed commemorative centre. I was very disappointed that Dublin City Council members rejected these plans, which I believe provided a real opportunity to have the restoration work completed and the commemorative centre open in time for the centenary of the Rising in 2016.

To ensure the long-term future of the national monument, I have secured the approval of the Government for it to be acquired by the State. This will bring the national monument into public ownership and secure its long-term future. It will also facilitate the safeguarding and restoration of the buildings, and the development of the proposed 1916 commemorative centre to be run as a public facility. The Department and the other parties involved are working to bring these matters forward as speedily as possible and I will revert to the Government in the coming weeks with final proposals in this regard.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I thank the Minister. There was a large share of agreement between us in the run-up to the decision of Dublin City Council. Regrettably, its decision changed everything and we are, as they say, where we are. In this respect the Minister's response is a little disappointing. Many people here have been signalling their concern over recent years that 2016 would come and we would not have done the redevelopment work essential to the critical site. Fianna Fáil has published, through the good offices of Senators Darragh O'Brien, Diarmuid Wilson and Mark Daly, the Moore Street Area Renewal and Development Bill 2015, modelled on the very successful Temple Bar development proposal. If the Minister is not in a position today to give us an indication of what will have happened at Moore Street by 2016 will she tell us she will accept the legislation which is aimed at achieving positive results for the area?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Deputy will appreciate some fundamental matters must be dealt with before there is any question of getting the work under way in Moore Street. He can be assured the intention is to have the restoration work completed and the commemorative centre up and running in the shortest possible time-frame. How long that will take I cannot say at present, but all options will be looked at with a view to delivering the project with a minimum of delay.

With regard to the proposed legislation mentioned, my remit under the National Monuments Acts is defined by the preservation orders of Nos. 14 to 17, Moore Street. Plans or proposals for the wider area outside the confines of the national monument site are the responsibility of Dublin City Council as the planning authority. Any legislative proposals for a new Temple Bar-type approach to the Moore Street area, as announced by Fianna Fáil, would be a matter for the Minister of the Environment, Community and Local Government under whose remit the matter falls.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: The Minister has responsibility for heritage and we need her to be a leader and to drive forward these plans. It is not just a matter for the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government; it is a matter for the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to take a leadership role. My colleagues in the Seanad have brought forward

this very positive proposed legislation, which is broad and all-encompassing in terms of the powers it would give to enable the site to be developed in the way it deserves to be developed. One of the difficulties we have now is that Chartered Land's plan, which the Minister supported and which I personally supported, was rejected but the Department had no plan B. We have arrived at this juncture with regard to the birthplace of our republic and the Government had no plan B with regard to what it would do if plan A went wrong, which it did. Now we will find that, in reality, nothing will be ready by Easter 2016 on Moore Street.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: To be clear, my role as Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht is to assess what is best for the national monument, and the national monument has been designated as Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street. I do not have any powers under the National Monuments Acts to create an historic quarter in Moore Street. The properties around the national monument are in private ownership. They are not subject to my remit under the National Monuments Acts. The redevelopment plans for the area have received full planning permission from An Bord Pleanála. The good news is we have the building. I must bring a proposal to the Government to develop it. The proposed plans for the centre were fine and would have been a great facility in Moore Street. I have been there and it is very derelict. The proposed plans would have represented a tribute to the leaders. I will bring a memo to Government. It is my intention that the work will commence as quickly as possible.

National Monuments

2. **Deputy Sandra McLellan** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will provide a detailed update on developments since the Government's recent purchase of Nos. 14-17 Moore Street, Dublin 1. [16962/15]

Deputy Sandra McLellan: I am seeking a detailed update from the Minister on developments since the Government's recent purchase of Nos. 14-17 Moore Street, Dublin.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As I outlined in my reply to today's Priority Question No 1, my primary function in this case arises from the preservation order that was placed on Nos. 14-17 Moore Street under the National Monuments Acts 2007 in order to protect No. 16 as the site of the final council of war and final headquarters of the leaders of the 1916 Rising. The area surrounding the Moore Street national monument is largely in private ownership, is not covered by the provisions of the national monuments Acts and is the subject of a grant of full planning permission by An Bord Pleanála. Dublin City Council has statutory responsibility under the planning and development Acts for all planning and development matters in the area.

With regard to the national monument, the position is that the preservation order requires the consent of the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to be obtained for any works affecting the monument buildings. Following extensive deliberations, ministerial consent was given to the owners in April 2014 for the creation of a 1916 commemorative centre in the monument buildings, involving the full repair and restoration of the structures, internally and externally.

Proposals that subsequently went before Dublin City Council late last year would have allowed the exchange of two modern 1990s buildings at Nos. 24 and 25 Moore Street, currently used as a cleansing depot, in return for full ownership of Nos. 14-17 being transferred to the city council. The transfer would have been accompanied by NAMA funding to cover the full cost of the restoration project and the proposed commemorative centre. I was disappointed that Dublin

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City councillors rejected these plans, which I believe provided a real opportunity to have the restoration work completed and the commemorative centre open in time for the centenary of the Rising in 2016. However, to ensure the long-term future of the national monument, I have secured the approval of the Government for it to be acquired by the State. This will bring the national monument into public ownership and secure its long-term future. It will also facilitate the safeguarding and restoration of the buildings and the development of the proposed 1916 commemorative centre to be run as a public facility.

My Department and the other parties involved are working to bring these matters forward as speedily as possible and I will be reverting to Government in the coming weeks with final proposals in this regard.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: As the Minister will be aware, I have been calling on this Government for many years now to guarantee protection of the national monument, No. 14-17 Moore Street. I welcome the active steps pursued by the Minister in terms of its preservation by way of purchase of the buildings. All of those who have campaigned tirelessly for preservation of the full area will continue to insist that this be guaranteed. Can the Minister give that guarantee? The recent vote by Dublin City Council to prevent a land swap deal with the developers, Chartered Land, was a key step in ensuring its protection.

Nos. 14-17 Moore Street was the last headquarters of the provisional Government of the Irish Republic in 1916. Can the Minister guarantee that the surrounding battlefield site will be preserved in a way that is authentic and true to the area's history and character? The national monument will now be in the ownership of the State. This is to be welcomed. However, further details on its development are needed. Can the Minister outline what restoration plans are in place and confirm if any of the project be delivered by 2016?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I can give a guarantee that Nos. 14-17 Moore Street will be developed as a commemorative centre to the 1916 leaders. There are some details remaining to be worked out and I have yet to bring a memo on the matter to Government. Work will commence as soon as possible.

On the remainder of the site, as I have said previously, it is outside of the national monument and is in private ownership. As such, it is not a matter for me. My responsibility is in respect of Nos. 14-17 Moore Street. This has now been secured into State ownership, which will protect its long-term future. It will be developed in a way that will ensure it is a lasting tribute to the 1916 leaders. It will also be a great addition in terms of the development in the GPO and the centre to be developed there. I believe both buildings will complement each other.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: As Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, the Minister should look beyond Nos. 14-17 Moore Street. Perhaps she will detail how the purchase price was arrived at, confirm if a compulsory purchase order procedure was considered and verify the current status of the Chartered Land planning application to demolish the surrounding area. Will the national monument buildings be subject to an independent survey by suitably qualified experts, as recommended by Dublin City Council, and will the Minister confirm that, as Minister, she will extend protection to the other monuments in the area, as recommended in the Frank Myles report on Chartered Land?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: On the area surrounding Nos. 14-17 Moore Street, a detailed battlefield assessment has already been carried out and I am satisfied with the quality and find-

ings of that research. As part of the Minister's consideration of the consent application, the consent applicant, Chartered Land Limited, which owns the national monument site, was asked by the Department in January 2012 to commission an assessment of the wider battlefield, including a battlefield assessment and inspections and fabric investigations of an area incorporating the block formed by Moore Street, O'Rahilly Parade, Moore Lane and Henry Place, and some of the areas south of Henry Place extending back towards Henry Street. The report, research, inspections and investigations reinforced the primary status of Nos. 14-17 Moore Street, most notably due to the degree to which the pre-1916 physical fabric survives and continues to convey an authentic and legible historical sense of the place within which the final critical hours of the Rising took place and how these buildings stand in marked contrast to the degree to which the historic fabric within the wider urban landscape no longer survives. Unlike other adjacent properties, Nos. 14-17 Moore Street also retains significant and extensive internal 18th century elements, including staircases, partitions, plaster work, doors, floors, fittings and fixtures. The 18th century building form and profiles also survive, along with the physical evidence of the presence of the insurgents in the form of the openings in the walls between the houses.

Special Protection Areas Designation

3. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she has sought and secured adequate funding to provide a package of compensation measures to farmers whose farms have been rendered valueless and whose livelihoods have been destroyed as a result of special protection area designations imposed by her Department in respect of the hen harrier; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16857/15]

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Over the past few months it has come to light that farmers in so-called protected areas have had their payments cut, be they SPA, SAC or NHA payments. What is the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht doing in this regard and what compensation package is being put in place for farmers who have lost their single farm payments?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The designation of special protection areas, SPAs, is a legal obligation placed on all member states in the EU. In 2007, Ireland was found by the European Court of Justice to have failed to designate a sufficient number of SPAs. It is essential that, wherever possible, use is made of opportunities for co-funding from the EU in providing payments to farmers who own lands subject to such designations. Therefore, while my Department has the lead role in regard to the implementation of the EU habitats and birds directives, significant funding is provided through the rural development programme operated by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to assist farmers in meeting the requirements of the birds and habitats directives.

Participation in the basic payment scheme requires farmers to abide by the statutory requirements relating to special protection areas and special areas of conservation, collectively known as Natura 2000 sites. Additional funding is provided through the rural development programme. Agri-environment schemes, such as the new GLAS, have provided, and will provide, a range of supports, including payments, in respect of Natura 2000 sites, to tens of thousands of farmers. I understand that there is to be a dedicated measure in GLAS for farmers in targeted areas who abide by a specific measure for the hen harrier.

A habitat enhancement scheme, known as the National Parks and Wildlife Service farm plan scheme, was available to farmers in hen harrier SPAs to undertake proactive measures for

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the species. These measures were not a condition of the designation, nor were they mandatory. For that reason, they are not considered to be compensation for the prevention of an activity or a development on the lands in question. Voluntary commitments were entered into by 377 landowners under the farm plan scheme, covering over 9,000 ha. I am advised that 42 farm plans are still active.

The designation of lands does not mean that the lands are subject to blanket restrictions, although they must be managed appropriately. This requirement means that certain State-funded grant schemes must be operated with due care where they may affect such lands and they cannot be considered an automatic entitlement of the landowner.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Whoever wrote that response does not understand what is going on around Ireland. When land is designated, people almost have to emigrate from the area because they cannot make a drain or plant the land if they are going to abide by these so-called laws. People are being forced out. In Ireland, if something is seen on someone's land, what was seen or the person who owns the land will survive before the designation but both will not survive after it. The rural development plan is available to people in counties Meath, Kildare or Cork with no land designated. It is disingenuous to mislead people. They will get the same rate if they are considered under different criteria, which people can choose to do. Let us not mislead people. The Minister said there are 42 plans involving the hen harrier. Is there a scheme?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I live on a farm and I understand farming. The scheme in place in my Department ceased in 2010 and 42 farmers are getting funding under it. The funding available for heritage purposes is not unlimited. We are trying to work with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and what we want to achieve is to strike a balance between protecting the environment and allowing farmers to farm. The farmers are custodians of the countryside and carry out great work in protecting our environment but we must work together on this.

With regard to the rural development scheme, we should deal with the issues through co-funding, which is to the appropriate mechanism. Through the rural development plan, we can deal with these issues. In the GLAS and GLAS plus schemes, farmers who have been designated will get priority.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Since 2010, there has been no scheme in the Department. There is no scheme at the moment. It is suggested that farmers in designated areas get priority but if I sow wild bird cover I can get priority. If I have the best land in Ireland, even if it is not designated, I will get priority. Let us not spin this to people that they are special and lead them astray. Organic farmers with a designation get priority. It is dangerous to mislead people to think they are a special category and will be compensated in this way. If I have land that is not designated but I am in the organic sector, I get the same status and priority as if I cannot farm the land in counties Cork and Kerry, along the west coast or wherever there is a designation.

There is no good looking to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. In the past seven to 12 years, the Department has designated people's private property and has run behind the hills, leaving farmers with single farm payments that are now being blocked.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The designation was put in place a considerable number of years ago. Ireland was faced with multi-million euro fines and the likelihood of daily fines if

we did not do something about the designations.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It is because of civil servants.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: These are EU directives and we have gone through this before. We are where we are and we must deal with it. My Department is working with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and it is clear that these farmers will get priority under the GLAS scheme. There was a scheme in my Department but, under the GLAS scheme, many more farmers with lands designated will be able to avail of it. My Department is working with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and we must strike the right balance so that farmers can continue to farm and the environment can be protected.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Three weeks ago, in Athlone, I met senior people from the Minister's Department but they have not liaised with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. If I have land that is not designated and I am involved in organic farming, I get the same priority as if all my land is designated. I know the Minister is from a farming background and most of us understand the scenario. If we draw a straight line from Cork to Donegal and consider the designations in that area, we are driving families out of their farms because of lunacy and rules imposed on people. These designations have been brought in by civil servants, not by the farmers. The farmers did not write to the Minister looking for them. Family farms and families are being driven out by rules and regulations that need to be addressed.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Staff in the Department are in direct contact with colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to ensure the rules protect the habitat and species and the income of farmers who farmed the land. The issue is being dealt with. I assure the Deputy of that.

Seirbhísí Oileán

4. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Michael P. Kitt** den Aire Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta chun a fhiafraí den Aire Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta an bhfuil sí ag lorg tairiscintí maidir le seirbhísí aeir go dtí Oileáin Árann, an mbeidh an leibhéal céanna seirbhísí ann agus atá ann faoi láthair; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [16944/15]

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: An bhfuil an tAire Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta ag lorg tairiscintí maidir le seirbhísí aeir go dtí Oileáin Árann, an mbeidh an leibhéal céanna seirbhísí ann agus atá ann faoi láthair, cén dul chun cinn atá déanta aici, agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh?

Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Joe McHugh): Is féidir liom a dheimhniú don Teachta go bhfuil mo Roinn ag lorg tairiscintí faoi láthair do sheirbhís aeir d'Oileáin Árann don tréimhse ón 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2015 go dtí an 30 Meán Fómhair 2019. Mar atá i gceist faoin chonradh reatha, tá bunleibhéal seirbhíse iarrtha don chonradh úr. Faoin iarratas ar thairiscintí, tá íosleibhéal seirbhíse in aghaidh na seachtaine i gceist, is é sin dhá eitilt fillte in aghaidh an lae, seacht lá na seachtaine, móide seirbhís iompair bóthair chun freastal ar na heitiltí sin. Mar atá i gceist faoin chonradh reatha, ní bheidh bac ar an chuideacht ar a mbronnfar an conradh níos mó seirbhísí ná an t-íosleibhéal sin a chur ar fáil.

Mar is eol don Teachta, i gcomhréir le Rialacháin an Aontais Eorpaigh, rinneadh athbhre-

ithniú anuraidh ar riachtanas na seirbhíse aeir. Cuireadh tuarascáil chuimsitheach faoi bhráid mo Roinne a chlúdaigh an tréimhse ó 2003 go 2013. Rinneadh measúnú sa tuarascáil ar leibhéal agus ar threocht na gcostas don tseirbhís aeir agus ar an chomhréireacht idir an oibleagáid seirbhíse poiblí agus riachtanais forbartha eacnamaíochta an réigiúin.

I measc nithe eile, léiríodh sa tuarascáil go raibh caiteachas bliantúil mo Roinne ar an tseirbhís aeir tar éis méadú faoi 136% le linn na tréimhse athbhreithnithe ó €800,000 in 2003 go €1.9 milliún in 2013, cé gur fhan líon na bpaisinéirí mórán mar a chéile le linn na tréimhse ag thart ar 40,000 paisinéir in aghaidh na bliana. Dá bhrí sin, dúradh sa tuarascáil go raibh sé riachtanach breathnú ar roghanna éagsúla chun luach ar airgead níos fearr a fháil don Státchiste. Is sa chomhthéacs sin a d'ullmhaigh mo Roinn, i gcomhar leis an Oifig um Sholáthar Rialtais, an t-iarratas ar thairiscintí a foilsíodh le déanaí. Tá spriocdháta den 8 Meitheamh 2015 ag tairgeoirí seirbhísí aeir chun tairiscintí a dhéanamh.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Tá inní agus míshásamh ar mhuintir Oileáin Árann de bharr an chonartha chun seirbhís aeir a chur ar fáil d'Oileáin Árann. Tá an tseirbhís seo an-tábhachtach. An mbeidh an tAire Stáit sásta an Conradh seo a tharraingt siar agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas faoi sin? Tá ceisteanna ag na Teachtaí Éamon Ó Cuív agus Seán Kyne ar an ábhar seo freisin agus bhí caint air ar chlár Vincent Browne seachtain ó shin. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go mbeidh an tseirbhís ar an chaighdeán céanna agus a bhí sí cheana maidir le minicíocht na seirbhíse agus costais do na hoileánaigh. Tá an costas sin an-tábhachtach. Cén leibhéal seirbhíse atá i gceist? Cén suim atá ann chun an tseirbhís sin a choinneáil? Is dócha go bhfuil an tAire Stáit ag iarraidh daoine a fháil chun an tseirbhís sin a chur ar fáil.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Aontaím gurb é an rud is tábhachtaí ná an ceangal idir an mórthír agus Oileáin Árann. Bhí na Teachtaí Derek Nolan agus Seán Kyne i dteagmháil liom agus d'ardaigh comhghleacaí an Teachta Kitt, an Teachta Éamon Ó Cuív, an cheist le déanaí freisin. Is léir go bhfuil próiseas foirmiúil agus próiseas beo ar siúl faoi láthair. Beidh toradh againn ar an 8 Meitheamh. Níor mhaith liom cur isteach ar an phróiseas. Ní bheadh sé sin ceart. Muna bhfuil fadhb i ndiaidh an phróisis, b'fhéidir go mbeidh seans ann do mo Roinn obair le mo chomhghleacaithe agus muintir na háite, ach tá próiseas ar siúl faoi láthair. Rinne an comhlacht EY athbhreithniú maidir le rialacháin an Aontais Eorpaigh agus cuireadh tuarascáil chuimsitheach faoi bhráid mo Roinne anuraidh. Táim tiomanta do mhuintir na n-oileán agus don tseirbhís aeir sna blianta atá romhainn.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Tá an tAire Stáit ag caint mar gheall ar dhátaí, mhíonna, bhlianta, athbhreithniú agus an Eoraip. Tá sé ag caint faoi gach rud ach amháin an cheist a chuir mé air maidir le seirbhís fadtéarmach. Ní gá bheith ag rá liom go mbeidh sé ann ar feadh bliana eile. Caithfidh a bheith cinnte go mbeidh seirbhís ann d'Oileáin Árann san fhadtéarma, do na hoileánaigh sa chéad dul síos, ach tá cúrsaí turasóireachta an-tábhachtach freisin. Sna míonna atá ag teacht, beidh níos mó daoine ag taisteal go dtí na hOileáin Árann. Níl a fhios agam an bhfuil an tAire Stáit ag éisteacht le muintir Oileáin Árann mar níl freagra á thabhairt domsa inniu. Baineann an cheist le cúrsaí sláinte agus oideachais freisin. Braitheann na rudaí sin go léir ar thaisteal go dtí na hOileáin Árann. Céard a cheapann an tAire Stáit faoin suim atá ann chun an tseirbhís aeir sin a chur ar fáil?

Deputy Joe McHugh: Táim ag éisteacht agus táim ag obair go dian ar an cheist seo. Bhí cruinniú ag na Teachtaí Derek Nolan agus Seán Kyne le hoifigigh i mo Roinn Dé hAoine seo a chuaigh thart. Níl mo thiomantas i gceist maidir leis an ábhar seo. D'ardaigh an Teachta Kitt ceisteanna sláinte, oideachais, gnó agus turasóireachta. Tá siad sin iontach tábhachtach agus tá

an tiomantas ann i ndiaidh an phróisis fosta, ó 2015 go 2019, le haghaidh ceithre bliana. Tá an tiomantas ann faoi choinne an cheangail idir an mórthír agus Oileáin Árann ach tá an próiseas foirmiúil fós ar siúl agus níor mhaith liom, mar Aire Stáit a bhfuil freagracht speisialta air maidir leis an Ghaeltacht, cur isteach ar an phróiseas sin. Muna bhfuil fadhbanna nó ceisteanna eile i gceist i ndiaidh an 8 Meitheamh, b'fhéidir go mbeidh seans ann obair le chéile ar an cheist seo. Is léir go bhfuil próiseas beo foirmiúil ar siúl faoi láthair agus níor mhaith liom cur isteach air.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Is é an Teachta McHugh an tAire Stáit ag deireadh an lae.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Agus tá próiseas ann.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is not present for Ceist Uimh. 5, so we will move on to Question No. 6.

Question No. 5 replied to with Written Answers.

Other Questions

Special Areas of Conservation Designation

6. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will state categorically on the record of Dáil Éireann that properly constituted special areas of conservation exist today; if she will identify on the record for Dáil Éireann one such properly-constituted special area of conservation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16847/15]

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I have searched in a legal sense and in all the official books in Ireland that tell us these things. For the record of the Dáil, SACs, special areas of conservation - I am not referring to candidate special areas of conservation, cSACs, or sites of community importance, SCIs, but SACs - do exist in Ireland. Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Natura 2000 is the centrepiece of European Union nature and biodiversity policy. It is an EU-wide network of nature protection areas established under the 1992 habitats directive. The aim of the network is to assure the long-term survival of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats. The establishment of this network of protected areas also fulfils a community obligation under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. The criteria for selecting sites eligible for identification as sites of community importance and designated as special areas of conservation are set out in annex III of the habitats directive.

The habitats directive has been fully transposed into Irish law by means of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2010, as amended by the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011. These replaced the European Communities (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1997 to 2005 and have addressed deficiencies identified by the Court of Justice of the European Union in the transposition of the habitats and birds directives into Irish law.

Following the public advertising of the intention by Ireland to designate 429 special areas of conservation, those sites were transmitted to, and subsequently adopted by, the European

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Commission as sites of community importance or European sites. Legal protections, commensurate with those set out in the habitats directive, have applied to the sites since initially proposed for designation and Ireland's planning and environmental legislation has operated under these designations.

The protections under the habitats directive ensure that no plan or project undertaken in the area or vicinity of any special area of conservation can be commenced without prior consultation with my Department and an appropriate assessment of the likely impacts on the habitats and species protected by the designation.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I have a good background in the whole designation process. I did not ask that question. The Minister talks about sites of community importance, SCIs, but from what she has said I take it there are no special areas of conservation, SACs, in Ireland. There are SCIs with legal protection but I am asking are there or are there not SACs, legally designated, in Ireland? From that answer I understand there are not.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: There is-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I asked a question.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Yes. There is a final, technical part to be addressed, which is the making-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: There are none at the moment in Ireland.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I will answer the question. There is a final technical part to be addressed, which is the making of a statutory instrument for each site. There is a programme in place to deliver that over the period ahead but the fact remains that the sites have full legal protection since they were initially proposed.

That is the situation and it is recognised in planning law and environmental legislation.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am trying to establish that, until this legal technicality the Minister is going on about is done, there is no SAC in Ireland. She is making clear that the legal technicality has to be done.

I question other things the Minister said because there were certain time limits for it to be done but I understand what she has said and I thank her.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: No, no. I am saying there is a process, which is fully in accordance with the law. There was full legal protection from the time of the initial proposal for designation. There is a final technical part to be addressed. That is the making of a statutory instrument and, in conjunction with the signing of the necessary statutory instruments formally designating sites, landowners, users and others who live in and around these sites will be notified again of the designation. The final phase of the designation process does not place any additional requirements on landowners or users who have already applied. It does not change anything. It is the end of a process.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I gather from what the Minister is saying that until that other process has gone through people may talk about SACs but they do not exist. There are other legal terms but until this legal process the Minister is talking about has been done, people are using the wrong word.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: They do exist.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: They do not.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: They do exist in that they have full legal protection since they were initially proposed under planning law and the environmental legislation.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The term SAC does not exist. That is all I am asking about. The Minister may call them SCIs or whatever under legal protection but SACs will not exist until that bit of tweaking has been done.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: They are still granted the full protection of the law.

Comóradh 1916

7. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Michael P. Kitt** den Aire Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta cén dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir le comóradh Éirí Amach 1916 sa Ghaeltacht; cad iad na háiteanna agus cén saghas comóraidh atá i gceist; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [16819/15]

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Cén dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir le comóradh Éirí Amach 1916 sa Ghaeltacht; cad iad na háiteanna agus cén saghas comóraidh atá i gceist; agus an ndéanfaidh an tAire ráiteas ina thaobh?

Deputy Joe McHugh: Mar is eol don Teachta, lainseáladh an Clár Comórtha Céad Bliain d'Éire 2016 ar an 31 Márta. Tá an Ghaeilge fite fuaite tríd an chlár go léir, chomh maith le bheith mar snáithe faoi leith den chlár. Tá béim faoi leith sa snáithe Gaeilge, An Teanga Bheo, ar raon imeachtaí agus gníomhaíochtaí a chuirfear i láthair trí Ghaeilge sa Ghaeltacht agus lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht le linn 2016. Ós rud é go bhfuil sé ar cheann d'aidhmeanna an chlár Ghaeilge aird a tharraingt ar thábhacht agus ar luach na Gaeltachta mar áit a bhfuil an Ghaeilge ina teanga phobail bhríomhar i gcónaí, tá i gceist go mbeidh láithreacht chúil ag an Ghaeltacht sa chlár.

Is deis faoi leith é Éire 2016 chun ceiliúradh a dhéanamh ar an Ghaeilge, a hoidhreacht a thabhairt chun cuimhne agus an todhchaí atá aici a athshamhlú. Tá An Teanga Bheo curtha i dtoll a chéile i ndiaidh dul i ndáil-chomhairle leis na páirtithe leasmhara. Cuimsítear mórimeachtaí, clár digitithe, léachtaí, díospóireachtaí agus seimineáir, imeachtaí ealaíon agus acmhainní foghlama ar-líne sa chlár. Is é an cuspóir ná an teanga a chur i láthair an phobail mar ghné bhríomhar dár bhféiniúlacht, dár sochaí, dár stair agus dár gcultúr.

Ina theannta sin, is I an aidhm atá leis an chlár ná feacht an phobail maidir leis an Ghaeilge a spreagadh, chomh maith le rannpháirtíocht, díospóireacht, machnamh agus athshamhlú a chothú faoin ré atá caite, faoi staid reatha na teanga agus faoina bhfuil i ndán di. Cuirfear tuilleadh sonraí faoin chlár Gaeilge, atá á chur le chéile ag mo Roinn i gcomhar le heagraíochtaí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta, ar www.ireland.ie de réir mar a fhorbraítear é.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: An aontaíonn an tAire Stáit go bhfuil an teanga lárnach i gcomóradh 2016, mar a bhí sí in Éirí Amach 1916? Mar a dúirt Pádraig Mac Piarais, “Tír gan teanga, tír gan anam”. Ar ndóigh, tá sé an-tábhachtach do mhuintir na Gaeltachta go mbeidh siad in ann an tacaíocht sin a fháil ón Rialtas, agus mar a dúirt mé cheana, go mbeidh siad in ann a ngnó a dhé-

anamh trí Ghaeilge. An bhfuil polasaí dearfach ann mar gheall ar thacaíocht don Ghaeilge sa Ghaeltacht, a bheimis in ann úsáid sa chomóradh an bhliain seo chugainn? Tá €1 milliún tugtha do na comhairlí contae chun cuidiú le comóradh 1916 an bhliain seo chugainn. An úsáidfear cuid den airgead sin sa Ghaeltacht? An mbeidh aon phleananna eile ann chun an comóradh sin a chur ar siúl? Tá a fhios againn faoin €1 milliún ach níl a fhios againn cén sórt plean atá ag an Rialtas ná ag an Aire Stáit.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Caithfear a rá go bhfuil dualgas ar an Rialtas, ar na heagraíochtaí ar an talamh agus ar na comhairlí contae. D'ardaigh an Teachta ceist an €1 milliún a thugadh do na comhairlí contae ar fud na tíre. Tá mo chomhghleacaí, an tAire, an Teachta Humphreys, freagrach as an airgead seo ach, mar is eol don Teachta, tá na comhairlí contae freagrach as ceantair Ghaeltachta i nGaillimh, i bPort Láirge nó i dTír Chonaill. Níl an t-airgead ar fáil ó na ceantair lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht. Tá deiseanna ann agus tá dualgais ann ar eagraíochtaí ar nós Conradh na Gaeilge, Muintearas, Gael Linn, agus ar bhunscoileanna agus mheánscoileanna. Tá clár mór ann. Táim iontach dóchasach go mbeidh scéal dearfach ann an bhliain seo chugainn mar tá athbheochan ar siúl. Mar a luaigh an Teachta, tá an Ghaeilge lárnach i gcomóradh 2016, mar is ceart, agus is é sin an rud is tábhachtaí.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Aontaím leis an Aire Stáit faoin méid sin, ach tá a lán daoine sa Ghaeltacht nach bhfuil sásta maidir le scéimeanna a bhí ann. Bhí daoine ag labhairt, mar shampla, ag Ard-Fheis Fhianna Fáil ag an deireadh seachtaine, faoi chiorruithe i scéimeanna tithíochta agus scéimeanna bóithre. B'fhéidir go mba cheart don Aire Stáit smaoinemh ar sin nuair atá sé ag caint faoin mbliain seo chugainn. Rud amháin a bhí lárnach, ná scoláireachtaí an Phiarsaigh. Bhí na scoláireachtaí ann chun cúnamh a thabhairt do dhaoine a bhí ag foghlaim na Gaeilge. Ba mhaith liom go mbeadh an tAire Stáit in ann na scoláireachtaí sin, atá curtha ar ceal, a thabhairt ar ais. Labhair an tAire Stáit mar gheall ar sheimineár atá an-tábhachtach. Bhí scoláireachtaí an Phiarsaigh an-tábhachtach freisin mar chúnamh agus mar thacaíocht do scoláirí. Bhí baint ag ceannairí Éirí Amach na bliana 1916 - mar shampla, Pádraig Mac Piarais, Éamon de Valera, Tomás Mac Donnchadha agus Ruairí Mac Easmainn - leis an nGhaeltacht. Ba cheart go mbeadh caint mar gheall orthu nuair atá an comóradh ar siúl.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Níor chuala mé achan rud a bhí le rá ag Ard-Fheis Fhianna Fáil.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: Is mór an trua é sin.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Nuair a bhí an tAire Airgeadais ag caint faoi ráiteas an earraigh cúpla lá ó shin, labhair sé faoin méid a bhí le rá ag Charlie McCreevy nuair a dúirt sé go gcaithfeadh sé an t-airgead dá mbeadh sé aige.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Sa Ghaeltacht.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Cinnte. Bhí na scéimeanna bóithre iontach tábhachtach i mo chontae féin agus i gContae na Gaillimhe. Is é sin an rud is mó. Stopadh an scéim sin. Níl mé freagrach as na bóithre Gaeltachta. Is é an rud is tábhachtaí an bhliain seo chugainn ná an teanga a choinneáil beo. Tá athbheochan ar siúl taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht agus go háirithe sna ceantair Gaeltachta. Chonaic mé an spiorad atá sna ceantair Gaeltachta le mo dhá shúil an-uraidh nuair a fuair mé an post seo don chéad uair. Tá scéal dearfach ar siúl. Beidh uimhreacha na mac léinn agus na ndéagóirí a fhreastalaíonn ar na coláistí Gaeilge ag méadú i mbliana. Tá mé dóchasach go mbeidh scéal mór dearfach i gceist an bhliain seo chugainn nuair a bheidh comóradh 2016 ar siúl. Má tá smaointe ag na Teachtaí ar an taobh eile den Teach, tá mise agus

mo chomhghleacaithe anseo chun iad a chloisteáil. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeimid ag obair le chéile. Má tá smaoinemh ag an Teachta Kitt mar gheall ar Chontae na Gaillimhe-----

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Labhair mé mar gheall ar an smaoinemh atá agam i leith scoláireachtaí an Phiarsaigh.

Deputy Joe McHugh: B'fhéidir go mbeidh seans agam suí síos leis an Teachta agus cabhair a thabhairt dó i dtaobh an ábhair sin.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: Go raibh maith agat.

Turbary Rights

8. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will confirm that her Department is prepared to introduce more and tighter restrictions on designated blanket bogs, such as Bragan Mountain and others in County Cavan, and country-wide; if her Department is planning to stop turf cutting on designated blanket bogs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16851/15]

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It seems to me, having spoken to some of the Minister's officials in different parts of Ireland, that preparations are being made to impose tighter restrictions on the blanket bogs in different parts of Ireland. One of the bogs in question is found on Bragan Mountain in the Minister's part of the country. Can the Minister confirm that the intention is to stop turf cutting on those bogs? Perhaps the information given to me is not factual.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Government is continuing with its policy of implementing the EU habitats directive and protecting habitats in special areas of conservation, including 50 special areas of conservation for the protection of blanket bog. These sites include lowland and mountain blanket bog areas, predominantly along the western seaboard but also widely distributed on upland areas. The climatic conditions required for the formation of blanket bogs are found in limited locations around the globe, such as Scotland and Norway in the northern hemisphere and New Zealand and Argentina in the southern hemisphere. Many of the special areas of conservation sites identified for protection of blanket bogs are extensive and include complexes of other habitats, such as heaths, grasslands and aquatic habitats, also listed for protection under the habitats directive.

The habitats directive has been fully transposed into national law by means of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2010, as amended, and the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011. Legal protections consistent with those set out in the habitats directive have applied to the sites since they were initially proposed for designation. Ireland's planning and environmental legislation has operated under these designations. Due to a deterioration of the protected peatland sites since they were nominated for designation, an infringement action has been brought against Ireland by the European Commission. The action relates to all protected peatland sites - both raised bog and blanket bog.

The draft national peatlands strategy makes it clear that greater clarity must be brought to the process of how turf cutting on blanket bog sites is to be managed in compliance with the requirements of the habitats directive and the environmental impact assessment directive. It is anticipated that turf cutting will be able to continue within blanket bog special areas of conser-

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vation but more sensitive areas will need to be avoided. The aim is to have in place a workable system for the management of turf cutting on these sites. This system will be put in place in consultation with the local communities involved. The necessary scientific work and consultation with local communities will need to be undertaken in advance of this system being implemented. Therefore, it is unlikely that the system will be introduced until 2017 at the earliest.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I take it that the person who wrote the Minister's reply was not looking at the question because it seems we are talking once more about special areas of conservation.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: No.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I say that on the basis of the reply read by the Minister. We established earlier that while these areas might have legal importance, they are not yet special areas of conservation. I urge people to stop using the phrase "special areas of conservation" in this context because it is misleading.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: It is not misleading.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It seems from the Minister's reply that one's right to cut turf on a blanket bog will depend on where one is in Ireland. If one is lucky enough, one may be able to cut turf. If one is unlucky and the blanket bog is in one of the sensitive areas about which the Minister is talking - it could be any bog in any county in any part of Ireland - one may face restrictions. Would it be fair to say that one will be able to cut away at least until 2017, which will be after the next general election?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I want to make it clear that there is no doubt we have to value the bogs.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I did not say we do not.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The bogs are a great asset and we need to be positive about them. The point is that certain sensitive areas have to be looked at. We want to work in consultation with local communities. We want to get agreement. We want to work for the benefit of our peatlands. We want to work together. Anything the Deputy can do in this regard will be very welcome. Our peatlands are a huge resource, especially in terms of tourism. Last year, I visited Corlea Trackway Visitor Centre in County Longford, which houses the preserved remains of an Iron Age bog road that dates back to 148 BC. This hugely significant archaeological find has broadened our knowledge of early civilisation in Ireland. The visitor centre has become a wonderful tourism attraction in the midlands. We have to look at our bogs as an asset to our country. They need to be protected. I want to make it clear that we need to work in consultation with the landowners. I fully agree with that principle.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome what the Minister has said and I fully agree with her. As we have always said, there can be conservation while people make use of things in different parts of the country. There is no reason people cannot work together constructively. I often saw in Connemara that the biggest attraction for a busload of people might be to look at a fellow cutting a few sods with a sleá. That is another aspect of it we need to look at.

Deputy Denis Naughten: They might even lend a hand.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Yes. I agree with the point made by the Minister when she

spoke about finding archaeological evidence of roads, etc. Those who have worked on the bogs down through the years need a bit of clarity. I welcome what the Minister has said about trying to work constructively with people so that they can cut their turf on these blanket bogs while also preserving these locations.

The final point I would like to make is that if one looks back on infringements and on what Europe has sent us, I do not think one will find it has been about bogs. It has been about other things. That should be clarified as well.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As the Deputy has said, it is about working together and trying to find the right solution. I am fully committed to consultation on this issue and to working with the landowners. There is great potential for outdoor activities. I understand that 9 million Germans want to use cycling for recreation or go on cycling holidays. We have a great opportunity to develop our bogs as a tourism amenity. They are a great asset.

Special Areas of Conservation Designation

9. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the position regarding the imposition of burdens on the land folios with lands designated as special protection areas or special areas of conservation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16749/15]

Deputy Denis Naughten: Legislation enacted in 2011 places a charge on the deeds of property designated as special areas of conservation. One seventh of the area of the country was made subject to these burdens through sleight of hand in a statutory instrument. Why was this introduced? The Department of the Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht is beginning to act like the banks except that agreements are entered into voluntarily in the case of banks and the banks deliver on their part of the bargain by providing the money up front.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The designation of an area of land as a special area of conservation or special protection area does not create a burden on a folio for that land. The actual imposition of a burden on land folios is a matter for the Property Registration Authority of Ireland. Provision is made under Regulation 14(6) and Regulation 18(9) of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 to facilitate this process for special areas of conservation and special protection areas, respectively. However, I have no plans at present to seek the imposition of such burdens.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The Minister has authority under law to introduce burdens with the stroke of a pen. If somebody goes to the bank tomorrow morning to get a loan, the bank will take into account the fact that the lands have been designated and will reduce its valuation of the land accordingly. A burden is placed on the land in practical terms. Given that she has put this responsibility on land owners, why is the Minister not prepared to compensate them? A total of 781 turf cutters have sought to relocate to bogs that are not designated. At the rate that the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht is currently processing their applications, it will take 276 years to relocate all of them.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: In regard to the Deputy's question, there is provision to place a designation as a burden on a folio. I have no plans to seek the imposition of such burdens.

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Deputy Denis Naughten: The reality is that the burden is already on those properties. They have been devalued and the Department is not prepared to offer compensation. The Minister justifies this policy by claiming that farmers can avail of the GLAS scheme as a form of compensation. I know of one farmer in County Roscommon who has a turlough on his land which has been designated as a special protection area. If he wants to go into the GLAS scheme he must give up intensive farming as a sheep farmer because one third of his farm will be sterilised for six months of the year under the conditions set out under the scheme. The reality for a considerable number of farmers in designated areas is that it is not feasible to go into GLAS but the Department has not offered a compensation scheme since 2010. Given that the Minister has in practice imposed a burden on these lands by introducing legislation to impose a legal burden at the stroke of a pen, will she deliver on the compensation to which these farmers are entitled?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: That matter was not raised in the Deputy's original question but I restate that I have no plan to register a burden on land certificates.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Will the Minister answer any of the questions I asked? Why was a statutory instrument introduced in 2011 to legally place a burden on one seventh of the land area of this State? When one takes into account the area of land that is already in public ownership, this provision in practice will mean taking possession of lands because farmers will be unable to carry out work without written permission from the Minister. Why was that legislation introduced if she has no plan to place a legal burden on the folios because it places a burden on those lands in practical terms? Why is she turning her back on the affected farmers by withholding legitimate compensation for the legal responsibility she is imposing on them?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I am not turning my back on any farmers. I answered an earlier question on farmers with lands in designated areas. Those farmers will get priority under the GLAS scheme. I will find out the precise details of the legislation to which the Deputy referred but I understand that the legal agreement for raised bogs and special areas of conservation covered by the cessation of turf cutting scheme provides the right to enter a property to carry out works, with the cost of restoration to be placed as a burden on the folio under which the property is registered. A burden preventing the cutting and removal of turf from the property can also be placed on the folio. The agreement also provides that if a site is undesignated the burdens can be removed from the folio. Furthermore, the agreement provides for the registration of notice of the agreement on the folio. As I have already stated, I have no plans to register burdens on folios.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The Minister-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, the Deputy has had a good run.

Deputy Denis Naughten: She has already listed the burdens.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please resume your seat.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: That is the legal agreement.

An Ceann Comhairle: Two Deputies are waiting to put their questions and we only have seven minutes left.

Arts Plan

10. **Deputy Sandra McLellan** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will provide this Government's detailed plan for a national strategy in for the arts, culture and heritage; and the funding that has been allocated for its implementation. [16836/15]

Deputy Heather Humphreys: An overall statement of strategy for my Department for the period 2015 to 2017 has recently been prepared and will be published shortly. This statement will set out my Department's goals and strategies for various programme areas, including the arts and heritage. Within my Department's overall budget of €277 million for 2015, €156 million is being provided for the arts, culture and film and €39 million for heritage. In addition to my Department's statement of strategy, I am committed to the delivery of the country's first ever national cultural policy, which is called Culture 2025. In this regard, I plan to carry out a wide ranging consultation process to ensure that all stakeholders and interested members of the public can make their views known. With this in mind, I have initiated general discussion on the process of developing the policy with a number of stakeholders, including with the council of national cultural institutions. A draft discussion paper is currently being finalised within my Department, having regard to those discussions, and I intend to publish it shortly. I look forward to substantive engagement with the arts and culture sector, the general public and other interested parties in the development of the new policy. As the purpose is to set out the high-level aims and policies in the area of culture for the period up to 2025, the issue of funding does not arise.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: The arts can often be sidelined, especially in the current economic climate of many sectors facing cuts. Those who are trying to earn a living as artists often struggle to survive and must supplement their incomes by other means. Artists who are in their 50s cannot be confident of security in their old age. What does the Minister propose to address the issue of struggling, aging artists? Has she investigated the successful models developed in other European countries? Has the Minister looked into this? Brilliant minds fall by the way-side all too easily due to lack of support and there is little in the way of facilities to support people as they rise and progress through the arts. Where are all our young and mid-career artists?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Artists are supported through the Arts Council, but I accept the Deputy's point that some artists find it difficult to make progress.

The Culture 2025 document will protect and set out clearly the value of the arts and our culture, which is of importance. Culture 2025 aims to develop a national cultural policy which will set out high level aims and policies in the area between now and 2025. We need to understand what culture is, how it can be supported, the role of Government in developing it, how we can use social media to deliver it to everyone and how to get people involved in music, drama, poetry, film, writing and so on. It is not about how much money we need, but about how we value and support our culture. We will look at that in our consideration of the Culture 2025 policy.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: I thank the Minister for her response but I would like to know what she is doing to capture, retain and support the young talent that exists in Ireland. What is the Government doing to halt the talent drain from this State to other shores? Young people in the arts have huge potential to contribute to State revenue. What steps is the Minister taking to halt the mass export of our young talent?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: In terms of young talent, we have signed the arts in educa-

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tion charter with the Department of Education and Skills. I got an update on this yesterday and on the interesting work that is going on, bringing people to schools to get young people involved in the arts and to show their value and how they can help young people develop as individuals and tune into their creative side. There is significant work going on between the two Departments to promote arts in education.

National Monuments

11. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the role her Department plays in the ongoing maintenance and preservation of monuments across County Donegal; the way her Department monitors ongoing decay of monuments; the way it decides a monument needs preservation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16738/15]

Deputy Thomas Pringle: This question asks what role the Department plays in protecting and preserving national monuments across the country. What practical steps does the Minister take to ensure the preservation of national monuments?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: My Department's role in regard to the safeguarding and conservation of archaeological monuments is set out in the National Monuments Acts 1930 to 2004. The Acts provide for the protection of national and other monuments in a number of ways.

Where I am of the opinion, as Minister, that the preservation of a monument is of national importance and I am further of the opinion that the monument is in danger, I may make a preservation order in regard to the monument under section 8 of the National Monuments Act 1930, as amended. Where a preservation order is in force, no interference with or alteration of the national monument in question is permitted without my express written consent. My Department's records show that nine preservation orders have been made in regard to national monuments in County Donegal. Where a national monument is in my ownership or guardianship, similar protections apply as in the case of a preservation order. There are currently 17 national monuments in County Donegal of which I am owner or guardian.

Section 5 of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act 1987 provides for the establishment of the Register of Historic Monuments, RHM. There are currently 35 registered historic monuments in County Donegal. Section 12 of the National Monuments Act 1994 Act provides for the establishment of a record of monuments and places, RMP, in respect of each county in the State. The RMP for County Donegal contains 2,166 entries. Any person proposing to carry out or to authorise the carrying out of work at or in regard to a monument included in the RMP or RHM is obliged to give two months written notice to the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. In addition, RMP and RHM data is used by my Department to advise planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála of any potential archaeological implications from individual developments and the steps which should be taken to avoid or mitigate such impacts.

My Department's national monuments service maintains and updates the national database of archaeological monuments. It also investigates reports from members of the public of breaches of the Acts and refers these to the Garda, where appropriate. In addition, it liaises with planning authorities and other relevant bodies regarding the impact of development on monuments and advises me, as Minister, on the exercise of my statutory powers to protect such

monuments. National monuments in my ownership or guardianship are maintained by the Office of Public Works and my Department works closely with that office in that regard.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: With regard to access to monuments, what is the role of the Department in cases where somebody interferes with or restricts access to monuments that were previously open to the public?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I do not have details on the access to monuments to hand, but I will find out the details for the Deputy. I understand county councils have a role to play in this and that the main responsibility is to protect the monument. The OPW has a role in managing sites and carrying out works and it is focused on ensuring that the physical fabric of sites in State care are conserved *in situ*. Therefore, where there is evidence of structural instability or a direct threat of damage or collapse to a national monument, it must, under the terms of its statutory remit, act to rectify the position.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Spring Economic Statement: Statements (Resumed)

Deputy Michael Colreavy: Last night I outlined relevant statistics that indicate clearly that what the Government states in the spring statement is unlikely to happen. Sinn Féin would argue that it cannot happen under our current system. Ours is a high cost and low pay society and when the purchasing power of Irish workers is accounted for, Ireland falls 13% below the EU15 average while almost 350,000 of the workforce suffer multiple deprivation.

Linked to this issue is the issue of collective bargaining. Ireland is one of only two countries in the European Union that does not recognise collective bargaining and successive governments have failed to introduce statutory collective bargaining. It is baffling that this is the case. This failure means that organised labour, particularly in the low-paid sector, does not have an adequate means to push for better pay and conditions. Sinn Féin believes it is the role of the Government to take action to make the lives of people in this country better and that the obvious way to do that is to introduce collective bargaining on behalf of workers.

Even if the forecasts made in the spring statement were achieved, we would still have 160,000 people unemployed in 2020, without any consideration of those who may be added to the unemployment register in the meantime. If there is one thing we should have learned from the 1980s, it is the danger and long-lasting implication of long-term unemployment. It is a major failure of policy that we keep entering a cycle of long-term unemployment and never quite solve the issue. Things may have been improved marginally for a while but we never got to grips with the endemic crisis that is long-term unemployment.

Yesterday, when I was making notes for this speech, I heard the story of a woman who is in receipt of an invalidity pension. The poor lady is terminally ill with cancer. Apparently, she was overpaid social welfare in 2005, and €95 is now being stopped from her €103 weekly pension. I know the legalities involved and that if somebody is overpaid, he or she must repay the money. I know certain rates must be taken. Nevertheless, have we reached the stage where we are plundering €95 from the €103 pension being paid every week to a woman with a terminal illness? That is not an Ireland of which I am proud. The issue should be immediately addressed as the Government has its priorities mixed up.

I will do something I normally would not. The Taoiseach and Tánaiste do it every week, so

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if it is good enough for the Taoiseach and Tánaiste, it is good enough for Colreavy.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Go on Michael.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: I will speak about Northern Ireland.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Six Counties.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: What I have to say is no reflection on the Minister. Austerity is hitting Northern Ireland just as it is hitting southern Ireland. One might say we should welcome the fact that the Irish Government thinks about Northern Ireland and is concerned about the good people living there, as successive Governments through the decades stood idly by and looked away while the people in the North of Ireland were being politically abused by a sectarian administration. The only time there was mention of Northern Ireland in the Dáil through the decades was if something happened that might have an impact on southern Ireland. There was nothing done to provide support or understanding for those who were living under the yoke of political abuse. Now, when Northern Ireland is mentioned it is not because of concern about the citizens there but because the Government and Fianna Fáil are trying to gain political advantage by wrongly arguing that Sinn Féin supports, promotes and administers austerity in the North of Ireland.

It is particularly ironic when the Taoiseach and Tánaiste come out with this verbiage as the same Taoiseach and Tánaiste aided and abetted a Tory leader who came to Belfast to try to force austerity on the population of Northern Ireland. They nodded like the little dashboard puppies while the Tories were trying to force Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party to accept austerity.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Do not worry. Nicola Sturgeon will sort them out.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: Sinn Féin fought back on this but the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste aided a Tory leader in trying to enforce austerity on the people in Northern Ireland. How dare they come here and accuse Sinn Féin of administering austerity policies in Northern Ireland? We can talk about deception.

There are different groups of people who have been listening to or reading about the spring statement in the past couple of days. I have described this as a surreal couple of days. There are different audiences, including politicians. Politicians on the Government side will say it is great, as the statement indicates all the great plans we have and that we are going well. Politicians on the Opposition side will point out what is missing from the spring statement and what is unrealistic. Constructive Opposition Members, such as us, will point out how things could be done better. We do so not just with the spring statement but week after week in this Chamber. I am not sure that anybody listens to us but it is being done.

There are also wealthy and powerful groups, whose wealth increased during the period of austerity. It is a case of having drinks all around for those guys. They will do well and they will not suffer, as they did not suffer during the austerity period. Let nobody say to me that it was not by design, and the only question was whether the design was deliberate or flawed. No matter what it was, the wealthy and powerful - described by Deputy Mary Lou McDonald as the entitled class - are still partying. They were partying and will continue to do so if what is contained in the spring statement is implemented.

There are people on low and middle incomes suffering new charges all the time, including the universal social charge, pension levies, tax on the family home, water and refuse charges, as well as mortgages that are strangling people because of unrealistic mortgage rates. There are also education fees, medical expenses etc. People have been working hard all their lives but they are struggling to make ends meet. They do not understand why the wealthy are getting more wealthy and they are not. God help the people on low incomes or who depend on State income. These include lone parents, students, the young unemployed and people on hospital waiting lists, including children with disabilities who are awaiting psychological assessment or speech and language therapy assessment. The people may boast that more people are taking out voluntary health insurance. Medical card holders who have been deemed unable to provide for their own medical expenses will take out such insurance because they do not trust the public health care system. It is a very good system in an emergency but if a person needs a hip replacement, he or she must wait for it. People are paying over the odds for health insurance because they cannot trust the public health system.

Indicators may demonstrate national economic improvement while a large percentage of the population live in conditions close to abject poverty. How much of the so-called economic benefits are only felt by the wealthy, privileged and powerful? If I take €2,000 from somebody's pocket and hold on to it for four years before giving back €200 in a nice little gift card, would I expect the person to be grateful? I think not.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joanna Tuffy): The Minister, Deputy White, is sharing time with Deputy Dowds.

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): The spring statement sets out a solid basis for continued and sustained recovery in personal incomes and public services over the coming years. It is a more open, transparent and rational approach to the budgetary process that is informed by best practice in countries such as France and Britain. By setting out the economic assumptions and fiscal parameters that will inform the budget decisions we take in six months, it gives political parties and others an opportunity to be part of a rational discussion about budgetary choices and priorities. Such a discussion is essential to ensure our economic and fiscal recovery is not put at risk and its fruits are used effectively and shared fairly. The negative reaction of Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil and others in opposition suggests they fear a rational discussion in which they must either accept the projections and parameters in the spring statement or propose realistic alternatives based on facts from the real world.

11 o'clock

Publication of the spring statement paves the way for a national discussion about the choices that face us in the run-up to the budget. The next stage will be a consultation with social and economic bodies and organisations through a national economic dialogue, which will also take place well in advance of the budget. We want to hear their analysis of the economic and fiscal parameters we have outlined and their priorities now that we are emerging from recession and have the capacity to increase public spending and ease the burden on family incomes. This discussion will also be informed by the capital review, which will be published in June by my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin. The review will address capital investment in broadband, transport, schools, housing and other areas.

The palpable unease at the prospect of a rational debate about budget choices among Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil Party Deputies and some others on the Opposition benches suggests they have little confidence in their economic policies and claims. I understand the reasons for their

obvious discomfort. Four years ago, the economy lay in ruins as a result of the disastrous boom-bust policies of Fianna Fáil, which were implemented with the assistance of the Green Party. If given a chance, Sinn Féin and other parties on the Opposition benches would, at least on current form, wreck the economy again by pursuing senseless policies that would bust the recovery.

As a country, we have worked hard to create conditions that are set to deliver steady, year-on-year increases in public expenditure and family incomes. This will only occur if we stick with the effective approach that has delivered recovery. The recovery would not have taken place if we had told the troika to take a hike and take its money with it, as advised by Deputy Gerry Adams in 2011. If we had followed that advice, the country would have run out of money by the end of 2011. Such economic illiteracy would have meant the State would have had no money to pay old age pensions, social welfare, nurses, teachers, doctors or gardaí in the past four years. That is what I call austerity.

I will respond to the contribution of Deputy Colreavy, whom I respect, in a moment.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: Do I have an exemption?

Deputy Alex White: Sinn Féin is the only party in the House that is implementing austerity measures this year. To name but two such measures it has introduced in the North, teacher numbers are being reduced by more than 2,000 and welfare benefits are being cut. Meanwhile, in the South the party expects people to believe the populist fantasy that one can have unlimited public spending while abolishing all charges and taking virtually everyone out of the tax net. It is no wonder Sinn Féin wants to avoid a rational debate about budget choices.

We learned the hard way that sustainable public finances are a prerequisite for genuine improvements in living standards. We have Fianna Fáil to thank for that particular harsh lesson. The Government will not put recovery at risk with reckless and unreal spending and tax plans. Our effective and progressive alternative to Fianna Fáil boom and bust policies and Sinn Féin's populist fantasy has brought us to the point where we will have had the fastest growing economy in the European Union this year and last year; we have experienced nine successive quarters of job growth; 95,000 new jobs have been created since 2012; unemployment, while still much too high, has declined to 10% from more than 15% in 2012; we are witnessing the return of apprenticeships and skilled jobs across the economy; and we can look forward to seeing 2.1 million in work by the end of 2018. These achievements by Irish people have created the conditions for a recovery in incomes and public expenditure. This is the basis on which we can make realistic and progressive taxation and expenditure decisions that will cement and extend the recovery over the coming years.

I propose to refer to some of the issues raised by previous speakers, including Deputy Colreavy for whom I genuinely have a great deal of respect. The Deputy made my point for me. When I entered the Chamber he stated that, having studied the statistics presented in the spring statement, his party took the view that the assumptions contained therein were wrong. That is fine. Sinn Féin now has six months to tell us what should be the correct assumptions. I look forward to hearing it set out the reasons the Government is wrong in respect of its parameter statements on the deficit, employment and debt projections. The party now has six long months to show us where we are wrong in respect of all the basic assumptions and I look forward to hearing what are the correct figures because we have heard precious little from it in that regard.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: We will, as always, present the figures in our alternative budget.

Deputy Alex White: Opposition parties must develop a particular skill. It is one which parties on this side had to practise when in opposition because it is part of the job of opposition. I refer to the need to point to Government decisions that have adverse effects on citizens.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Yes.

Deputy Alex White: I fully respect that this is part of the job of the Opposition, including Deputy Finian McGrath, and God knows, after the past seven or eight years, the list of issues the Opposition can raise or criticise is long. However, the job of the Opposition extends beyond listing a litany of criticisms. At some stage, it must tell us what it proposes to do. Deputy Jonathan O'Brien was getting around to doing so yesterday when he called for more special needs assistants, improvements in the apprentice programme, a literacy and numeracy strategy, which is an issue Deputy Finian McGrath has raised in the past, and investment in services. The Deputy is correct about all of those issues. He now has six long months to tell us whether the Government's assumptions are correct and, if not, what should be the parameter figures. He must set out how he would use available resources, including what proportion of them should be devoted to education, health and child care. I believe a significant amount should be devoted to these issues.

The Government will address the issue of investment next month when it produces a capital plan. Sinn Féin can criticise the Government for not previously affording it an opportunity to explain how our assumptions are wrong and what it would do differently. We are now giving it a golden opportunity, in technicolour, to do so over the next six months.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: We do it every year in our alternative budget.

Deputy Alex White: Sinn Féin's sums will have to add up because they have not added up thus far.

Sinn Féin Deputies become upset when its role in the North is raised. I will not make an apology for raising the North. Deputy Colreavy argued that Government Deputies raise the issue to derive political advantage, as if Sinn Féin did not seek to derive political advantage and press all the buttons of people who are affected, in some cases badly, by what occurred following the economic collapse. It needs to do more than simply press all these buttons to derive political advantage. It must show people some kind of a vision.

I do not make any apology for pointing out that Sinn Féin is fixed on a programme which will cut welfare in Northern Ireland. When I put this point to Deputy Pearse Doherty on a radio programme recently he responded that there was a crisis in Northern Ireland. What does he believe occurred here? Did we not experience a crisis? Was one of the most spectacular banking and economic collapses in history not a crisis that necessitated the decisions taken and leadership shown by the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, and Deputy Gilmore when he was Tánaiste? They did what was required to maintain an economy that is beginning to create the jobs Deputy Colreavy correctly argued are necessary. The Government is delivering progress in the economy and broader society. It took the necessary decisions at that time to return order to the public finances and enable us to begin developing the economy.

Sinn Féin should not only list all the bad bits. It must start thinking about what it would do

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if, God help us, it ever moves to this side of the House.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: We do that every year.

Deputy Alex White: It should start having a rational debate. Rather than pressing all the political buttons, as it does to great effect, it should take as long as it likes - six months if necessary - to think about this before coming to the House and showing some leadership and vision because these qualities have been spectacularly absent from the contributions of its Deputies to date.

Deputy Robert Dowds: I welcome the process the spring statement brings about whereby, as the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources outlined, it is open to all and sundry to make positive contributions as to how the next budget is constructed. It is very useful to know the financial parameters within which we will be operating and the extent to which we will have extra funds to spend. This allows us to make realistic proposals.

It is also useful that the spring statement outlines the way the economy has moved in the past several years since the Government came into power. I particularly welcome such developments as the 5% fall in unemployment. I will never be happy until we get the unemployment rate down to 0% because it has such a detrimental effect on people. I welcome the creation of an extra 100,000 jobs since 2012, a clear pointer as to the correct course the Government has taken. It is pleasing to see Ireland has the fastest growing economy in the EU with a growth rate of 4.8% last year and 4% this year. While projections until 2020 would be more tentative, they indicate a positive growth in a similar direction. It is also welcome to see that Government spending is coming into line with what it is taking in, as well as finally beginning to reduce our national debt.

It is a far cry from where we started off in 2011 when we had to borrow €55 million a day just to keep afloat. I am sorry that Deputy Colreavy has left the Chamber but it does bring into stark contrast the intentions of Sinn Féin had it got into power after the last election to tell the EU, the European Central Bank, ECB, and the International Monetary Fund, IMF, to take a hike. That would have left us in an impossible situation and we would not be getting out of the morass which Fianna Fáil got us into.

Since I was elected in 2011, there are very few things that surprise me. There were some minor political spats that one could not have written in advance but the broad picture has been pretty well as I might have expected, including the downturn in support for both Government parties. The one surprise, however, is that the economy has improved as much as it has, particularly when one looks at the economic situation in some other European countries. Long may that continue for the benefit of all those who live in this country.

All Ministers in this Government are worthy of praise, including the Minister opposite, Deputy Michael Noonan. I want to particularly single out for praise the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin. Without the work he did-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Deputy is not a bit biased.

Deputy Robert Dowds: Deputy Finian McGrath knows that without the very skilled work that the Minister did, the Haddington Road agreement would not have been delivered. It took enormous courage and perseverance on his part. I can contrast that to a remark he made to me in conversation during the early days of the Government that he was almost in despair as to

whether we would get out of the economic mess. To struggle through that on behalf of the Irish people, who have had to suffer a great deal, was a monumental achievement. That, along with the achievements of other Ministers, needs to be focused on.

In line with this work, the Minister is correct to move away from the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act, FEMPI, in careful steps. While I know this is obviously not for discussion now and will be subject to negotiation, there is a strong case for flat increases in public service pay across the board. It would have an added benefit for those on low incomes in the public service. Helping them will also help the economy because they are more likely to spend their money locally than people on higher salaries.

It is useful that some relief for the universal social charge, USC, will be introduced. An area that should be examined is the marginal tax rate kicking in at such a low level. At the same time, I want to sound a cautionary note. Tax is very important. One of the reasons why this country works is because the Revenue Commissioners are effective. If one does not believe that, one can look at the example of Greece. It is important that we consider carefully the significant amounts that need to be invested in health, education and transport.

On the latter issue, I appreciate this is for another debate but I want to flag it. We have the great fortune that Dublin city is booming because of the improving economy, as can be seen from traffic on the roads. If this city and, to a lesser extent, cities such as Cork, Galway and Limerick, is to thrive, then it is important we put money aside for investment in transport. It would be hugely useful if an interconnector was built to link Heuston Station to the south of the city to link up with the Luas on Stephen's Green and the DART. It would have a considerable and transformative impact on the development of good public transport in Dublin city. Given that most of the development in housing and so on is likely to be on the western side of the city, it would be well worth planning for that.

There has been a great deal of talk about the need to reduce the level of USC. Some people have even called for its removal. Whether it is removed or not, it is important to remember it brings in €4 billion in revenue. It is a great way of taking money from wealthy people. The amount of USC a Deputy has to pay comes to €5,424. It is important that this money is taken from those on good salaries and higher salaries. Whatever mechanism is used, it is important that those who can pay are encouraged to continue to pay this charge.

I welcome the fact the economy is in such a positive situation. I hope that as we progress, we will do it in such a way that the whole community benefits and that we bring this country to a better place.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joanna Tuffy): I call Deputy Finian McGrath who is sharing time with Deputy Tom Fleming.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I welcome the Minister for Finance and am glad of an opportunity to speak in this debate on the spring economic statement. I also wish to speak about the future of the economy and, more importantly, the future of Irish society.

When I heard both Ministers' statements on Tuesday, I had expected a reasonable and balanced debate covering the last four years, including mistakes that were made and the positive things that were done. I had also expected to hear about the urgent need to do something practical for the Irish people.

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I welcome this process, by the way. A few months out from the budget, people should have an opportunity to set out their stall. There has to be a debate on the question of tax cuts versus the provision of public services. If the Government has extra resources, I would favour spending them on services, including health, disability, education and people in need, rather than giving tax cuts to people who are very well off.

I know that some people have a broader agenda with other issues-----

Deputy Robert Dowds: Even within the Deputy's group.

Deputy Finian McGrath: -----but that is my clear position. I remind Deputy Dowds that the Independents will always hold the Government to account and challenge it on issues. As was seen last Wednesday night, however, we will also put forward constructive proposals, for example, on mortgage arrears. I believe the Minister is seriously examining those proposals at the moment. A year ago, I introduced the Down's Syndrome (Equality of Access) Bill, while a few months later the Government gave resource hours to children with Down's syndrome. I do not care if Government Deputies want to run around with flags and hold up their gold medals because they are implementing something I agree with. As long as it is done, I do not care.

Independent Deputies are different. Not only do we hold Ministers to account, but we also put forward sensible proposals. That is why many people are looking to credible Independents as an alternative to political parties.

All we got this week, however, was a sort of self-delusory lap of honour and statements that sounded like an election stunt. There have been more big promises and misleading statements. There was no mention of those who have suffered, including people on trolleys, the unemployed, low-paid workers or Cadbury staff whose jobs are under threat. Neither was there any mention of the cut to the respite care grant or other cuts that destroyed many people in this State. This is another view that the Government might not want to hear.

On top of that, there was no acknowledgement of the huge hurt and pain imposed on weaker sections of society. We need to stop this kind of nonsense and face reality. Those using the current buzzwords concerning the economy, should look at the facts and the broader economic arguments and issues. The OECD and World Bank, as well as the Government's friends in the IMF and TASC, have all said that gross income inequality is growing. That has been identified as a serious impediment to future economic growth. I will come back to that point later in discussing what is currently happening to the staff at Cadbury in Coolock.

I live in the real world, but this Government needs to wake up and see what is happening.

Deputy Robert Dowds: So does the Deputy.

Deputy Finian McGrath: For example, we will not hear Deputy Dowds or the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy White, telling the nation that nearly 12% of Irish children are living in consistent poverty, while 18% are at risk of poverty. By the age of 13, one in three Irish children will have experienced a mental health difficulty, and this figure rises to two thirds by the age of 24. Half of mental illnesses emerge before the age of 14. Some 15% to 20% of Irish nine year olds experience significant emotional or behavioural problems. One in four Irish children are overweight or obese. If things do not change, it is predicted that by 2030 some 7.5% of the population will have diabetes.

Ireland invests just 0.4% of GDP in early years services, which is well below the OECD average of 0.7%. Those are the reasons I am putting forward an alternative view. That is the reality for children in Ireland in 2015.

The current trend to damage workers' rights and pensions has been completely ignored in the spring economic statement. Dunnes Stores workers are being driven into the ground. We have seen zero hour contracts and other low-paid conditions. I am also told that industrial action is pending at the Cadbury-Mondelez factory in Coolock, which is in my constituency. It is all about outsourcing the electrical department in that factory. Outsourcing means that electricians would no longer work for Mondelez, but for a contract company. They may also have to work at other locations. If employees refuse to transfer to the new employer, they are deemed to have resigned.

Furthermore, as they would no longer work for Cadbury, they would no longer be active members of the pension fund and would lose future benefits. That is a major loss of conditions. Their employment terms and conditions would be transferred, but they would come under attack after a relatively short period. The electricians in Cadbury feel they are being backed into a corner and have no choice but to strike in defence of their jobs. They have made it clear to management that, alongside other groups, they are prepared to negotiate a change programme, but they cannot negotiate with a threat to their very existence as employees. No one likes to negotiate with a gun to their head. This dispute can be resolved by the removal of that threat.

Recently, I heard the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Bruton, talking about the urgent need to flag problems in factories via an early-warning system. I urge the Minister to examine the sensible proposals emanating from staff, including the electricians. They have even sought funding for an independent expert so that they can engage in consultation with the company. They need to know what the story is concerning the books in Coolock and what is going on there.

More involvement is required by Government agencies which should focus on the potential for saving the plant, rather than dealing with it when the plant goes, and they move production of the Time Out bar to Poland where the company can avail of cheap labour and more exploitation.

I wish to ask the Minister for Finance about the issue of transferring production of the Time Out bar from Coolock to Poland. Under European legislation, companies operating in more than one EU country are obliged to engage in a consultation process if they wish to transfer production from one location to another within the EU. This process is to allow for possible counter proposals, as well as affording employees an opportunity to understand fully the facts and explore ways to prevent such a transfer. The Minister should tell Cadbury to get involved and work closely with the staff.

In the broader debate, I wish to deal with issues concerning people with disabilities over the past four years. There have been unprecedented cuts to supports that enabled people to live independently. These include the mobility allowance, motor transport grant, benefit allowance, medical cards, home help and the respite care grant. I call on the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, to restore the respite care grant in the next budget. That is a sensible, positive and constructive idea.

It should be recalled that this Government tried to scrap the personal assistance services,

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but reversed that decision when disabled people turned up at the gates of Leinster House. At an international level, the Minister should implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. If the Government does not restore the respite care grant, it will be in breach of article 19 of that convention. I am raising these matters because we have a chance to fix them if we have a few extra million euro in the budget.

There are currently 27,256 people with intellectual disabilities in this State. Of that figure, 2,271 are seeking residential places. Some 197 are now seeking day-care services, which is not a huge figure. Those who are considering lashing out more tax cuts to the big fat cats in society, should look at that figure as a small start. The respite care grant and day care services could be restored tomorrow morning with a bit of vision and leadership.

People with disabilities have played a vital role in Irish society. We are missing thousands of such people in society generally who have great talents. I meet with them regularly. In regard to their IT skills, if we do not use them we will not be able to address the problem of unemployment. I do not expect the Minister to accept all of these proposals but he has an opportunity now to consider the areas of health, disability and the protection of workers' rights.

I urge the Government to keep a very close eye on the Cadbury factory because if there is a slow winding down of that company and an attempt to provoke staff into industrial action so that it can pull another stunt, there will be a need to act cautiously. As far as I know, and I am open to correction, that factory in Coolock makes €400 million a year, which is enough to pay the staff and take on extra staff.

Deputy Tom Fleming: This Government was elected at the lowest point economically and socially in the history of this nation since its foundation. It was handed the most difficult task of any country in the European Union, namely, to pick up the pieces and get the country back onto a sound footing. That task was further inhibited by the presence of the troika for a number of years which oversaw every move and all the decision making at Government level to tackle the enormous burden on it. It was on the precipice of a catastrophe. I would be the first to give credit where credit is due for the many manoeuvres the Government had to take to bring some form of stability to the country.

In the meantime, the public had to endure a horrendous few years, which began three years prior to the sitting of this 31st Dáil. The public took a hit as a result of approximately €30 billion being taken out of the economy in that period, and in its wake is a tale of hardship and adverse consequences for a huge majority of our population. The vital services of health, education, local government housing and general social welfare have taken the brunt of the impact in terms of the non-availability of the necessary funding in those areas allied to wholesale job losses. There is a huge indebtedness problem also, and the bank accounts of many people are practically empty, as we are all well aware. We also have the crisis in the housing market and the other issues that arise from that.

The younger generation has also taken a hit. It has been overwhelmed and stifled by what happened. The development of that human potential will be a great resource in putting us back on an even keel. In the meantime an entire generation of well educated and highly qualified people have left the country. They were fortunate to have that vent to secure fulfilling employment suitable to their qualifications in other countries. I hope their future in those countries will be short term and that they will return here in the near future. Those people are a huge economic loss in terms of this country's recovery. I hope they will be returning to a more pros-

perous and friendly environment. Part of the strategy in the spring economic statement is that a substantial number of those in that youth sector will return here and contribute significantly to the improving economy but it is clear that unless the Government addresses the outstanding deficiencies and anomalies, the majority of those younger people will have no confidence in returning. The drain of our youth is continuing on a weekly basis and we must accelerate the recovery process to stem that exodus.

There is a serious shortage of well qualified professionals such as nurses in the health service. Our young general practitioners and consultants are leaving the country in droves to go to North America, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. That is creating a huge void in our health care staff. There is an urgent need for intervention by the Minister for Health in terms of having friendlier relationships with the people in that sector. Those health staff are vital and we need to immediately engage in an exercise to stem the haemorrhage. Prioritising health service delivery in a timely fashion is imperative, as is tackling the spiralling waiting lists for life-saving procedures. Those are the priorities we should consider in terms of this spring economic statement. There are many things we can do to help the Department of Health with the delivery of health services. There is much wastage and overspend in some Departments, and steps should be taken immediately to end that.

Last March an announcement was made about the building of new court buildings at a cost of €100 million. That was agreed and approved for Cork, Limerick and Waterford. Following the announcement a number of barristers and judges queried the potential value for money of those projects, given that a 19th century courthouse was the focus of a €28 million development in 2005, and this was one of the courts listed for a new build. In his retirement speech one of the senior judges, Judge Patrick Moran, who is the longest serving Circuit Court judge, asked for the project in Cork to be seriously considered. The existing 18th century courts complex is used for civil cases but under the new plan all criminal matters will be handled in a €21 million state-of-the-art building. Judge Moran said he was taken aback that the Courts Service spent €28 million eight years ago on refurbishing the same courthouse. He further stated that senior judges were not properly consulted on the new plan, and he questioned whether it was necessary. That is an exceptional statement from a person of his status. The Economic Management Council, the Minister for Finance, who has just left the Chamber, and the Minister of State, Deputy Deenihan, who is present, will recognise that this was a disastrous proposal. Vital money could be utilised for our ailing health services to reduce waiting lists for those awaiting life-saving operations and provide services for those with disabilities, for which there are huge waiting lists, community care and home help services.

The Minister of State, Deputy Deenihan, comes from my county and has been a good servant in this and previous governments. As a long-serving Deputy I ask him to use his influence - we will all try to help in whatever way we can - in the IDA situation in County Kerry. What is happening at the moment is that there is a total regional imbalance. We are well aware of the fact that there is a huge concentration of foreign direct investment being attracted into the eastern margins, particularly Dublin. The county will nearly collapse into the Irish Sea with the weight of it. There is a huge tilt in favour of the east coast.

The Minister of State and I would be doing a great day's work if the Cabinet prioritised this to give us fair play in our county of Kerry. I welcome the new advance factory for Tralee. The Minister of State is well aware of Pretty Polly in Killarney, which was strategically located and closed within the last seven or so years. The site is in the ownership of Kerry County Council and a project should be got off the ground there immediately. It employed 900 people at one

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stage and the potential is there again for sustainable long-term jobs. I will rely on the Minister of State to put his weight behind this. We will all join with the Government as best we can to ensure that development takes place in Killarney and our other towns. The first day we stepped in here, 100 jobs were lost in Castleisland town. We must recover those jobs again. There was a sad cloud over the Kerry Members who sat in the Dáil that day. There are other towns, including Kenmare, Listowel in the Minister of State's own area, and Dingle. We need to look after the rest of the towns in Kerry and ensure there is a balance in terms of job creation.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I wish to share time with Deputy Gabrielle McFadden. I welcome the spring economic statement which was made jointly here by the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. It told us that in the October budget there will be between €1.2 billion and €1.5 billion available to reduce tax for low and middle income earners and improve our public services. It also told us that the economy will grow by another 4% this year, that unemployment will continue to fall, that full employment will be achieved within three years and that the taxpayer will now get back all of the money the State put into the Bank of Ireland, Allied Irish Bank and Permanent TSB. What a contrast that good news is to the economic disaster which faced the Government formed by Fine Gael and Labour just over four years ago on 9 March 2011. Four years ago, the Government was faced with solving the worst recession in living memory. At the depth of that recession, the Irish economy shrunk by over 6% in one year alone. Last year, the Irish economy grew by nearly 5% and, this year, it is forecast to grow by another 4%. That rate of growth is double the forecast for the rest of the eurozone and will be well ahead of the growth forecast for Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. By any standard, it is a remarkable turnaround in our economic fortunes.

The turnaround is real and is reflected where it matters most, in new jobs. Four years ago, unemployment was at 15% and heading for 500,000. Today, it is dropping under 10% and expected to be under 9% by the end of the year with full employment by 2018. In 2010, the budget deficit was over 14%. We were spending €10 for every €7 we took in. As a State, we were unable to borrow. We were locked out of the money markets with Irish ten year bonds reaching 15% at peak. Today, the deficit is heading for 2.3%, which is well within our limits, and we can borrow again on the open markets for less than 1%. Four years ago, we had, in effect, lost our economic sovereignty and were in the hands of the international receivers - the IMF, EU and ECB. Our international reputation was in tatters, we were regarded as one of the PIIGS and made peripheral in every sense in Europe. What a dramatic turnaround there has been in the last four years. It is hard to think of any economy anywhere in the developed world which has made such an emphatic recovery in such a short period of time.

In the course of the debate in the House and in recent media commentary on the economy, I have heard the opinion that the recovery has nothing to do with the Government. I heard that it was all going to happen anyway and that some magnanimity by the ECB, the Fed or the tooth fairy was always going to set us right. Why, I wonder, did those who now hold that opinion keep the good news to themselves for so long? Why did they not share this wisdom with us four years ago? It would certainly have been reassuring for pensioners who four years ago worried how a bankrupt state could continue to pay their pensions. It would have been comforting for the worker who had lost a job and wondered if she would ever work again. It would have been comforting for the businessman who worried about when the next customer would cross his threshold or the parents who were saying goodbye to emigrating children and wondering if they would ever have the opportunity to come back. Of course, they did not share this retrospective

optimism with us then because while they hold this opinion now, they were leading the chorus of pessimism and negativity for most of the time the crisis had to be addressed. Many of those who now say that recovery was inevitable, were loudest in proclaiming that we would not get out of the bailout by the end of 2013, that we would need a second bailout, that we would not succeed in renegotiating the terms of the bailout, including the interest rate, that we would not get a deal on the promissory note and that exiting the bailout without a precautionary programme was a mistake.

I can understand why Opposition politicians would want for political reasons to talk down the prospects for recovery, but they were not alone. There were many independent commentators who simply did not believe that this level of recovery could be achieved in such a short period of time. I select one in particular because of the respect and regard I have for the institute involved. I refer to the Nevin Institute for which I have particular regard. It published an economic outlook on 10 April 2013, which is just two years ago. It forecast growth of just 1% and 1.2% for 2013 and 2014, respectively. It predicated that unemployment would remain at 14.7% in 2013 and increase to 15% in 2014 and 2015. It did not expect the Government to reach the 3% Maastricht target by 2015. How much more wrong could it have been? It was not alone. Indeed, one of my own abiding memories of that difficult period was the challenge of convincing people that we could succeed and that we would recover. I recall making a speech to the 2012 Labour Party conference when I predicated that there would be two more difficult budgets, following which the economy would recover and that we would succeed in that recovery. I recall also making a speech at a Labour Party event in mid-2013 when I suggested that we should aim to achieve full employment by the then-modest target of 2020. I am glad that target has now been revised to 2018. Unfortunately, there were few takers back then for such optimism outside our own most loyal ranks. I can understand why. The work which had to be done and the difficult decisions which had to be made had a huge impact on people and were sometimes deeply unpopular.

The credit for our country's recovery must go above all to the people. Their sacrifice, hard work and co-operation made the recovery possible. Among them were the trade unions who worked the Croke Park agreement and agreed the Haddington Road replacement. No other representative body in the State came into Government Buildings and agreed a reduction in their own members' conditions in the broader interests of the country. There was, of course, a political cost. My own party, the Labour Party, in particular paid a high price at last year's local and European elections. I too paid a political price, but speaking personally I believe it was worth it to see now in the spring statement the great economic recovery that has been achieved and the foundation that has been set for the future of the country. It may have been difficult, but we did the right thing. Imagine where we would be if we had remained in a bailout. We can only look to the situation in Greece in that regard. Imagine where the country would be if we had taken Sinn Féin's advice and defaulted. It would take another 20 years to recover. Imagine we had taken the route argued for in some of the more hawkish opinions that budgetary adjustment alone would achieve the recovery. We insisted that there had to be a jobs and growth strategy. Imagine where we would be if public services had been cut even more, if compulsory redundancies had been implemented in the public service or if basic social welfare payments had been cut and wages reduced in order to pursue a particular version of competitiveness. The route we took was the fairest and most balanced possible and it has resulted in a recovered, growing, job-generating economy.

The work is not complete because an economy only exists to serve society and not the other

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way around. Unemployment is still around 10%, which is far too high, and we have to keep the focus on jobs. Recovery is still at risk and must not be squandered. The greatest risks to recovery are political choices, that is, political choices which are made in these buildings and the choices we will make as citizens when we next go to our polling stations.

Jobs themselves are not sufficient. Any old job is not enough. If our society is based on the belief that people must work for a living, then people must also be able to make a living from work. This problem is not unique to Ireland. Far too many people at work do not earn enough to pay the bills, buy a house or raise a family. Throughout the world there is a growing inequality in income. Some corporate chiefs take home 200 or 300 times the income of their lowest paid workers. This is simply not sustainable and must be addressed by governments and international bodies such as the EU and the OECD. I commend in particular the work of the Minister of State, Deputy Nash, in bringing forward the Low Pay Commission and his efforts to bring forward the legislation on collective bargaining.

Among those who have been most affected by the reduction in earnings are the young. This generation came onto the labour market as the recession hit. It has been affected by fewer job opportunities due to the recession, lower earning opportunities and difficulty in accessing affordable housing. As we chart the next phase of recovery, the social dividend of recovery, we must pay particular attention to the needs of this generation. I therefore ask the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, in his discussions with the trade unions on pay, to pay particular attention to the reduced pay of those who entered the public service, in particular professions such as teaching, in recent years.

We must also address the need to increase the supply of housing. As a result of the collapse in the building industry, the level of residential construction has also fallen. Currently even the most optimistic projections for house completions up to 2017 are showing figures of less than 20,000 per year. This level is behind the demographic need for housing, which is put at about 25,000 per year. I believe the real need is probably higher than that as a result of pent up demand. I welcome the Government's publication of a construction strategy and, in particular, the announcement by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, of the biggest public housing programme introduced in this country since the 1980s. However, we need to do more in this area to ensure that affordable housing is available for those who need it.

We also need to look at some longer-term issues such as population growth. Within the next two decades, the population of this island will increase to more than 8 million. This will be back to the level at the time of the Famine. This poses considerable challenges for us in terms of housing provision, employment and public services. Issues need to be addressed, particularly in the planning area. It is also one of the reasons the Government is right to invest in the provision and delivery of water services. We need to provide for that growing population.

I wish to mention another issue, but I will mention it only briefly because I am conscious of the time. There is an election in Britain next week which will have implications for us. It may have implications for Britain's relationship with the European Union. That is of considerable interest to us. It may also add to the momentum towards Scottish independence, which will have very considerable implications for the set of relationships between the different countries on these islands. It will have particular implications for Northern Ireland. The time has come, as we look at our economic future, for us to look at the economy not just in terms of the State but to look at it in terms of the whole island. There is a logic about economic development on

this island being done on an all-island basis. We should probably return to this subject and have a deeper discussion on it at a later stage.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joanna Tuffy): Deputy McFadden will have the approximately three minutes remaining before I ask her to call for the adjournment of the debate.

Deputy Gabrielle McFadden: When this Government came into office four years ago, it was faced with a catastrophic situation. There were fears that there would be no money to pay public servants, no money for social welfare and no money for pensions. Rumours suggested ATMs were drying up. Some 300,000 jobs were lost at the height of the recession. To add to the near Armageddon situation, there was also a real fear at the time that there would be a run on the banks. That is the nightmare that the people of this country were facing. Our dear country was inches away from being a complete economic basket case. There is much work still to be done, but this Government came into office in early 2011, rolled up its sleeves and got on with the business of facing the challenges head on. Many of the decisions taken were not popular, but were taken for the right reasons by a responsible Government. It has been far from easy, particularly for the people of this country who had no hand, act or part in the crash.

The economic evidence clearly indicates that the recovery is under way. Four years on, no one in this Chamber can dispute that we have come a long way since the darkest days we ever faced as a country. Some 90,000 jobs have been created by this Government since it launched its Action Plan for Jobs in 2012. Unemployment has dropped from a high of 15% and will fall below 10% in the coming months. The current aim is to add another 100,000 jobs to the economy and to have more than 2 million people at work by the end of 2018. This would be a full replacement of all the jobs lost during the crash.

It is uplifting, to say the least, that we can look forward to seeing those who emigrated during the crash returning. Families can look forward to seeing their sons and daughters returning home to live in Ireland. We have the fastest growing economy in Europe. However, this Government has made it clear that despite the fact that the economy is in recovery mode, there will be no return to the extravagant days of boom and bust policies promoted by the last Government, a Fianna Fáil led Government which cosied up to the property developers as the bubble continued to grow and finally burst with horrendous consequences for this country.

The Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance made it very clear that, as a result of the positive impact of the prudent policies followed, there will be sensible tax cuts and spending increases to continue to improve people's living conditions and vital services. We must never forget that the turnaround which we are seeing in the economy is a direct consequence of the policies pursued by the Government and the sacrifices made by the Irish people. This Government is determined to recognise that contribution by giving people some breathing space.

At the start of this year, the Government put money back into people's pay packets for the first time in seven years. Our last budget reduced income tax and the universal social charge for the first time in six years. These were the first steps in making our tax system fairer and better for job creation. As the Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance have outlined, the Government will continue to provide more breathing space for people.

Thankfully for families right across this country, we have moved away from an era of austerity to a new dawn full of hope and renewal for our great country. One of the key objectives is to ensure that all regions feel the benefit of economic recovery, including the midlands.

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Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joanna Tuffy): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 27A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Terence Flanagan - the need to reduce the burden of child care costs;

(2) Deputy Brendan Griffin - the need to prevent future wild fires in Killarney National Park and on Sliabh Mish in view of recent damage;

(3) Deputy Michael McNamara - the closure of St. Joseph's rehabilitation unit, Ennis, County Clare;

(4) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - an gá fíor-phráinneach go dtarraingeodh an tAire Ealaíon, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta an fógra ag lorg tairiscintí do sheirbhísí aeir go dtí na hOileáin Árann siar agus go gcuirfear fógra tairisceana eile ina áit a chinnteoidh an leibhéal céanna seirbhíse agus atá ann faoi láthair, the pressing need for the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gael-tacht to withdraw the notice seeking tenders for air services to the Aran Islands and the need to replace it with a new tender notice which ensures the retention of the current level of service;

(5) Deputies Denis Naughten and Fergus O'Dowd - reports of missed diagnoses by locum radiologists at certain hospitals;

(6) Deputies Thomas P. Broughan, Richard Boyd Barrett and Timmy Dooley - the proposed privatisation of 10% of Dublin city and national public bus routes and implications for bus and rail commuters;

(7) Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn - the removal of school transport to Carndonagh Community School, County Donegal, under the terms of the post-primary school transport scheme;

(8) Deputy Colm Keaveney - impact of the loss of the home school community liaison teacher from St. Jarlath's College, Tuam, County Galway;

(9) Deputy Clare Daly - concerns raised at the GRA conference, with particular reference to calls for access to greater repressive apparatus and the implications for the development of a modern police service;

(10) Deputy Thomas Pringle - the introduction of a recreational blue-fin tuna fishery here;

(11) Deputy Alan Farrell - proposals to route construction traffic through Donabate town centre for the construction of the National Forensic Mental Hospital;

(12) Deputy Shane Ross - the reason for his votes in favour of all board resolutions at the AIB and Bank of Ireland AGMs this week; (13) Deputy Joan Collins - the reason for no Government representation at the second *ad hoc* committee session on sovereign debt restructuring, New York;

(14) Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil - the status of the integration of the former Newbridge Credit Union into Permanent TSB;

(15) Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly - the potential conflict of interest which may arise in the investigation of Siteserv through the involvement of KPMG;

(16) Deputy Mick Wallace - concerns raised at the GRA conference, with particular reference to calls for access to greater repressive apparatus and the implications for the development of a modern police service; and (17) Deputy Catherine Murphy - the potential conflict of interest which may arise in the investigation of Siteserv by KPMG.

The matters raised by Deputy Alan Farrell, Deputies Denis Naughten and Fergus O'Dowd, Deputies Thomas P. Broughan, Richard Boyd Barrett and Timmy Dooley and Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl have been selected for discussion.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Government chose to fill this week's Dáil schedule telling the country how wonderful it believes it is. This sets a new world record in backslapping.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Better than backstabbing.

Deputy Sean Fleming: It shows how out of touch the Government has become. There was little or no mention of how it would specifically tackle the plight of householders with variable mortgage interest rates other than by meeting the banks. The 300,000 families paying these penal variable rates pay on average 2% more than other EU customers, or €6,000 per annum. Over the lifetime of a mortgage, that is almost enough to pay for a house.

When we raised this matter in Private Members' time a month ago, the Government expressed concern and stated that it would speak with the banks. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, met the Governor of the Central Bank and expressed his concern. Last Tuesday, he *12 o'clock* stated that he would meet the banks' CEOs to express his concern. However, the horse has already bolted. At yesterday's Oireachtas finance committee meeting, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank confirmed that there would be no rate cut, as their variable rates were not overpriced as far as they were concerned.

Does the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources agree with the CEOs that their variable mortgage rates are not overpriced? Does he believe it acceptable that the banks are refusing to reduce their rates? Now that Plan A - expressing concern - has failed, has the Government a Plan B? Fianna Fáil will not let this matter go. We will pursue it until we force the Government to act. The majority of the 300,000 families involved are paying penal rates to banks that are fully owned by the Irish taxpayer and controlled by the Government. Other than expressing concern, is it going to do anything substantial to solve this problem?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Nothing.

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): The statement of Government priorities from 2014 to 2016 recognised that promoting and encouraging competition and new entrants in the banking sector were required to put downward pressure on interest rates for variable rate mortgage customers, both new and existing.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Change the script.

Deputy Alex White: The mortgage interest rates that independent financial institutions operating in Ireland charge to customers are determined as a result of a commercial decision by the institutions concerned. The Minister for Finance and the Central Bank have no statutory role, as the Deputy is aware, in respect of the mortgage interest rates charged.

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Deputy Mattie McGrath: Send that script by e-mail.

Deputy Alex White: While the ECB base rate is a factor in determining those rates, a broad range of other factors, including deposit rates, market funding costs, the competitive environment and the institutions' overall funding, are key determinants. The improvements in the overall economy, reduction in the cost of funds, increased demand and greater competition between lenders has led to a reduction in the standard variable rate, SVR, offered by the majority of banks for new customers or, in the case of AIB, all SVR customers.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Claptrap.

Deputy Alex White: As part of the Central Bank's work on mortgage arrears, lenders were asked to consider all avenues to help customers in arrears, including interest rate reductions. The regulation of interest rates remains a policy area under active review.

Deputy Robert Troy: "Active review"?

Deputy Alex White: This has been the subject of correspondence between the Department of Finance and the Central Bank. The Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Bill 2015 will ensure that all mortgage holders will have the protection of the code of conduct on mortgage arrears and access to the Office of the Financial Services Ombudsman. The actions already taken by the Government to promote competition in the banking sector, including the establishment of the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, the credit guarantee scheme and the amendments to section 149 of the Consumer Credit Act to encourage new entrants into the financial sector, are important.

At a recent meeting between the Minister for Finance and the Governor of the Central Bank, the issue of mortgage interest rates was discussed. The Governor provided an update on the ongoing work that he and his officials were carrying out on the issue of the SVRs charged by lenders. The Governor and the Minister noted that the SVRs charged in Ireland were higher than in other euro area countries and had not fallen in line with ECB wholesale rates. The Central Bank will continue researching why this is the case and will publish its results shortly. The Governor will update the Minister on progress in due course.

In terms of the next step, the Central Bank will present the results of its research to the Minister in the coming weeks. He has given a commitment that he will initiate discussions with the six main lenders in Irish banking on the issue and looks forward to hearing their plans for reducing interest rates.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Unfortunately, the Minister's response did not address the issue. The banks have already indicated that they will not take the concerns of the Minister for Finance. I am disappointed in the Minister present because I believed that I would get a good and intelligent answer from him, but most of what he read-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Toe the line. Read a script.

Deputy Sean Fleming: -----could have been read to us last November. I am afraid to say that he sounded like a ventriloquist's dummy. I do not think he even believed the script himself.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: No.

Deputy Sean Fleming: He came to the Chamber with a script, most of which was written

last November, and parroted it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: A joke.

Deputy Sean Fleming: It seems that the banks are only interested in their own profits. By their actions, including those that they confirmed this week, they are adding to the social housing waiting list.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: A bankers' charter.

Deputy Sean Fleming: They have admitted that they intend to chase people they have made homeless for the outstanding debts and negative equity. Did the Minister hear that? They will chase the homeless for the outstanding debts and negative equity.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Oliver Cromwell is back.

Deputy Sean Fleming: That was stated in Leinster House yesterday. They will not even leave the homeless alone.

Is it the case that the Government is powerless over the banks - it gave them a veto - or is it choosing to do nothing other than to meet them, examine the facts and express concern? None of that will reduce the rates. We assure the Government that it will answer in this Chamber every week from this week on until we see a reduction in rates. We will not let this go.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Fianna Fáil did not do much about the issue when it had responsibility for this.

Deputy Alex White: The Deputy is well aware, and has not questioned what I stated, that there is no statutory power to direct a reduction in interest rates. If I am wrong in that, maybe the Deputy might correct me.

Deputy Ray Butler: Smoke and mirrors.

Deputy Alex White: Or if he is proposing-----

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Minister has asked me to correct something.

Deputy Alex White: He started off-----

Deputy Ray Butler: I thought that might upset him.

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Minister directed a question to me. On a point of order, the Minister-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Sean Fleming: On a point of order, this is Leaders' Questions.

Deputy Alex White: Yes, but if you give me an opportunity-----

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Minister has directed a question to me. He has signalled the right of the Government to answer.

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Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy should sit down and take his seat.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy-----

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: It is not a great audition.

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Minister has asked me a direct question. When the Minister asks direct questions, he-----

Deputy James Bannan: The Deputy has got his wings.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Deputy McGuinness is way better.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Chair is on his feet.

Deputy John Lyons: Deputy Sean Fleming should sit down.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister is replying to the questions.

Deputy Ray Butler: Yes. The Deputy will get answers now.

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Minister asked me a direct question.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Try to show some bit of respect.

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Minister asked a direct question and I outlined what legislative powers the Minister for Finance had.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: We know that the Deputy has no respect for-----

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Minister asked a direct question.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: For heaven's sake.

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Minister asked a direct question. He is entitled to an answer.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Deputy Sean Fleming is a show. Deputy McGuinness was right. This carry-on is a disgrace to all of Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I will give him that answer.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Sean Fleming: If the Minister will withdraw his question to me, I will sit down.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Will he withdraw the question to me or does he want-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Deputy McGuinness was right. Fianna Fáil is a show.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will deal with this. Will the Deputy resume his seat?

Deputy Sean Fleming: If the Minister withdraws his question.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: For God's sake.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If the Deputy does not resume his seat, I will suspend the House.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I will not have questions put to me in this Chamber without an opportunity to answer them.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy will not be able to spin.

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Minister asked the question. Does he want the answer?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: It is like "Reeling in the Years" for Fianna Fáil. The face of the future.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I cannot put that to the Minister if the Deputy keeps talking.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Put it to him, or I will rise again if he does not-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Minister happy to reply without asking questions?

Deputy Alex White: Absolutely.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister has no answer. That is why.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister, please.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Will he-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Alex White: Let me rephrase what I said-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We never get an answer.

Deputy Alex White: -----to assist the Deputy.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Does Deputy Mattie McGrath want to return to Fianna Fáil?

Deputy Sean Fleming: Will the Minister withdraw the question?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Deputy McGuinness would not have Deputy Mattie McGrath back if he were leader.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He has a script.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister has the floor.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: Where was Deputy Sean Fleming on the day of the bailout? Where was he for the bank guarantee?

Deputy Sean Fleming: Will the Minister withdraw the question? This will not run any

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more. Will he withdraw the question?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister will answer the question if the Deputy resumes his seat.

Deputy Sean Fleming: No. He asked a question.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister cannot answer.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I will answer his question.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: There will be a telephone call from Cork in a moment.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Will he withdraw it?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Resume your seat. The Minister will reply.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Forget Joan Burton. Look at Alex.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Will he withdraw the question?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Deputy please resume----

Deputy Sean Fleming: Will he withdraw the question or else let me answer it?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Fleming, please resume your seat. If you not do so, I will have to suspend the House. What you are doing is not fair to other Members.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does Deputy Fleming want the Minister to reply?

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am suspending business for five minutes.

Sitting suspended at 12.10 p.m. and resumed at 12.15 p.m.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before I call the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Alex White, I advise the House that if any Member has an issue or complaint relating to Standing Orders, the appropriate forum in which to raise it is the Committee on Procedure and Privileges, CPP. As Chair this morning, I am overseeing the procedures for Leaders' Questions. Any Member may go to the CPP with an issue relating to the ordering of business in the House, but he or she cannot stipulate how Leaders' Questions operate in this Chamber. I call on the Minister to reply to the question from Deputy Sean Fleming.

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): To assist in ensuring order in the House, I will not ask the Deputy any more questions. I can understand his aversion to being asked questions, whether it is about this issue, his party's economic policy or anything else. I will not ask him any more questions because I know he finds it difficult to address those issues.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I will answer any questions the Minister has.

Deputy Alex White: What I have said in response to the Deputy is true. He started off in

an attempt to mollify me by accusing me of being intelligent. All I am saying is that he knows the Government has no statutory power to intervene in the way he seems to be suggesting. If he is proposing a change in the law, let us hear what he has to say. I realise there is a competitive tension between the two parties opposite in their attempts to achieve notice in the House.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Alex White: I am anxious to clarify the matter. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, said yesterday:

I am calling in the senior management of the six major lenders in the market in Ireland, and I will present them with the evidence from the Central Bank, and I will say to them I think they should reduce their interest rates and that we want to discuss it, and I will want them to explain why they cannot, but we would prefer it if they did. If you call that pressure, that is pressure, but I would see that as a discussion [with the banks] in the normal way. But I do not have legal authority to direct [the banks].

That is the position. If anybody in this House is able to tell me or the Minister it is wrong, I am all ears.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: What we are seeing, yet again, is a hands-off Government when it comes to dealing with the banks. This State is reeling from a once-in-a-century economic catastrophe. That catastrophe was in large part precipitated by the Fianna Fáil golden circle and Anglo Irish Bank. In 2011, people right across the State voted to smash that golden circle and close the door forever on Anglo Irish Bank. They also voted to ensure this would never happen again. Many people invested their trust in the Labour Party to ensure that was the case.

The Siteserv debacle has demonstrated that, in a few short years, Fine Gael has become more Fianna Fáil than Fianna Fáil itself and the Labour Party is as useful as a mudguard on a tortoise. It bends the mind of people of my generation that despite the destruction of this State, both the golden circle and IBRC are back at centre stage. Last week, in response to demands for a commission of investigation into IBRC, the Tánaiste and leader of the Labour Party said she wanted an independent inquiry by a competent authority. Is the Minister happy that the review, which the Government has proposed, is a genuinely independent inquiry to be carried out by a competent authority, as demanded by his party leader, when it involves KPMG which played a central role in the sale of Siteserv? Is there not a glaring conflict of interest at the heart of this review, which renders it incapable of assuaging the public concerns that now exist with regard to the Government cover-up of this scandal? Will the Government now move to deal with these concerns by establishing a commission of investigation? Will the Minister guarantee that shareholder activity is contained within the scope of this commission of investigation?

Deputy Alex White: What the debate over the past few days indicates is the utter bankruptcy of the Sinn Féin Party with regard to any kind of vision or any kind of economic future for this country or any kind of a coherent sense of what has to happen and what is happening in terms of restoring our economy, creating jobs-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: In Australia.

Deputy Alex White: -----and facing the future in a confident way.

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Deputy Dessie Ellis: What about the homeless people?

Deputy Alex White: There would be no recovery if we had listened to Sinn Féin and its leader and there certainly would be no recovery-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: They will be recovery for the wealthy.

Deputy Alex White: ----- if we were to follow the kind of policies, if one can even call them that, that Sinn Féin advocates.

In respect of the issue Deputy Tóibín raised, the review that has been announced by the Minister for Finance, as he well knows, will cover transactions that resulted in a capital loss to IBRC of at least €10 million during the period concerned, or that are specifically identified by the special liquidator as likely to give rise to potential public concern in respect of the ultimate returns to the taxpayer. The purpose of this review is to determine whether there is evidence of material deficiencies in IBRC's performance in respect of such transactions and related activities and management decisions and whether it can be concluded that the transactions were not commercially sound. The Minister, Deputy Noonan, has asked that the special liquidators carry out this review and provide a report of their findings before 31 August of this year. Following this, the report will be made available to relevant committees of the Oireachtas. The special liquidators are best placed to undertake such a review-----

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Will it be independent?

Deputy Alex White: -----thoroughly and expeditiously given their access to all the books and records of IBRC, the resources at their disposal to conduct such a review and the power set out under the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation Act which allows the Minister to make this direction in the public interest.

To address potential conflicts of interest, with the agreement of the special liquidators, the retired High Court Judge, Mr. Justice Iarfhlaith O'Neill, is being appointed to monitor any actual or perceived conflicts of interest. This will ensure that the review process is robust. There will never be a situation where a person involved in a transaction will be involved in reviewing that transaction.

This review and report are to serve the public interest in light of recent speculation and they are not being undertaken as a result of any evidence that such deficiencies existed or that transactions were not commercially sound.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Is it going to be independent?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I note that the Minister dodged the question of whether it is going to be independent.

Deputy Alex White: It is.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Despite reams of questions from Opposition Deputies, including my colleague, Deputy Pearse Doherty, regarding the IBRC transactions, the Minister, "hands-off Noonan", refused to reveal very serious concerns expressed by his own officials about the series of IBRC transactions. Vital information was withheld from the Dáil. This Dáil was misled on the IBRC scandal and, to add insult to injury, the Minister comes in here today, representing the Labour Party in government, and attempts to justify the Government cover-up.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Where is the transparency?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Again I ask the Minister will he now put an end to this cover-up by declaring that the Government will set aside a farcical and fatally compromised review and initiate simply an independent inquiry, carried out by a competent authority, as demanded by his party leader last week?

I will ask the Minister one further question and I want him to listen to it because it is an important one. Will he inform the Dáil if members of the Cabinet are aware of any individual who was a shareholder of Siteserv who would have had access to IBRC information around the sale of Siteserv and who would have information around the tender of Irish Water and Siteserv? I will put that question again.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have that, Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I will ask it again as it is very important.

Deputy James Bannon: Is it very important - what about the kangaroo courts?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Minister inform the Dáil if members of the Cabinet are aware of any individual who was a shareholder of Siteserv who would have had access to IBRC information around the sale of Siteserv and who would have information around the Irish Water-Siteserv tender? I remind the Minister of the importance of this information and the damage done by the closed culture of the Minister for Finance over the past few weeks.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Do not forget the “T” word - “transparency”.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It is a straightforward question.

Deputy Alex White: It is a classic tactic of Sinn Féin to level allegations, which have no grounds and for which the Deputy has presented no grounds-----

Deputy Sandra McLellan: It is a question.

Deputy Finian McGrath: You sound like P. J. Stone.

Deputy Alex White: -----masquerading as a question. That is a classic tactic of the party.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Just answer the question.

Deputy Alex White: There is absolutely no basis for that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Do members of the Cabinet know?

Deputy Alex White: I am a member of the Cabinet and I am certainly not aware, and I can only answer for myself, but I believe that the manner in which the Deputy-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Is the Minister confident that other members of the Cabinet do not know?

Deputy Alex White: -----poses questions, a little like the way his party colleagues, including Deputy McDonald, operate in this House, is to make allegations without any foundation-----

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Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister is dancing around the question.

Deputy Alex White: -----leave them on the record and make no effort whatsoever to ensure-----

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Alex White: ----- that there is any kind of a reasonable basis for what is being said.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Is the Minister confident that members of the Cabinet-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Have any Labour Party TDs ever used parliamentary privilege?

Deputy Alex White: That means-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Has any Labour Party TD ever used parliamentary privilege?

Deputy Alex White: -----that the Deputies opposite cannot actually be taken seriously in relation to anything they say.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The list of them would be as long as my arm.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Alex White: If they come in and have something to say, they should have a basis for it. I believe that this inquiry is the correct way to proceed.

Deputy Finian McGrath: You sound like P. J. Stone.

Deputy Alex White: I believe that it will be independent. I believe that it will report by the end of August.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: One of the participants is KPMG.

Deputy Alex White: I believe that Mr. Justice Iarfhlaith O'Neill, a retired High Court judge, will ensure that any conflict of interest, or perceived conflict of interest, will be addressed. It would do well for this House for the Deputy opposite to see that the best way to proceed in this kind of matter is to have a robust investigation-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: By an independent authority.

Deputy Alex White: Yes, an independent investigation, and to bring the results in here and pass them to a committee and deal with them at that stage, but that is not the way the Deputies opposite operate.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Does the Cabinet know of individuals?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you.

Deputy Alex White: They operate on the basis of smear and on the basis of groundless allegation-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Does the Cabinet know?

Deputy Alex White: -----and that is always the way they operate.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Clare Daly from the Technical Group and I ask for order.

Deputy Clare Daly: I find it incredibly ironic that a couple of weeks ago those in government were falling over themselves on the Government benches to express their solidarity with Dunnes Stores workers and their horror about the repressive and anti-worker onslaught of the Heffernan family. Yet here we are today with the Government playing the role of Margaret Heffernan in a battle against the country's bus workers. The Government can dress it up any way it wishes. It can try to hide behind the Minister for Transport, Deputy Donohoe, and Eoin O'Duffy's descendants sitting behind the Minister, but the reality is that there is a huge significance in the fact that these workers will be involved in industrial action and protest action on May Day, international workers day, against a decision made by a Government made up of the party founded by James Connolly to defend workers' interests. How far ye have travelled.

Let us be clear. No worker ever wants to go on strike. These bus workers are making a stand not just to defend their terms and conditions but to make a stand against privatisation and in defence of public services. In recent weeks we have had to listen to Government representatives trying to persuade them that this is not about privatisation but about competitive tendering. Guess what? They called it competitive tendering and franchising in Britain but it still ended up with British Rail being handed over to private companies, with prices and subsidies rising and big payouts to shareholders.

The Government has tried to persuade us that it is not its fault and that Fianna Fáil started it. It is right. It certainly did, but the reason this Government is in power is because people thought it would be different, not that it would carry on what Fianna Fáil had started. It has also said it is the fault of the European Union but there is nothing in the EU directive of 2007 which demands competitive tendering. In fact, it specifically states the Government does not have to have it so it should stop trying to con people. Nobody is falling for it.

I ask the Minister and his Government to stop blaming Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann workers for what is going on. How could any right thinking worker believe statements from the Government that their terms and conditions will be protected and that they will not have to transfer when they know that their colleagues in Team Aer Lingus, for example, had not only commitments but significant and supposedly legally binding letters of guarantee that would not happen to them, but it did? How could these people believe the press statements from the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, that their pensions will be maintained when their colleagues from the DAA and Aer Lingus will be assembling in their hundreds tomorrow outside the Aer Lingus annual general meeting because their retirement pensions have been decimated? Would the Government not just come clean and admit that what is going on here is a classic situation that Noam Chomsky described as the standard technique of privatisation - "defund, make sure things don't work, get people angry ... [and then] hand it over to private capital".

Deputy Alex White: The tactic of getting people angry may be one that is practised by the Deputy opposite but it is certainly not one that is practised on this side of the House.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: It was when the Deputy was on this side.

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Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: The Labour Party would have won an Oscar for being angry when it was in opposition.

Deputy Alex White: It is very regrettable that it now appears there is likely to be a strike this weekend. This is a pity as it will have an impact not just on the workers concerned, which I understand, but also on commuters across the country on a bank holiday weekend. It is regrettable and a great pity that it could not have been avoided and averted.

I am not, contrary to the Deputy's accusation, in the business of blaming people - management, workers or anyone else. I very much hope that some time in the very near future it will be possible for the parties to get around the table and reach an agreement on the issues involved. Deputy Daly, in her normal way, delivered a little lecture to me about trade union solidarity but I know all about the trade unions in the bus company and I know the efforts they have made in recent years, along with management, to transform the company and ensure that it is a good, strong public service company for the people of this city and elsewhere in the country. I am sure it will go from strength to strength, with strong management and strong trade unions. That is what makes a company like Dublin Bus successful.

The broader issue is that in a growing economy like ours the Government wants to ensure that commuters have the best service available to them to get to and from their place of work speedily and efficiently. We are greatly concerned that this industrial action is happening in circumstances where the NTA is carrying out its statutory duty of proceeding with a tendering process that has resulted from its assessment of how best to direct and award tendered PSO bus services in the public interest. The strike action will cause considerable disruption over the weekend to the public across the country and will inevitably damage the company's finances if it goes ahead.

The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Donohoe, confirmed yesterday that following detailed discussions with the bus companies, management was willing to give a commitment that no driver currently employed would be required to transfer to another operator unless he or she wished to do so. It is not a question of transferring to another company and having concerns about terms and conditions of employment in that new company because no worker will be compelled to transfer to a private operator. I appreciate and accept that the unions have other concerns but the best way for them to be resolved is around the table. The unions should sit down and do what they do so well, as they have done in Dublin Bus, and seek to reach agreement in the interests of their own members and of the broader community.

Deputy Clare Daly: There are so many contradictions that it is hard to know where to start. If Dublin Bus is so great and everything is going so well, why in God's name is the Government breaking it up and undermining it? If the Labour Party believes in a public transport system, why did it stay in Government for four years and stand over a falling subvention for bus services every year up to 2014? The subvention has been cut for the past seven years, four of them on the Labour Party's watch. Why does the Minister's party stand over the crazy situation of reducing the subvention instead of increasing it thereby taking people out of their cars in order to address issues like climate change? Instead, this Government has continued the obscenity of spending €50 million annually to fund the west-link toll bridge company, NTR, not to mention the millions spent on PPPs for roads that are not being used sufficiently. Why is that money not invested in public transport?

The Minister has said that the bus drivers do not need to worry because they will not be

transferring but let us look at that commitment, even though nobody believes any commitments this Government makes any more. The Minister expects us to believe that the company is going to carry an extra 10% of workers but at the end of 2019, that will be used against it to argue that the company is uncompetitive. It will be used as a justification for further privatisation, as history has already taught us.

I know that the Minister is familiar with the writings of James Connolly and he will probably attend the memorial service at his grave next week. No doubt Connolly will be doing some turning in that grave when the Labour Party shows up. That aside, Connolly said that “governments in capitalist societies are but committees of the rich to manage the affairs of the capitalist class”. I believe he was right and that is exactly what the Labour Party is doing. Why does it not just fold up the red flag and join the boys in blue behind it?

Deputy Alex White: When one prepares for Leader’s Questions, the writings of Noam Chomsky are not usually in one’s briefing notes. I must congratulate Deputy Daly for being able to bring in quotations from both Chomsky and Connolly but let us look at the real issues that are facing the people of Dublin and the people in the bus company. The Deputy is wrong in her great survey and is all over the shop on the Government. She forgot to mention, because it would not suit her rhetoric, that last year Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann were paid more than €90 million in PSO payments by the taxpayer, over and above the passenger fare income, to provide public bus services. A further €90 million in funding was also provided for new buses and the upgrade of the fleet. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport ---

Deputy Dessie Ellis: We have one of the lowest levels of PSO payments in Europe.

Deputy Alex White: The problem is that when people make an allegation and get an answer they do not like they try to stop one answering. The fact is that this Government is investing in public transport and in the bus companies.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: We have one of the lowest levels of PSO payments in Europe.

Deputy Alex White: The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport recently put on record his commitment to securing an increase in the subvention provided to the companies to deliver additional services and increase frequency for commuters. The Deputies do not want to hear that either. This year, for the first time since 2008, the PSO contribution for bus and rail services is being maintained at the same level as last year.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: After years of cuts.

Deputy Alex White: That is action taken by this Government and by the two parties in government. I am proud of what the Labour Party is doing in government in every respect. I would like to debate with the Deputy at some point her perspective on what Connolly would do today or what he would think we should be doing today. I would not mind having that debate with the Deputy some time to expose the absolute bankruptcy of the position that she and some of her colleagues try to advocate in here every day of the week. We do not have time for that today.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, we do not.

Deputy Alex White: I look forward to doing it on another occasion.

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Order of Business

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White):

It is proposed to take No. 33, Spring Economic Statement, April 2015 (resumed) and No. 1, Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2014 [*Seanad*] - Second Stage. It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders that the postponed division on the motion for the Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Members of the Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces) Bill 2015 shall be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business today and that the Dáil, on its rising today, shall adjourn until 2.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 6 May 2015.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are two proposals to be put to the House today. Is the proposal for dealing with the postponed division agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for the adjournment until Wednesday, 6 May agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I wish to refer briefly to promised legislation, the first of which is the health (miscellaneous provisions) Bill. *The Irish Times* reported today that thousands of X-rays and scans were reviewed resulting in hundreds of patients being recalled, causing huge distress to them and their families. Errors were discovered when three locum doctors were employed. I ask the Minister to confirm that he is satisfied with the governance arrangements currently in place in Irish hospitals where locums are employed. If not, will the aforementioned Bill address this?

In the context of the Health Act 2007 (amendment) Bill I ask the Minister to outline to the House when we can expect the report from HIQA on maternity services in Portlaoise. I also wish to ask about the social welfare Bill which is listed on the schedule. We have spent all week listening to Government Deputies talking about all of the money we have to give away but the Government is still going ahead with cuts to the one parent family payment on 1 July for one-parent families where the youngest child is over seven years of age. At the same time, the Government is saying that we have the fastest growing economy in Europe. Will the social welfare Bill stop the proposed cuts that are due to take effect in July?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not relevant on the Order of Business.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Finally, I wish to refer to the consumer protection (regulation of credit servicing firms) Bill. As the Minister knows, the majority of the 300,000 families paying penal standard variable interest rates on their mortgages are paying that money to banks that are owned by the taxpayer and controlled by the Government. If the Government feels that it does not have the power to issue directives to the banks that it owns and controls will it include such power in that legislation?

Deputy Alex White: The health (miscellaneous provisions) Bill was the first of the two health Bills the Deputy raised. I am not sure if that Bill would address the issues he went on to discuss. Regardless of whether it does, I do not have a date for that Bill for him at present. Similarly there is no date for the legislation to amend the Health Act 2007.

The Social Welfare Bill has completed all Stages in both Houses of the Oireachtas and it awaits signature by the President.

The consumer protection Bill has passed Second Stage and is now awaiting Committee Stage.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Low pay and underemployment are entrenched in the economy. Currently 50% of workers are earning less than €25,000 a year. Internationally Ireland is becoming an outlier with regard to the level of low pay. At the heart of this is the imbalance between the relationship of the employer and employee. For a long time the Government has promised to rebalance this and has promised legislation on collective bargaining. This should be a red-hot topic and one would think it would be front-ended in the process of the Dáil, but we are seeing the Government drag its heels on it. Do we have a date for it?

Deputy Alex White: My understanding and hope are that both those pieces of legislation will come to Cabinet shortly - in a period of weeks.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask for brevity as many Members are offering.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: When will the apprenticeship Bill be introduced? Throughout the country there is a dire need for apprentices to be trained in different areas. The issue needs to be moved on rapidly for our nation to prosper because the more we train, the better it is for people getting back to work.

The Minister will be able to give me a clear answer on the second issue, the energy (miscellaneous provisions) Bill. From what I have heard in recent days and through the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications the Minister told us that he would be approaching the EU to get clearance for rolling out broadband from 16 to 20. Is it true, as I have heard, that has fallen behind? We have nothing from the EU yet and it may take six months which would delay the whole process. Is that correct?

Deputy Alex White: Although it is in my remit, I do not know the particular energy legislation about which the Deputy is speaking, but I will certainly check it for him to see. There is no Bill or actual legislation along the lines he describes. However, I will talk to him afterwards and seek to assist him in that regard.

He is absolutely right about apprenticeships, which are extremely important. Great work is going on. In my area there are new apprentices in Eircom and the ESB. The deadline for receipt of submissions in respect of that process was the end of March and the Minister of State, Deputy English, is hoping to come to the Cabinet some time before the summer. It is critical, very important.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I ask about the Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Marriage Equality) Bill. We all recognise that An Garda Síochána has an unblemished record of being impartial in referenda and in election campaigns throughout its history. What action will the Minister for Justice and Equality take with the GRA and certain members of the GRA, namely Mr. P.J. Stone?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy not to name people.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: His name and comments have come out on one side of the referendum with very strange language. It is tarnishing the reputation of An Garda Síochána.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is making accusations and the people are not here to defend themselves.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I withdraw the name, but everyone knows the name. Sure, he has come out a number of times and got involved and given credence to people taking down

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posters because they think the gardaí will act with impunity. I think the Minister should deal with this.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will ask the Minister if he has any responsibility. I do not know whether he has.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister for Justice and Equality has.

Deputy Alex White: No. A Bill was passed by the Houses and a referendum is to take place on 22 May on a proposal to change the Constitution.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Without interference.

Deputy Alex White: The House is aware of that.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: From today the lifetime community rating provision is being implemented. In effect, from now on people over the age of 34 will be penalised if they do not purchase private health insurance. I ask the Minister to outline the timeframe for the introduction of universal health insurance. The programme for Government commits to publishing legislation to underpin universal health insurance, but as yet we have not seen the ESRI publish the costs of universal health insurance. It smacks of absolute hypocrisy that we are now forcing people to take out private health insurance without knowing when universal health insurance will be introduced. Does the Government still intend to bring about universal health insurance, compulsory health insurance, or is it just a pretence like many other things in the programme for Government?

Deputy Alex White: The Deputy will be aware that the Minister for Health has quite a deal of legislation. Last year's focus was on the legislation to introduce free GP care for children under six. At the time the Deputy was not clear whether he supported it, but now supports it - although Deputy Keaveney is against it. There is further legislation on those aged over 70. That is the Minister's focus at the moment regarding health legislation. In accordance with the development of the policy on universal health insurance, I am sure the Minister for Health will revert to the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ellis.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: The Minister, Deputy White, is representing the Minister for Health, as the leader of the Government today.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, I am sorry. I have called Deputy Ellis.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I have no timeframe for universal health insurance legislation.

Deputy Alex White: There is no date for such legislation.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: The programme for Government states quite clearly it must be published before the end of the Government's lifetime.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy, I have called Deputy Ellis.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I do not want to delay the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not either.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: There is a commitment in the programme for Government-----

Deputy Alex White: I can assist. If there is specific legislation-----

Deputy Billy Kelleher: -----that universal health insurance legislation would be published in advance of a general election. We are now less than-----

Deputy Alex White: On the specific legislation about which the Deputy has asked me, there is no date.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should submit a Topical Issue request or a parliamentary question. I would be glad to tell the Ceann Comhairle.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: Will it be before the general election?

Deputy Alex White: We do not know when the general election will be.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: It is an absolute farce.

Deputy Finian McGrath: You and your spring statement.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: It is a programme of broken promises as opposed to a programme for Government.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Could we have order? Deputy Ellis has the floor.

Deputy Alex White: The Deputy should discuss that with Deputy Keaveney who has a different view.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: We have all experienced at one stage or another unruly neighbours or even a rented house with parties going on into all hours of the morning. The law has been very poor and frustrating in addressing anti-social issues of this nature. The noise nuisance Bill is intended to apply fixed-penalty notices and to provide for mediation between neighbours and other parties. When will this be brought before the House?

Deputy Alex White: I have no date for that Bill at this time.

Deputy James Bannon: When Deputy Martin was Minister for Health and Children he set up the HSE and its 99 committees to dodge hard decisions.

Deputy Finian McGrath: He would never do that.

Deputy James Bannon: We are making real reform and progress in the health services-----

Deputy Noel Grealish: With 400,000 on waiting lists, how is that making progress?

Deputy James Bannon: -----despite less funding and fewer staff. Our objective is to overhaul radically our health system.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does the Deputy have a question on legislation?

Deputy James Bannon: When can we expect to see the health reform Bill come before the House?

Deputy Noel Grealish: It is backwards the Government is going.

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Deputy Alex White: The Minister for Health will revert, but there is no specific date for that legislation.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: What is the purpose of this Dáil?

Deputy Frank Feighan: There are a few outstanding issues regarding the sale and consumption of alcohol. When will the sale of alcohol Bill come before the House?

Deputy Alex White: I had the honour of bringing the public health alcohol Bill to Cabinet when I was in the Department of Health. That Bill is at pre-legislative scrutiny at this stage.

Deputy Joe Carey: I ask the Minister to update the House on the family leave Bill, which is No. 57 and No. 67, the landlord and tenant Bill.

Deputy Alex White: I do not have a date for either of those Bills at this point.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The criminal procedure Bill is promised legislation. It proposes to modernise the pre-trial process. Have the heads been approved by Cabinet? When is it likely to come before the House? The mediation Bill will have a very broad impact on a series of other areas outside its immediate area. I ask the extent to which that has been progressed at the moment. When is it likely to come before the House? Many people are concerned that the law be changed in accordance with the proposals in the National Archives Bill. Have the heads of that Bill been approved by Cabinet? When is likely to come before the House.

Deputy Alex White: I will have to revert to the Deputy in respect of the criminal procedure legislation, which is an important area of law. The mediation Bill will be later this year. I do not have a date for the National Archives legislation.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: The Government promised to introduce a planning and development Bill and a housing Bill. When are these Bills likely to come before the House and if they are not imminent will the Government provide time in the near future for a debate on housing? I ask this question in the context of a statement released today by the Dublin Simon Community which asserts that the Government's emergency housing response is not providing any light at the end of the tunnel for people in need of emergency accommodation. Nearly 2,000 adults and 1,000 children are in emergency accommodation and that emergency accommodation is becoming long term. We have 151 people sleeping rough in our capital city. The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government provided 271 beds after Christmas, following the tragic death of Jonathan Corrie but the crisis still needs to be addressed urgently. What does the Government propose to do about it?

Deputy Alex White: The first Bill, which was previously called a planning and development Bill and is now to be called the urban regeneration and housing Bill, is expected to come before the Cabinet before the end of May. I think the second Bill to which the Deputy referred is the housing (regulatory and approved bodies) Bill, which will be introduced later this year.

Deputy Finian McGrath: In regard to the industrial relations Bill, is the Minister aware of the threat of industrial action next Wednesday in the Cadbury's chocolate factory in Coolock in response to proposals to outsource the electrical department in the factory and to undermine the staff's pensions and working conditions? Is he also aware that the parent company, Mondelēz International, is in breach of European legislation? Companies which operate in multiple European countries are obliged to engage with their staff but the company is refusing to do so. I

urge the Government to intervene because this plant provides hundreds of jobs in the northside. People are being pushed around and bullied. Common sense needs to be brought to the issue.

Deputy Alex White: I cannot comment on the specific issues raised by the Deputy. The collective bargaining legislation will be introduced this session and the Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation is hopeful that it will come before the Government within a short number of weeks.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Most Members will be aware of the damage that gambling causes to society but fewer will be aware that no bet is legally enforceable. If I win a bet, I cannot enforce payment on it. The former Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Shatter, prepared the general scheme of a gambling control Bill in 2013. What is the position of that Bill and when will it be published?

In the context of the spring statement, an issue has arisen this morning that is causing considerable concern in County Clare, with news of a threat to the rehab unit in St. Joseph's hospital.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should raise that in the context of the debate on the spring statement.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Ordinarily the Opposition would raise this issue on Leaders' Questions but given Fianna Fáil's dismal performance on health in County Clare during its term in government, that party is not in a position to raise. That is why I have to raise the issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not know if the Minister can answer it.

Deputy Alex White: I can only deal with the Deputy's question on the gambling control legislation, which is currently being drafted. I do not have specific date for its introduction.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: In regard to the planning and development legislation, one of my constituents was made homeless this morning along with her children. She presented to the homelessness unit in Parkgate Street but there was no accommodation for her. She is one of 60 homeless families who have not even been able to secure emergency accommodation. Deputy Ó Fearghail outlined the overall numbers. Every morning between 60 and 80 families cannot even find emergency accommodation. The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government appears to be in a state of paralysis. Where is he? The legislation is not being progressed and there was no reference to housing in the lengthy statements by the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform. Is it not time that the Government took a similar approach to the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, legislation to housing by taking urgent action today? This situation cannot be allowed to continue.

Deputy Alex White: The Deputy is right that it is a pressing matter but he is totally wrong to say that the Government has not taken action on it.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Sixty families.

Deputy Alex White: It flies in the face of the facts of our investment in the housing programme and dealing with homelessness. The Deputy is completely wrong about that, as he is aware. The urban regeneration and housing Bill is to be introduced before the end of May. It is being worked on as a priority because it is extremely important.

Deputy Pat Deering: I ask the Minister to update the House on the Competition and Con-

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sumer Protection Bill 2014, which was one of the most important pieces of legislation introduced in this House. We have been awaiting regulations under the legislation for quite some time. The Bill regulates the relationship between producers and retailers.

Deputy Alex White: I understand that legislation was enacted last year. An issue arises in respect of the regulations required under the Act. I will get a response for the Deputy on the status of those regulations.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: In regard to the Irish Aviation Authority (amendment) Bill, it was reported in today's *Irish Independent* and *Irish Examiner* that the leader of Fianna Fáil launched an unprecedented attack on the management and operation of Shannon Airport and what the Government has done for the airport in terms of driving massive economic progress in the region. I ask the Minister to update the House on that Bill. Perhaps he is also be in a position to facilitate a debate on aviation policy so that the leader of Fianna Fáil would have an opportunity to explain why he launched a scurrilous attack on Shannon Airport and the people who work there.

Deputy Alex White: Work is ongoing on the Irish Aviation Authority legislation but I do not have a specific date for the Deputy.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: The Government is sitting on its hand while Cork Airport closes.

Industrial Relations (Members of the Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces) Bill 2015: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the Industrial Relations (Members of the Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces) Bill 2015. On Friday, 24 April 2014, on the question that the Bill be now read a Second Time, a division was claimed and in accordance with the Order of the Dáil of that day that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 24; Níl, 69.</i>	
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>
<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	<i>Bannon, James.</i>
<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	<i>Breen, Pat.</i>
<i>Colreavy, Michael.</i>	<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>
<i>Creighton, Lucinda.</i>	<i>Butler, Ray.</i>
<i>Daly, Clare.</i>	<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>
<i>Flanagan, Terence.</i>	<i>Byrne, Eric.</i>
<i>Fleming, Tom.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>
<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>
<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Collins, Áine.</i>
<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>
<i>McLellan, Sandra.</i>	<i>Connaughton, Paul J.</i>
<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	<i>Coonan, Noel.</i>
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	<i>Costello, Joe.</i>

<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	<i>Creed, Michael.</i>
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	<i>Deasy, John.</i>
<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>	<i>Deenihan, Jimmy.</i>
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	<i>Deering, Pat.</i>
<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>
<i>Ross, Shane.</i>	<i>Dowds, Robert.</i>
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>
<i>Timmins, Billy.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	<i>Feighan, Frank.</i>
<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>	<i>Ferris, Anne.</i>
	<i>Fitzgerald, Frances.</i>
	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>
	<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>
	<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>
	<i>Gilmore, Eamon.</i>
	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>
	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>
	<i>Harrington, Noel.</i>
	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>
	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>
	<i>Humphreys, Kevin.</i>
	<i>Keating, Derek.</i>
	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>
	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>
	<i>Kenny, Seán.</i>
	<i>Kirk, Seamus.</i>
	<i>Lyons, John.</i>
	<i>Maloney, Eamonn.</i>
	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>
	<i>McFadden, Gabrielle.</i>
	<i>McGinley, Dinny.</i>
	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>
	<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>
	<i>Mitchell, Olivia.</i>
	<i>Mulherin, Michelle.</i>
	<i>Neville, Dan.</i>
	<i>Nolan, Derek.</i>
	<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>
	<i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i>
	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>
	<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>
	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>
	<i>O'Reilly, Joe.</i>

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	<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>
	<i>Perry, John.</i>
	<i>Quinn, Ruairí.</i>
	<i>Reilly, James.</i>
	<i>Ring, Michael.</i>
	<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>
	<i>Shatter, Alan.</i>
	<i>Stanton, David.</i>
	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>
	<i>Tuffy, Joanna.</i>
	<i>Twomey, Liam.</i>
	<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Clare Daly and Mick Wallace; Níl, Deputies John Lyons and Paul Kehoe.

Amendment declared lost.

Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Sub-Committee on Children and Youth Affairs has completed its consideration of the Children First Bill 2014 and has made amendments thereto.

Spring Economic Statement: Statements (Resumed)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Broughan is sharing time with Deputy Billy Timmins.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute briefly to this important discussion on our spring economic statement for 2015. Of course, it is extremely clear that the Government is gearing up for a general election and apparently hoping that the Irish public has a very short memory. Let me start by saying that I welcome a process of regular economic and fiscal debate in the Oireachtas. For many years on the public accounts committee and finance committees I called for a move towards the Dutch and other EU models of full citizen and parliamentary consultation and discussion over each fiscal year on the choices and possible tax and spending decisions for each annual budget. In that context, the idea of a spring economic statement and national economic dialogue are welcome in principle as moves to democratise the budgetary cycle and process.

Tuesday's statements by the Ministers, Deputies Noonan and Howlin, were a great opportunity to signpost key policies to address the ongoing suffering and near despair caused to so many Irish citizens and households by the relentless policy of austerity since autumn 2008. On the Order of Business I identified one of those areas of total despair this morning regarding our homeless families. Sadly, both Ministers' statements, as I wrote on Tuesday, are "devoid of content" and do nothing to lay out a new approach on the key elements of our economy and society. The full spring statement and draft stability programme documents comprise together

simply a history of economic austerity and a projection for its essential continuance to 2020. It remains incredibly sad that the Labour Party has seemingly completely tied its fortunes to Fine Gael in the economic planning to 2020. The failure of both Ministers to chart a new way forward is another clear sign that this Government can have no hope of being re-elected.

From the Minister, Deputy Noonan, we learned that a “fiscal space” of €1.2 billion to €1.5 billion has been found courtesy of Mr. Jean-Claude Juncker of “Luxembourg Leaks” fame to provide tax reductions and investment in public services and that the fiscal space will be split 50:50 between tax cuts and expenditure increases in budget 2016. The €600 million to €750 million projected increases for public current expenditure in 2016 represent little more than 1% of gross voted current expenditure and even less of gross current expenditure according to a table in the stability programme update. As there is a fiscal straitjacket imposed on Ireland by the EU six pack and two pack fiscal rules, the outlook in the stability programme projections down to 2020 are equally bleak. Of course, we are assured by the Minister that the annual debt ratio reduction of one twentieth of the difference between the overall level of national debt and the 60% of GDP threshold will be painless because “growth will do the heavy lifting”. There was a mistake in the Minister’s speech in that respect. The continuing total adherence of Fine Gael and Labour in following Fianna Fáil’s betrayal to brutal and unyielding austerity means that major needs of our people now in housing, health and education will go unmet and that new humane and dynamic programmes will not be countenanced by this outgoing conservative Government.

The smug self-congratulating tone of these statements echo the comments of the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Noonan, with respect to the Greek struggle under Syriza, led by Mr. Tsipras and Mr. Varoufakis, to alleviate the colossal debt burden imposed on Greece by its EU and other creditors. Ireland’s debt burden is in the same league as Greece and will remain so under the type of lethargic bookkeeping prescribed for us by the Ministers, Deputies Noonan and Howlin. An earlier Greek Government did Ireland an immense favour by lowering the interest rate on part of the troika debt, which also greatly benefitted us. Recently, the Minister, Deputy Noonan, gave me comparative figures for Greek and Irish national debts in terms of gross national product, GNP, or gross national income, GNI, as overall totals *per capita*. The Minister reported that “at the end of 2013, the general government debt *per capita* figures were €46,950 for Ireland and €28,848 for Greece while the comparable gross national income *per capita* figures were €32,391 and €16,486 for Ireland and Greece respectively. These equate to a debt to GNI percentage of almost 145% for Ireland and 175% for Greece”. Clearly this comparison demonstrates that there remains a shocking burden of debt also on the Irish nation. In the forthcoming general election, the Government’s failure to follow up on the 2011 election promises and the 2012 EU commitment will be a huge reason for its demise.

Both ministerial speeches congratulate each other and the Government on the levels of employment and perceived falls in unemployment. In reality, employment levels have still not reached the pre-crash total of 2.1 million and a huge cohort of workers, approaching 400,000, are part-time, with tens of thousands underemployed with poor wages and conditions and little or no security. The Tánaiste yesterday announced that the number of persons unemployed now stands at 353,000. The headline unemployment rate would be at Greek or Spanish levels if the five full Aviva stadiums of young Irish emigrants had not fled the Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour austerity behemoth since 2009. The Ministers, Deputies Howlin and Noonan, referred to the end of emigration and indicated that young people are now returning to our shores because of our recovering economy. I wonder are they aware of the fact that it took a whole 12 minutes

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for the almost 4,000 Canadian working holiday permits to be snapped up this year as opposed to the seven minutes it took for them to go last year.

It is especially disappointing that the Minister, Deputy Howlin, cannot give us the details of a new capital programme until June. The country needs radical investment in infrastructure, including housing, health, education, public transport and roads, water and sewerage, and coastal defences. The savage cuts in capital investment since 2011 have been most disastrous for social housing. The complete disregard shown towards citizens in need of social housing has been the main driving factor in forcing hundreds of families, including 911 children, into emergency homeless accommodation in the Dublin region alone. The most recent figures from the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, DRHE, revealed there were 411 families in emergency accommodation, 251 of which were headed by single parents and 160 by couples. This means the total of number of adults and children in family emergency accommodation stood at 1,482.

My office is in regular contact with the central placement service of Dublin City Council and Dublin Region Homeless Executive to make representations on behalf of many Dublin Bay North constituents experiencing housing and homelessness issues. As I informed the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Alex White, figures provided to my office show that on any given day between 60 and 80 families are unable to access emergency housing, yet the statements of the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform did not contain one word about this emergency.

House prices have increased this year by 16.8% compared to last year. Coupled with new mortgage rules for first-time buyers, these rising prices mean there will be no affordable homes for first-time buyers, in any case not in the capital and other larger cities. I repeat my earlier question and ask the Minister to explain the reason the Government has not employed financial emergency measures in the public interest legislation to address social housing and rent regulation.

The constraints of the budgetary envelopes implicit in ministerial statements mean that serious austerity continues in our vital health and education services. The health service is failing dramatically, with lengthy waiting lists to see consultants and for diagnostic procedures and treatments. Recruitment to the health service is in crisis and accident and emergency departments continue to be overcrowded and underresourced, while the Minister frequently gives the impression of being an innocent bystander. The additional €65 million in hospital funding announced this spring is welcome, as is news that general practitioner care will be free for children under six years and those over 70 years. Nevertheless, a large number of significant shortcomings persist in the health service, including in disability services for which funding has been cut to the bone.

The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, trumpeted the fact that under this Fine Gael and Labour Party coalition, 150 schools had been built and 1,700 new full-time teachers had been employed. However, the figures he provided on demographic change show that at least 3,500 more primary and secondary school teachers will be required by 2020. The Irish National Teacher Organisation's April-May newsletter, which Deputies received recently, highlighted that more than 500,000 primary school pupils are attending what INTO describes as the "most overcrowded classes in the eurozone", with 76% of children in classes above the EU average, 24% of classes made up of 30 or more students and 66% of classes having between 20 and 29 pupils.

The most shameful aspect of the Government's performance is the ruthless cuts it has made to the means of the most vulnerable citizens who depend mainly on social welfare assistance and benefits. Those in receipt of social welfare payments have endured cuts to child benefit, lone parent's payment, carer's allowance and respite care grants, whereas developers, bankers and the elite have had debts written off and bonuses and contracts awarded to them. At least one quarter of the population hovers slightly above or below normative measures of poverty in society.

I was not surprised by this week's spring economic statement as it was, unfortunately, another example of a conservative Fine Gael Party Government with no vision, backbone or empathy that is backed by a Labour Party which, unfortunately for the Deputies concerned and their local organisations, is facing annihilation in the forthcoming election for turning its back on the very people who voted it into government.

Deputy Billy Timmins: One of the difficulties of modern government is its constant battle with the public relations machine to win hearts and minds. The spring economic statement reflects this battle in many respects. It is a case of "much ado about nothing" in that, following a big build-up and some leaking before the statement was made, we found, when we stripped away the various layers of propaganda, that it contains little of substance.

Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that the underlying figures show a dramatic improvement in the economy. Ireland is clearly in a much better position than it was six or seven years ago. Equally, one must also acknowledge that the Government and its predecessor implemented a programme that was laid down by the troika. It did not simply take driving instructions from the troika, so to speak, but took on the difficult task of implementing the programme. While the vision was framed by outside agencies, it had to be implemented by the previous and current Governments. According to some reports, the previous Government did 70% of the heavy lifting with the current Government responsible for the remainder. I do not know if that figure is accurate and in any case it is irrelevant because the important issue is that both Governments adhered to the troika programme. While it caused great difficulty, the programme was drawn up with a view to obtaining the maximum results with the minimum amount of pain.

Many people have responded to the spring economic statement by accusing the Government of seeking to buy the electorate and sell the country. I am not an apologist for the Government and I will not echo the line taken by my good colleague, Deputy Rabbitte, who asked if this is not what Governments do. However, buying the electorate is a trend that has characterised politics as far back as we can remember. The 1977 election, for example, was bought. I can still hear the words of Colm T. Wilkinson echoing from a loudspeaker at a polling booth in Kilkee as I hitched back home to do my leaving certificate. He was singing a famous song about Fianna Fáil selling the country down the Swanee with a giveaway budget. The impact of Fianna Fáil's approach to the 1977 election is still felt today, especially in local government. Subsequent spending spikes in 2001 and 2006 were decried on several occasions in this House, notably by members of the current Government.

The Government should not go down the road of previous Governments, tempting though that may be, by producing goodies for the electorate. It must do the right thing. While this presents a challenge to the political system in general, it also presents a challenge to the electorate. The Government has promised to split an additional €1.8 billion in revenue - I believe that estimate to be somewhat low - equally between tax reductions and increased expenditure on services. It should be noted, however, that the commitment given by some Opposition par-

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ties to abolish water charges amounts to an attempt to buy the electorate by another means. Everything must be paid for and only a fool believes that things can be obtained for free. Human nature being what it is, however, people like to hear good news and do not like pain. If a message can be dressed up and camouflaged with a nice sugar coating, we cannot resist it. This presents a challenge to all of us, including me. For this reason, I ask members of the public to view with scepticism any commitment to increase expenditure on public services, reduce taxation, increase public sector pay or abolish water charges or property tax and to assess whether the implementation of any such promise would benefit the common good.

I understand it would cost approximately €2.2 billion to restore public sector pay and pensions to the levels that obtained prior to the introduction of emergency legislation. While many people were hurt by cuts, many also understand there was very little choice in the matter. Their pain could have been greatly eased if the cost of services had reduced by a corresponding amount. If, for instance, energy costs, the cost of visiting a general practitioner or obtaining legal advice had declined, people would be slightly more willing to accept decreases in their pay. Such reductions have not been forthcoming, however. We must reform all the sectors that impose charges, many of which can be attributed to increased bureaucracy. I read a book by a Peruvian economist on this issue. From his studies, he noted a strong correlation between the numbers in the legal profession and additional costs to administration.

I am a member of a new party, Renua, which is examining the water charges issue. In December 2013, I outlined the difficulties that would arise if we were to go down the road we did with water charges. I equated it to falling into a burning furnace out of which it is impossible to get. If one stays, then one gets burned, meaning there is no solution.

The natural inclination is to deconstruct the whole set-up for water charges. I do not know if that can happen. I do agree, however, that we must have a system in place that makes people respect and realise the fact we pay for water anyway. In doing that, those who conserve water and act responsibly have to be rewarded. Where there is abuse and waste, measures have to be in place to ensure that does not happen.

The issue of Siteserv has taken up much media space in recent times. I do not know what the report will throw up. However, a point I articulated in a debate here in 2011 is that IBRC and to a lesser extent Anglo Irish Bank sold off loan books at a price that may have not got the full value for the State. Whenever the formal review is carried out, I hope this will be examined extensively. It is particularly disheartening that having gone through all the difficulties with the banks over the past several years, we may have added to our woes by underselling ourselves in some cases.

Very little visionary policy was laid out in the spring statement. The usual statistics were rolled out but nothing concrete. People who access the health service have varying and conflicting reports of how it is. My understanding is the HSE is in a shambles but there is no major strategic plan as to how this will be turned around. The hospital groupings were launched several years ago to great fanfare but there has been no great movement in this.

If Ministers spent more time doing their job rather than trying to sell themselves, we would be far better off. I exclude the Minister opposite, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan, from that. Too much time is spent by Ministers pushing out their own image. The most important job a Minister has is to manage his or her Department. Several Ministers have fallen down and a few have been moved on as a result of not doing this.

The term league tables for schools caused much difficulty a few years ago. We need a system of measurement of schools' performance. If one is going to book a hotel, go on a foreign holiday or go to a restaurant for a meal, one is going to check out if one will get value for money. However, we are expected to send children to schools for which we have no idea as to how they are performing. There has to be a mechanism to measure their performance.

Our party, Renua, has several other worthwhile proposals. We propose a credit network system with peer-to-peer lending through an invoice system. We want to see tax changes for the self-employed, equitable USC rates and an opt-in to PRSI to enable access to support for businesses which run into difficulty. We also want to see automatic enrolment in pension schemes for all employees.

We want to see e-citizenship developed for all documents, forms and payments processes, as well as a credit system for the unbanked. Many people complain about the banks and the difficulties they got us into but some 20% of the population cannot even access a bank. Will the Minister for Finance put in place a system with the banks whereby people can access small loans of between €500 to €1,000? This would consign moneylenders to history.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I welcome the opportunity for the House to debate economic policy and the Government's plans to secure our hard-won economic recovery over the past four years. Since my appointment as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade ten months ago, I have been directly involved in promoting our country's trade and export markets, working with embassies, agencies and businesses in Ireland and around the world.

In 2011, the Taoiseach summoned ambassadors and consuls general to Dublin. He then charged the 79 heads of mission with the task of engaging with international media, political and business leaders to deliver the key messages that Ireland was meeting its troika bailout package targets, was returning to economic growth, that the Government would protect Ireland's corporation tax rate and that Ireland was the place to be for companies that wanted innovation, scientific research, cutting edge technology.

Earlier this year, I brought together all our ambassadors once again. This time the message was different. Ireland is now a politically and economically stable country, back at the heart of the EU. It has successfully exited the bailout, unemployment has fallen from a peak of over 15% to 10% and continues to fall. Last year GDP rose by 4.8%, making Ireland the fastest growing economy in Europe. International confidence is evidenced in our bond yields. A ten-year bond in October sold for a 1.63% yield compared to 15% yields in July 2011. The deficit has fallen from €22 billion in 2010 to a forecasted €5 billion in 2015. Ireland is open for investment and an investment opportunity here is like no other in the EU or beyond.

It is clear our core messages about Ireland are getting through while the relentless promotion of Ireland overseas by Ministers and ambassadors is most effective. Several weeks ago this was brought home to me when John McCain, the influential US Senator, approached me at an event to congratulate the Irish people and Government on our economic recovery. This is a message that I hear time and time again from foreign Ministers, Heads of Government and politicians, as well as business leaders when I travel abroad.

As well as their important work in connecting with international media and opinion formers, our missions play a key role in trade promotion, working with State agencies to organise trade

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missions and open doors to businesses. Local market teams are in place in priority markets, headed by the ambassador and comprising representatives of the embassy and relevant State agencies. The export trade council, which I chair, reviews their local market plans. All of this work is paying off as the latest figures show that exports by Irish firms have reached a new all-time high of €18.6 billion.

The hard-fought and hard-won turnaround is often subject of analysis in the international media. Indeed, *Forbes* last year ranked Ireland the fourth best country in the world in which to do business across eleven categories and the number one country for personal freedom. This is some turnaround from the period in which Ireland was locked out of international markets, broke, desperate and at the mercy of the IMF and our partners in the EU to bail us out of a catastrophic economic meltdown. We never want to be back there again. The dedicated work of my Department and our mission network will continue to consolidate our economic recovery.

I represent a constituency that was in many ways at the sharp edge of the economic collapse, representative of many communities around the country affected by the crash and its aftermath. County Laois is firmly located in the commuter belt. During the so-called boom years, many young families bought homes in the county at vastly inflated prices. The crash left a legacy of negative equity, ghost estates, unemployment, pay cuts and challenging taxes and charges, particularly for the many public and civil servants who live and work in and around Portlaoise. Gradually, as the economy recovers, confidence is returning slowly to the people, with the roads and main streets busy again.

Ghost estates were tackled and are being systematically dealt with. Job opportunities are opening up. Pupils now learn in new schools and school extensions are being completed. Laois is set to benefit from Ireland's Ancient East initiative with a number of our tourism attractions being included on the trail.

However, there is still much to be done for most people in my constituency to feel the recovery in their daily lives. That is why the spring economic statement can be a source of optimism for many people in County Laois, the midlands generally and other regions.

Public servants have made an enormous contribution to our economic recovery, including gardaí, prison officers, teachers, nurses, civil servants and other public servants. As the economy recovers, we can now look at gradual, sustainable pay recovery for public servants from 2016 onwards, linked to continuing reforms to improve public service efficiency and effectiveness.

Likewise, this year's regional Action Plan for Jobs will be of great value in the midlands by identifying some of the barriers to job creation and developing solutions of a new and exciting nature. The local enterprise office, which I had the pleasure of opening last year, is already active in assisting local businesses. Government plans to end unfair tax treatment for the self-employed and small businesses will also boost confidence in the regions.

Farmers feel good about the future with CAP reform, new markets and the abolition of dairy quotas taking effect. It is essential, therefore, that economic recovery is spread as evenly as possible throughout the State. I am looking forward with interest to the regional Action Plan for Jobs in the midlands region. I refer specifically to the need to ensure economic progress in the midland counties of Longford, Westmeath, Offaly and Laois. It is essential that economic recovery is seen to be spread as evenly as possible throughout the State but with particular

reference to regions that have been most disadvantaged. In my constituency alone, 4,000 construction workers lost their jobs directly as a result of the property collapse.

I am confident that the changes and initiatives introduced by this Government to date and further planned reforms as well as the economic proposals set out by my colleague, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, in the spring economic statement, and the Action Plan for Jobs spearheaded by my colleague, the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, will deliver a comprehensive recovery across the country, ultimately benefitting all of our people.

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): I wish to welcome the spring economic statement. I have been around this House for quite a long time and one of the things that always frustrated me, particularly when I was spokesman on finance, was the extraordinarily opaque way in which budgets were put together. Typically, budgets were produced in massive secrecy; so much so, that if the slightest information got out, a person's career was on the line.

We have seen many cases where Ministers pulled rabbits out of the hat on budget day, often to the long-term detriment of the country. Decisions were made on budget day that were poorly researched and prepared. I remember the decentralisation programme and many tax reliefs that were not thought through in a way that would have made them sustainable. Neither were they circulated to other Departments so that the best information could be brought to bear. There was no chance for the public to participate in debating or shaping the priorities to be set.

We are successively moving away from that opaque way of setting budgets, which is an important development. The budgetary system has improved in many ways in recent years. For the first time, the comprehensive spending review moved away from the traditional manner of adding on a percentage every year. No budget ever contemplated a root and branch reform or the alternatives. It was a question of getting a little bit of an increase in the budget, but that was no way to run any programme.

We now see an increasing emphasis on the impact of, and outcomes stemming from, individual programmes. Through the new Estimates procedure, Deputies get a chance to examine how well various programmes are performing. They can also make judgments on their impact. The spring economic statement is a further step forward. It adds to procedures such as the pre-legislative scrutiny that seek to treat the Oireachtas seriously. It allows Deputies to consider options in the coming years and how we can best shape the options available to us. The spring economic statement provides material about the resources available to us, as well as how and where we should deploy them. It gives Deputies a chance to engage seriously in shaping future choices.

I particularly welcome the forthcoming process whereby the public will have a chance to propose ideas for the forthcoming budget. People have made extraordinary sacrifices to get to the point where we have budgetary stability and employment growth. People want to be assured that the sacrifices they have made will not be squandered by decisions that would not copper-fasten the strength of the economy and its potential to grow. It is absolutely right that people should be able to participate in this process to solidly shape future options.

I am surprised at the Opposition's reaction to the spring economic statement. It has been singularly disinterested in seeking to engage in such a debate. Many Opposition contributions

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this week have featured lists of things that should be done. We need to move away from long, uncosted lists and focus instead on opportunities that can be delivered.

Employment is another important area. I regard the employment journey as one where we are half way on a very difficult road. Back in 2011, we took on an economy and the only thing on people's minds was whether their job would be the next one to go. As the Minister, Deputy Charles Flanagan, said, we were locked out of borrowing markets and our banks were in free-fall. Businesses that had been built up over a lifetime, or over generations, were wiped out in a couple of months. Over 300,000 jobs were lost, people were facing into emigration and all their hopes and dreams had been shattered.

We have had to work really hard to deal with this. I acknowledge that the heroes of this recovery are the enterprises and workers of this country who stepped up to the plate. They went to remote markets and built an export-led recovery for us. That is evident in today's Enterprise Ireland figures. Over 3,000 companies that participate in Enterprise Ireland programmes are now sending €18.6 billion worth of exports across the world. The highest growth is in emerging markets. That is the sort of enterprise base we need to build in new and sustainable sectors.

I must also acknowledge the major role the public service has played in delivering this change. People forget that the public sector has been reduced by 10%, yet we are treating more patients, educating more pupils, and supporting more companies to build enterprises and go abroad. Many people have radically changed the way they do things in order to facilitate that. My own Department has revised many of its institutional structures to make them leaner and more effective. That represents a huge change.

We can now realistically set a target of achieving sustainable full employment within the lifetime of the next government. I believe that we can have full employment by 2018, built on sustainable sectors and not on a building boom that will vanish no sooner than it arrives. Nonetheless, that is a huge challenge.

The spring economic statement clearly shows that the full employment target will not just fall into our lap. We will have to adopt further changes in the way we do things. Business as usual with no policy changes will not deliver it for us. We face major challenges in new areas. For example, the war for talent will be crucial if we are to deliver on that target. Deputy Ó Cuív will know that from his own travels in the United States and elsewhere. We have the capacity to build our own enterprises to world-class standards and to attract some of the most ambitious companies in the world to develop from an Irish base. To continue to do that in the next decade we will have to develop new skills, have an education system that is much more responsive to innovation and use technology to develop the way people are taught but also build incubators and build entrepreneurship within their four walls. We need to be able to share the innovation that is possible with companies and grow companies out of that environment. That is a massive challenge in the education sector.

It depressed me when I heard some prominent leaders of the trade unions in the education sector say recently that they need more pay but that there could be no more talk of productivity. Productivity in that environment, which is the boiler house of the future, is about better outcomes for our children and better job opportunities for them. To turn their backs on change and improving a system that is pivotal to where we want to get as a nation is selling short the challenge we face.

Growth in jobs cannot be taken for granted. The Action Plan for Jobs process has proven that if we adopt a whole of Government approach in terms of getting all Departments focusing on enterprise and employment as a challenge, setting targets and monitoring those targets as to their capacity and ability to deliver on time on changes that are necessary, it creates a great spirit around a national priority but also a great momentum.

I have sat in this House for many years and seen strategies produced by Governments. Governments have never wanted for ambition, but they have never had that focus on implementation that we have delivered. They have never been able to work across silos and make sure the resources and planning in an education Department are aligned with the resources and planning in an enterprise or a finance Department so that collectively we can develop sectors in a coherent way.

As we look to the future and the challenges of creating employment, increasingly it will be our capacity to build those systems and networks that support growing employment. It will be that mix in terms of the infrastructure, and we all know the role of broadband and the way in which technology is developing, the so-called Internet of things. In other words, we will have smart products that, for example, will allow people monitor their own health. It is no longer a question of just going to the doctor and taking a pill. People will be able to monitor their progress and respond in a preventive way. Those sort of technologies are available to be developed in Ireland but we have to get our manufacturing system talking to our health delivery system so that they can be test bedded in an Irish environment.

This spring statement has been portrayed as Government celebrating where we have got to but I see it as setting out huge challenges on the road ahead. What is optimistic about it, however, is that we now have a proven track record of being able to deliver the reforms within the public service and build enterprises that are sustainable. As the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, said, we now have to take the next step and consider how we maximise the opportunity in every region and build the clusters we need. It is a time of important input into this national debate, and I am glad to have an opportunity to contribute.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak in this debate but I am very disappointed with the tone of the Government's contribution, which seems more focused on a propaganda narrative to do with the next election than a serious analysis of what went right and what went wrong in the past 20 years.

The Government claims credit for everything. It inherited a ruined economy. The entire country was in a mess. We could not access the markets and, according to its own narrative, single-handedly and without any world events impinging on it, it saved us from ruination. It is a good story, but it shows the trite level to which Irish politics has sunk.

The reality, however, is much more complex but it does not suit the Government's narrative to say that. I have always believed, in government or in opposition, that when a Government does something right I should say it is right and when a Government does something wrong, I should say it is wrong. It is a very serious issue in politics if people start believing they have all the wisdom, they are always right and that nobody else has got a clue. We know it is not that simple.

If we look back over the past 20 years we see that two things happened in parallel, and to a certain extent one fed the other. There was a significant growth in the 1990s up to 2009 in

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both our indigenous economy and in the multinational companies. All throughout that period, companies that are household names came to Ireland and set up their bases here. It would be fair to say that if the Minister, Deputy Bruton, visited multinationals such as Google, Facebook and Intel he would find that most if not all of them had made their investment decisions long before he came into Government because he knows, and he knows I know, that it takes about five or six years from the time a Government starts looking at an investment decision before it makes it, not to mind setting up the factories.

We had genuine growth but we also had, and I would be the first to admit it, a bubble effect in the construction industry. Part of it was fuelled by the growth in that people needed houses and services, and as the Minister knows, there was a massive demand for new houses. Some of it was fuelled by cheap European money that came around the periphery, and if we had a problem in Ireland they also had a problem in Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Spain and Portugal. I accept that some of it was home grown and that, as I was in government at the time, serious mistakes were made but to think that the downturn in the economy and the problems on the markets were caused solely by decisions made in Ireland is simplistic and wrong. The Minister knows that.

The big issue that arose in 2010 was that bond yields rose dramatically across Europe and the euro itself came into question, not because of Ireland but because of much wider events. In particular, issues in Greece had a massive effect on bond yields here. We also had the flight of capital from the banks.

We also had an exacerbation of the downturn due to the overheated construction industry. It was like a bungee jump in that the higher it went up, the lower it fell when it collapsed. In terms of what happened, the building industry collapsed further than it needed to have done to remain sustainable, and having gone down so far it had to rise again because we are out of houses in all our major urban areas. There is the biggest housing crisis I have ever seen in my time in politics in Galway. We know about the crisis in Dublin. We have to build, and that means re-employing people in the building industry. If a reasonable amount of building had been done in the past four or five years, we would not be experiencing the current housing crisis. As sure as day follows night, once we had taken the big decisions, and this Government implemented them, there would be always a recovery.

What is often overlooked, and the Minister knows this from his work as Minister with responsibility for employment, is that during the downturn we were singularly fortunate in that the real economy, the productive economy, did not fail.

The Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation will admit himself that during his time in office, no more than in our time in the late noughties as they are called, the number collapses of major productive industries has been relatively small. In fact, foreign direct investment-based employment has remained solid. Agriculture has remained solid. Industries that should have been very prone to difficulty in the downturn such as the forestry industry have actually managed to adjust and stay out there in the markets. Parallel to the collapse in the domestic building economy, we were very lucky that the real economy stayed sound. That is a fairer assessment of what happened than this propaganda version the Government goes on with all the time.

As a society, we face huge challenges. What we get, however, is non-interaction with the Opposition, sloganising, boastful statements and very little debate. I agree with the Minister that reform of how we do business in the House is needed. I do not agree with him that reform

has been as thorough as he asserts. It is not as all-encompassing as he said. When I was in government, I believed, as I still do, that the way we do business in the House, particularly around Estimates and budgets, lent itself to “Alice in Wonderland” politics. Let us start with the big decisions first. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, stood up here the other day and said there would be €1.5 billion to give away every year over the next five years. I am glad he knows that. No one else can be sure of it. As we know, the world in which we live is an uncertain place. Maybe it will be more and maybe it will be less, but he has decided to give €1.5 billion back in one way or another. He said it will be half in expenditure and half in tax cuts. He has not said how this is calculated and whether we should have a debate on whether the first decision - the big decision - is the right policy. I would like to tease out what he has said a little. It always seems to me that Sinn Féin, the Deputies behind me on the Independent benches and the Government have one thing in common. They believe in continuous borrowing on current account. They believe in giving it out before they have it to give out and in continuing to borrow while putting the burden into the future. I would like to ask the Minister if the Government is willing to say that, excluding capital investment to which I will come, and taking into account interest and all current payments, it is not prudent for a household and a Government to spend more on day-to-day expenditure than it takes in in taxation. I would like some day for the Government to spell out whether that is its policy. Will it make it a priority to get there so that it is sustainable into the future?

On the other hand, I also believe there should be a major capital programme of investment in necessary infrastructure. It appears the European Union agrees with me. Contrary to popular opinion, the Government cannot create jobs, but it can create the circumstances in which jobs are created. It can also ensure that jobs are created in a regionally balanced way. Therefore, in line with what the European Union has indicated, there is a great deal of sense in borrowing money as long as it is for capital investment. We should have a comprehensive infrastructure programme. It should look to future needs which would include ensuring that every part of the country is accessible by a good road system. One of the great legacies of the good years about which one hears people talk all the time is the improvement in the roads where they have been improved. We have quite a good motorway system and an excellent one compared to what we had 20 years ago. However, in many parts of the country the road infrastructure is still totally deficient. We need public transport. If we do not provide it, this city will seize up, as will many others around the country. We need a power system that meets the needs of industries big and small, local and national. Those of us who have worked in industry know this is vital. For many small companies, it simply means getting a supply of three-phase electricity. For others it means major power lines.

We need a comprehensive plan to bring whatever is required to farmers, small businesses and large industries. We need fibre in every business and home, not this 30 Mb thing. We are on a small island and need fibre in every home. We need a proper integrated national water system. We need proper sewerage services. A great deal of infrastructure is needed. Of course, if one borrowed the money and invested it in a proper, comprehensive programme, particularly now that prices are competitive, one would create growth in the economy. The growth would occur in the long term on foot of the infrastructure and in the short term through the quick return to the Exchequer from building. Most of the requirements and materials will be home based. The labour will be home based and sand, gravel, timber etc. are all home produced. I am stunned that in all of the talk, there has been no mention of prioritising the needs of every region from the overcrowded cities to the rural areas like Deputy Harrington’s, where it is easy for him to get to Cork and just west of it, but then he has torture all the way back to Castletownbere. We

need to take a global approach.

The second thing that becomes obvious is that the Government is trying to get involved in a scatter gun approach to buying the electorate. It gives tax relief to those who will vote for it, but not to where it is needed. It will reduce the top rate of tax, but not look at the people who are in the biggest trouble. It will increase the public wage bill.

I was interested in what the Minister, Deputy Bruton, had to say about productivity. I am very interested to know if he is going to say to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, that we need to ensure that service delivery in this country is efficient for the money we pay. I would like to see the low paid public servants, who have been particularly hard hit, get a lift. Will percentage rises be given back? Will the person on €100,000 getting 2% back get €2,000 and will the person on €20,000 getting 2% back get €400? Is that the way the Government will do it? It is absolutely vital that the Government makes a clear statement of intent on how, in principle, it will tackle its expenditure benefits.

There is nothing significant in the spring statement to deal with the problem of those who cannot get houses or those who have houses but who cannot afford to pay for them. It would be easy enough to deal with the problem of the variable mortgage if this Government had the will, but it is set on selling AIB and nothing else. We should hold onto AIB and our shares in Bank of Ireland until every penny that we put into all the banks has been recovered by the people of Ireland. All of the investment should be recovered. I do not know why the Government is in such a hurry to dispose of AIB, but it is doing it on the backs of borrowers with a variable mortgage rate. If the Minister really wanted to reduce the variable mortgage rate, he could tell the banks that if they want to get the at-source tax relief which is paid directly to them and which makes it possible for mortgage holders to pay their mortgages, they will have to reduce their variable rates to 3.5%. Can the Minister imagine the huge lift that would give to all of the hard pressed mortgage payers who are finding it difficult, if not impossible, to pay their mortgages? They would get a letter from the bank saying that it is delighted to tell them they have got a double gain, that is, a reduction in the rate meaning the tax relief is more significant in terms of the mortgage. Fianna Fáil has also proposed raising the amount of mortgage relief available. This would make it an even greater gain to the most hard pressed families in the country.

The Minister talks about having a serious debate but we have nothing but propaganda. I am glad the Government took the four year plan on board. I regret the good parts of it the Government has put to the side, such as reforming the legal profession, and the abolition of mortgage interest supplement. At least the Government, having eventually come to realise it was the only show in town, has implemented the broad parameters of the plan. The Government is falling into the trap that it accuses Fianna Fáil of falling into. That is the trap of believing its own propaganda and an unwillingness to stand back and look at both the good and the bad and the challenges in the future and to deal with things in a serious fashion in this House.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Noel Harrington who is sharing time with Deputies Seán Kenny and Michael Conaghan.

Deputy Noel Harrington: I very much welcome the opportunity to speak on the spring economic statement. The first thing we must acknowledge is that it is not a budget. It is a timely economic statement and a necessary development which outlines our current situation and future development and policy opportunities. It is an opportunity to set out our stall for the next couple of years. It is true that much has been achieved over the past two to three years.

The unemployment rate has gone from 15% to 10% according to the figures published yesterday by the CSO. More than 140,000 people have left the live register to take up employment in the past 12 months. Almost 100,000 new jobs have been created since 2011. There are more people at work now than there has been for years. This is evidenced by the increase in the Exchequer returns at a time when, after the last budget, the tax rate was reduced marginally. More people are at work and they are earning more. There is a recovery. It is fragile, but it exists.

The rate of emigration has declined and the gap between those leaving and those returning is narrower than it has been in almost a decade. Net outward migration is due to cease next year. We look forward to welcoming home many of those people who left our areas, constituencies and parishes over the past seven or eight years and to giving them the opportunity to say Ireland is a place that can welcome them back, provide them and their families with a living and sustain them and their communities beyond 2020.

The public finances have been stabilised and this economy is currently the fastest growing economy in Europe with almost 5% growth this year and very sustainable growth projected at approximately 3.25% to 3.5% per annum up to 2020. This assumes that there will be no international setbacks but it is a relatively stable projection. The deficit will fall below 3% this year and we look forward to not having to borrow for current expenditure next year.

That is the context in which these statements are being made and which gives me pleasure to take part in these spring statements. However, where to from here? There is not a single Member in this House naive enough to believe that all is rosy in the garden, that all is well and that things will be great for our country in 2016 and beyond without addressing some huge challenges which remain. These will only be addressed by determined, stable, cohesive and sustainable policies and decisions taken now, next October and in the years beyond. Some incredibly difficult issues remain and these will have to be addressed in the coming months and years if we are to fashion this recovery for all sectors of our society.

We have an enormous problem in this country with jobless households. This did not arrive by accident. It is not a vagary of Irish society. This was a result of ill-thought out and lazy policy decisions taken since the late 1990s to the advent of the economic crash. When we saw a social problem in this country, because we had it we threw money at it. We abandoned sections of our society to poverty traps and dependency on the State. This was ill-conceived and has manifested itself as a stubborn issue that refuses to go away. We will have to address future policy proposals in the next few months, the next budget and the next few years. We need to make work pay for those already at work. We need to make work pay more than welfare by continuing to close down welfare traps. We need to break the cycle of intergenerational joblessness and poverty by helping vulnerable people who can and wish to get back to work. Poverty, including child poverty, remains an issue, but the most immediate way to address this is to create work that will pay more than social protection and by making the recovery a nationwide one.

As Deputy Ó Cuív rightly mentioned, rural Ireland has lost a generation. Much of this is well understood, but the reason it lost a generation is to be found in irresponsible Fianna Fáil led Government decisions and policies. These decisions and policies created a pyramid scheme in the construction sector which inevitably collapsed. There is not a parish in the country that has not lost a generation of its most active young men and women to foreign shores because there was no other alternative. These people had no other skill. The only world they knew was the construction sector. It abandoned them and they had to abandon Ireland and leave. It is for this reason that rural demand is at a low ebb and there is such pressure on small schools. The latter

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is not due to a lack of investment, but to a lack of children.

We have lost 20 or 24 post offices in the past four years compared with the almost 1,000 lost in the preceding decade. Business has been falling because the younger generation has left. In the years to 2020, our challenge is to create a rural economy and society that is welcoming and can support those people and their families. Deputy Ó Cuív rightly stated that this could only be achieved through investment in ICT services. I am pleased that the national broadband plan, which is supported by almost €800 million, will provide public investment and deliver a minimum of 30 Mbps to every household by 2020. This is crucial. We will not attract back the brightest and best if we cannot support them in driving an economy.

Many reports to be published in the next year or two will have a major impact on short-term policy. We expect the report of the low pay commission to be published in mid-July. The signing of the JobPath contracts will provide in-depth work on a case-by-case basis for 100,000 of our long-term unemployed and, I hope, deliver major results in returning that cohort of vulnerable people to the labour market. This is a significant challenge.

The roll-out of the housing assistance payment is ongoing. People should not be afraid that taking up work will lose them their housing supports. As they earn more and the economy recovers, those supports will remain and be reflected in their household incomes.

We look forward to the publication of the Mangan report and to the conclusion of the expert group on child care. Investment in underfunded child care services is a major issue and will address one of our greatest poverty traps, that being, the lone parents allowance system.

We have made considerable advances and west Cork has benefited. Almost 12% fewer people are unemployed in Cork county than there was in 2014, equating to 14.5% fewer in Bandon, 10% fewer in Bantry, almost 15% fewer in Clonakilty, almost 10.5% fewer in Kinsale and 10.5% fewer in Skibbereen. The chambers of commerce got these figures from the Central Statistics Office.

The message I would like to see being put forward in the spring statement is that a fragile recovery is under way and major decisions are yet to be taken. There is an alternative. Those on the Opposition benches are providing them, namely, more of the same by throwing more money into dependency and the abandonment of families and creating more poverty traps. That mistake was made in the late 1990s, but the Opposition continues propagating the same outdated policies. Those policies created significant issues for the country and will not allow for a recovery across all sectors.

I thank the Acting Chairman for this opportunity and look forward to the many reports in the coming months that will address social protection, in particular, and poverty traps.

Deputy Seán Kenny: I welcome the opportunity to contribute on the spring statement. It is not next year's budget and does not contain the sort of detail or specifics of a budget. Rather, it is a picture of the economy at this point in time. It is about stating where we are now as an economy and how that compares with from where we have come. It is about stating where we want to go as an economy and a society.

The spring statement is a first step indicating the Government's strategy for managing the economy until the year 2020 and making the most of the economic upturn that is under way so that opportunities for our people, society and economy can be maximised. The economic

upswing is at a point where the Government has the flexibility to change and improve some of the factors that people want addressed. As legislators, we cannot implement every initiative we would like. We do not have the resources to do so. In the next budget, the Government will have between €1.2 billion and €1.5 billion extra, which can be used in a sensible and sustainable way, given the strength of the performance of the economy at the moment. We must manage this extra money. Debate will be held in full public view in the national economic dialogue in Dublin Castle early this summer.

When I returned to the Dáil in 2011 after more than a decade away, I wondered what exactly we would see in 2015. Would the situation be as dark as it was in 2011 or better? I am happy to say that the situation is much better than it was in 2011. The Department of Finance is predicting 4% growth in the economy this year. If this prediction is met, Ireland will once again rate as the fastest growing economy in the EU. Consumer spending is up, as is business investment. Our national debt as a percentage of GDP is falling quickly and our economic targets have been exceeded. Most important, employment is continuing to rise and unemployment is continuing to fall.

In the last budget, the Government reduced the marginal rate of tax for people earning less than €70,000 and increased the level of income at which the marginal rate was payable. This will, broadly speaking, continue to be the approach in the taxation package for 2016. Low and middle-income earners will still be the priority, the low paid will continue to be removed from the USC net and taxes for those on middle incomes will be lowered progressively. We will implement an increase in the national minimum wage if that is recommended by the low pay commission.

The crisis greatly reduced the scope to improve services. It was a case of protecting them as best as we could while fighting to regain our economic sovereignty. In this year's budget, we made provision for more nurses, teachers and special needs assistants, SNAs. We are recruiting new gardaí for the first time since the collapse of the economy. All of this has come about as a new way of managing economic policy. The old-style Fianna Fáil way of spending and splurging during an unsustainable boom before cutting drastically when the boom stopped had to cease.

When I was a Deputy in the 1990s, the rainbow coalition got the economy back on track. Fianna Fáil took over power in 1997. By the time it had to give up the reins in 2011, it had made such a disaster of the economy that the troika of the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the IMF needed to be called in. This Government has seen off the troika and the reckless Fianna Fáil economic model. The new model is one of prudence and forward planning.

Despite Sinn Féin's protestations to the contrary, it knows and understands what the Government is doing. It is in government in the North and knows what it is to govern. It knows what it is like to have to make cuts because it has done so. It is implementing cuts made by the Tory government governing from Westminster. Sinn Féin is getting on with things, and without a protest, at what it is expected to do as Members of the devolved Assembly. The political approach of Sinn Féin is to propose one set of politics in the Twenty-six Counties while implementing the exact opposite in the other Six Counties.

Our country is in a much better place than it was four years ago when the Government took office. However, despite the positivity, the recovery is not yet secure. There may be setbacks,

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whether at home or abroad. We hope this will not happen but it might and a good Government will be prepared for it. Fianna Fáil was never prepared for it. Sinn Féin would not be either.

The country needs stable government and responsible management of our economy. It needs parties in government which, even if there are bumps in the road at some points, are able and willing to face up to the social challenges of our time. We do not need and cannot afford the instability and mismanagement that would be inevitable if Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin were in government.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Deputies Shane Ross and Paul Murphy are sharing time.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank the Acting Chairman. The debate so far has moved along utterly predictable lines. It is somewhat surprising to see so much Dáil time given to a debate on the economy given that we discuss it in more detail and in a more specialised way every week. The reason for it is quite simple, namely, that we are now in an election situation and this is the type of framework in which the Government wishes to operate for the next year, which will give it an opportunity, from time to time, to embark upon a kind of propaganda and media frenzy which it hopes will lift it into an electoral victory in 2016.

Having said that, it is only fair to make some concessions to the Government parties for the situation in which they landed themselves in 2011. They were unlucky when they came into power in that they inherited the worst economic situation in the history of the State, as Ministers constantly remind us. They had a mountain to climb, which was left to them by their predecessors. They were willing to do that, in accordance with their duty as public representatives. They won the election and inherited the poisoned chalice. They were unlucky, too, to face regimes at the ECB and in government in Germany which would not countenance any let-up in austerity. However, it also is true that the Government pandered to the desires of the bureaucrats in Brussels. Indeed, much of what this Administration has done and for which it is now claiming credit, if there is any credit to be claimed, was dictated not by it but from Brussels.

The Government is saying now that it has done extraordinarily well in a very short time and quoting figures to us which are supposed to prove that. While this Administration was unlucky initially, as I said, there is no question that it has got lucky recently. A lot of the extraordinary export and growth figures we are seeing is down to two factors, namely, the strength of the dollar and the strength of sterling. Those factors explain, to a great extent, why our growth rate is higher than that in the rest of Europe. It is, in short, because of our dependence on the United Kingdom and United States for exports. We have exploited that situation very skilfully and there is great credit due to those companies whose exports have increased by up to 10%, according to figures released this morning. That is a superb performance by our export companies but it has come about largely because of the happy fact that the dollar and sterling have been so strong and the euro so weak. That has absolutely nothing to do with the Government.

On the assumption, one can only presume, that the dollar and sterling will remain at the same or similar rates into the future, the Government has made some extraordinarily brazen forecasts which go out to 2020. That is madness and nobody has confidence in those forecasts. It is not that there is any suggestion of deliberate dishonesty but simply that nobody believes for a moment that it is possible to forecast five years ahead. We cannot tell what is going to happen in that timeframe and it is simply not feasible to base an economic strategy on that type of assumption. However, that is exactly what the Government is doing. We are now seeing the

beginning of an auction politics based on fantasy figures which will go on for up to a year. It is the oldest trick in the world and what Fianna Fáil has always done. It is what all governments do in an effort to be re-elected. Those on the other side of the House who championed austerity and fiscal rectitude and claimed to stand for balancing the budgets, not exaggerating growth and avoiding extravagance are breaking their own ideological declarations by making forecasts which are bogusly optimistic and over which nobody could stand. The simple fact is that the lucky factors upon which the forecasts are based are reversible. Is the Government telling us the dollar will not fall by 10% in the next ten years? Is it telling us it can predict what will happen with sterling and the euro? It simply cannot know any of that.

In the declarations he has made, the Minister for Finance has spoken very eloquently about the proposed privatisation of Allied Irish Banks. The State owns 99.8% of AIB and the Government is determined, for some reason, to raise some of its funds from the privatisation of the bank. This proposal should be subject to a serious reconsideration in the light of what we have seen in recent days. If the Minister decides to privatise AIB, he is undoubtedly giving the green light to a new cartel in Irish banking. Despite what he is saying, we have seen for ourselves in the past few days what is happening in the sector. Ulster Bank, Bank of Ireland and AIB, which is owned by the taxpayers, have given the Minister the two fingers. They have all told him either to wait, which is a euphemism for “go jump in a lake”, or simply that they will not take their boot off the necks of standard variable-rate mortgage holders.

How can we allow people and institutions that behave in that way to be freed out to persecute their customers in the way in which they are doing? Already, with the Minister in charge, they are defying his wishes. Even with the State as a 99.8% shareholder, he is being told AIB will do what it likes. That bank has decided to continue to screw its share of the 300,000 customers with standard variable-rate mortgages if it so wishes, and the other banks have followed suit. What we have here is a cartel encouraged by a Government policy based on a strategy of having two pillar banks. That policy created a duopoly. Duopolies become cartels and cartels take on the customer. It is not worth raising the small amount the Minister will get from AIB if it means having to allow these people to run amok in the banking and financial jungle which awaits them out there. He must take a lesson from recent days. He must take these guys by the scruff of the neck and tell them he will not tolerate their stance and they must reduce the rates.

The Minister had an absolutely heaven-sent opportunity in the past two days to do exactly that when he cast his vote at the AGMs of Bank of Ireland and AIB. That vote was influential in the case of Bank of Ireland and absolutely dominating in the case of AIB. He chose to vote for the re-election of the entire bank board in both cases, including members like Richie Boucher and Archie Kane at Bank of Ireland and David Duffy at AIB. Worse still, he voted for the payment of these people’s remuneration. It must be asked if he is in their pockets.

The chairman of AIB was given an increase of 33% over his predecessor last year. Imagine the Minister voting for a non-executive chairman of a bankrupt bank to get a 33% increase while others who that bank is persecuting - 130,000 of them in that case - are being fleeced. The Minister wants to approve an increase for the person at the top while this is going on. That is completely unacceptable. In the Bank of Ireland’s case the Minister appears also to have voted for a €490,000 package for its governor. That is €10,000 a week. The AIB chairman is only getting €1,000 a day, which the Minister approved, while the Governor of the Bank of Ireland is getting nearly €10,000 a week. A stop must be put to that and if the only way to do that is to stop the privatisation, the Minister should stop it.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government in preparing its spring statement was perhaps reading some of the works of the 19th century English novelist, Samuel Butler, who advised that “the advantage of doing one’s praising for oneself is that one can lay it on so thick and exactly in the right places”. The Government took full advantage in a full week of Dáil time to do exactly that but it is a little disappointed with the public’s response. Those in government do not realise it but the majority of the people do not believe the narrative that a strong recovery is in full flow and that austerity has ended because it is not their daily experience. People do not buy it.

I want to mainly focus on illustrating that people are right not to buy it. They are right to burst the narrative of this strong recovery as a result of the austerity programme implemented by the Government. Before I move on to that I want to raise a few points. The first is an omission on page 18 of the draft stability programme update, which comprises the budgetary projections from 2015 to 2020. In the previous two years of these updates one or two lines were devoted to the primary balance. That is the amount the Government takes in by way of tax revenue minus the amount it spends before it hands over any money to the bondholders. The primary balance in 2013 was a small deficit, in 2014 there was a very small deficit and we were due to have a primary surplus this year. Is it a coincidence that in the year that we are due to have a primary surplus, the primary balance has dropped off the budgetary projections? A line about the primary balance is not included anywhere in the document for the first time in the course of the stability programme updates. Why is it not included? Is it accidental? Were we to have it set out in black and white, and I am speculating here, that the State takes in more in tax revenue than it spends on all public services together, it would highlight very starkly that the Government’s argument and rationalisation of austerity is completely false.

When those in government are interviewed on television and radio and say that the Government needs to implement austerity because we are spending more than we are raising and that the money is being spent on public services, nurses, gardaí and so on, the figures would show that is not true. If one were to calculate the figures, they would highlight, in a graphic way, that we have a primary surplus of about €4 billion and that the only reason austerity is continuing is because we are paying the bondholders at a rate of about €7 billion a year and that is ongoing. We should be under no illusion that austerity has ended with this spring statement or with the coming budgets. We have moved, as Michael Taft, the economist of Unite has said, into phase 2 of austerity. Phase 1 comprised actual real cuts in terms of the amount of money spent on our vital public services. Phase 2 comprises cuts when we take inflation into account.

In terms of public spending, the Government’s projections for next year will see a decline in public spending once we take inflation into account. The Government has made play of the need for investment, with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, saying in his speech it is now time to invest again to meet our infrastructural needs. However, in real terms, investment by the State will fall 1% next year and there is no end to austerity in sight.

I want to mainly focus on challenging the economic forecasts of the Government and the idea that a substantial recovery is taking place, because I do not believe it is. The attitude of most people correct in that there is a recovery taking place and that austerity has worked for those for whom it is meant to work, which is for the rich. It has worked for the bondholders, who are getting €7 billion this year, and for the corporations, which have increased their profits by more than 20% during the course of the crisis. It has worked above all for the super rich in this society, with the richest 300 people having increased their wealth from 2010 to 2014 by

more than 60%, from €50 billion to €84 billion, and with the richest Irish man among them having doubled his wealth in the course of six years, and now holding more than €5 billion.

The people believe there has been no recovery for young people, one in ten of whom has emigrated and with one in five of whom who are still here but unemployed. There has been no recovery for workers who during the course of the crisis have faced declining wages and now face stagnant wages. We have the second highest rate of low pay in the OECD and we have had the spread of zero-hour, low-hour contracts with precarious working conditions. There has been no recovery for the unemployed. The rate of unemployment remains at 10% and if we take under-employment - those who want to work more than they currently are able to work - into account, it is about double that rate. However, even with the rate of decline in unemployment, we are talking about ten years before we reach the levels of employment we had pre-crisis. People are right to think that there is no substantial recovery.

The Government has headline figures that are quite impressive in terms of GDP and GNP but GDP and GNP figures in Ireland are thoroughly distorted. We have to look beyond the figures to see the reality of what is happening in the economy, and the reality is that there is marginal growth at best and that marginal growth is aimed at and taken up by the 1% in our society, as opposed to working class people, small farmers, middle class people, young people, unemployed people and so on. When we look beyond the figures, we see that our GDP is thoroughly distorted. As a result of multinational corporations in Ireland routing profits through this country in order to avoid paying tax elsewhere, it massively distorts the figures. Supposedly, profits in Irish manufacturing are eight times that of the other EU-15 member states. That is not possible. The average Irish worker is not that much better than workers in the other EU-15 member states. It is a sign that the profits are being routed through here from other countries and it is a sign, therefore, that our GDP is over-stated. It is not an accurate reflection of the economy.

GNP figures used to be more accurate but they are no longer accurate because now we have multinational corporations that have their headquarters in Ireland and the reverse process is taking place whereby profits are re-domiciled into Ireland to the tune of €7.5 billion, or 5% of GDP in 2012, which again inflates our GNP figures. We have to go beyond the headline figures to reveal something stark. GDP is made up of consumption, investment, Government spending and net exports. The domestic economy is made up of all those things apart from net exports. Every component part of GDP, with the exception of net exports, is still down on what it was before the crisis. Investment, in particular, is dramatically down, at about 50% of what it was before the crisis. The only element within GDP that is growing is net exports. The other elements all show a sign of the collapse in the domestic economy of 15% to 20%, bouncing along the bottom, with no substantial recovery to pre-crisis levels taking place.

We also have to look further at what is happening in terms of net exports, and again the figures are massively overstated from a number of points of view. First, three quarters of the increase in net exports is down to a decline in imports because people cannot afford to buy goods they previously bought that are imported. Imports are down €14.5 billion while exports are up €7.5 billion, but even within that the growth in exports is highly suspect. If we compare the measurement of exports in the external trade statistics as opposed to those in the national accounts, the more accurate figures for goods exports, for example, are revealed. They illustrate, in terms of actual goods that leave the country, that the growth rate was 1% rather than 18.4%. A similar distortion is at play in the service sector whereby the likes of Google, Microsoft, Oracle and Facebook are charging more for services as a way of routing profits through this country. The whole thing is significantly overstated. There is export growth taking place

but it is significantly and substantially less than what the Government is claiming and what the headline figures would suggest. The consequences of that, when one looks at the actual figures, is summed up by the socialist economist Mr. Michael Burke, who says “Without the fakery of an ‘export-led recovery’, statistically there is no recovery at all”. That chimes with people’s real experiences. People’s anger about what is happening is not based on nothing but is based on the reality of the economy as opposed to headline figures that do not speak to that reality. The reality is that there is no strong recovery but a stagnation for the majority of people in this economy. If we stick with this Government’s model and its neoliberal policies, there will not be any change.

I note that the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, said in his speech yesterday: “On its own, the State cannot create wealth. Instead, it must do all it can to create the right conditions for prosperity, through progressive taxation, appropriate regulation and targeted investment.” What is the point of the Labour Party if it just buys wholesale the neo-liberal ideology and argues that it is the only way? If we do not break from that ideology and initiate a massive programme of public investment, a different model of economic development based on sustainable manufacturing growth, public investment and democratic ownership and if we do not say that we refuse to pay the bondholders and rip up austerity then we are doomed to continue with the same austerity, misery and stagnation for years to come.

Deputy Joe O’Reilly: At the outset I wish to record my personal admiration for the extraordinary achievements of the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform in very difficult circumstances. The concept of the spring statement is a good one in that it will help us to avoid boom and bust scenarios in the coming years. It lays out projections, figures and parameters, factoring in the new fiscal rules at European level. This will inform the subsequent debate because it forces both Government and Opposition to present workable and realistic proposals within those parameters, which is to be welcomed.

The optimism and possibilities set out have their basis in four pillar achievements of this Government. The first thing this Government set out to do after its formation was to restore Ireland’s international reputation and it went about that meticulously and painstakingly. The fallout of that for the Irish people was the successful promissory note deal, involving savings of €20 billion over a decade and the consistent and continuing reduction in our interest rate bill. The second issue the Government wanted to take on was the state of the public finances, which had implications for inward investment, the delivery of services and the workability of the country. Prior to the Government coming into office, this country was spending €50 billion per year but only taking in €31 billion, leaving a deficit of €19 billion, which was completely unsustainable. Now the deficit is down to €4.5 billion and it will be under 3% of GDP this year. The third plank of the Government’s work programme was to bring sanity and order into the banking system with the stabilisation of the two pillar banks and ultimately the liquidation of Anglo Irish Bank. That has been achieved, although challenges remain in that area, particularly with regard to the remaining distressed mortgages, numbering 30,000 households. I gather that proposals are due shortly in that regard and I hope they will be effective, comprehensive and will ensure, where possible, that people do not lose their homes. The other challenge in this area is that of mortgage interest rates. The Minister for Finance has been working consistently to get the banks to adjust their variable interest rates downwards. The fourth enormously important issue, to which the other three were related, was dealing with unemployment. The unemployment rate is now at 10% and we will achieve effective full employment by 2018. That is what it is all about and that is a huge achievement. In summary, we had a growth rate in 2014

of 4.8%, an expected rate of 4% for this year and an average of 3.4% for the decade as a whole, the highest rate in Europe currently. In jobs terms, since the low point of 2012, we have created 95,000 jobs which is absolutely crucial.

Of course, all of this required enormously skilful management and the maintenance of industrial peace throughout the period through the buy-in of the social partners and so forth. While all of this was skilfully handled by the Government which led from the front, nobody should deny the fact that ultimately this all came about through the sacrifices of our people. The people made enormous sacrifices and those sacrifices are fructifying now. The people deserve a dividend now - a reasonable and sustainable dividend. The sacrifices of our people must be rewarded and in that regard, the average industrial wage has increased, in net terms, by 10% since the last budget. We need to continue with further tax reductions and the Minister for Finance has secured €750 million for that purpose in the coming budget. The aim should be to reduce the amount of tax deducted from the lower paid in particular as well as reducing the number of people liable for the universal social charge. Doing that is an important element of social engineering because the USC in particular is very oppressive for many people, particularly those on lower incomes.

I am also happy that the Government has opted for a 50:50 split between public expenditure and tax reductions. There are a number of important areas deserving of additional public expenditure and I firmly believe that we should introduce a second year for the preschool programme. As a former primary school teacher and as a parent I would argue that a second preschool year is vitally important and would be enormously beneficial for our children and for society as a whole. The benefits of preschool education do not need elaboration here and I will not insult the intelligence of Deputies present by giving my reasons for arguing thus.

Another critically important issue is the need to deal with the biggest infrastructural deficit in the country, namely the lack of high-speed broadband in all areas. I hope that progress will be made on this in the next year or two. I am delighted that Cavan town now has exceptionally high-speed broadband through a recent initiative involving Vodafone and Eircom but I want to see that extended across Cavan and Monaghan in the coming years.

The Minister promised a regional dividend. He promised to try bring the rewards for the sacrifices made to every region of the country, which is extremely important. In that context, while I am happy with what has been achieved in my constituency during the worst of times,

3 o'clock I would like more to be achieved in the period ahead. In the midst of the recession we built new schools in Mullagh and Virginia in County Cavan, approved a long-overdue secondary school for Kingscourt and invested in numerous schools in Cavan town and throughout the counties of Cavan and Monaghan. While all of that was welcome, I would like to see further investment. I would like to see the Holy Family School in Cootehill get a new school building, which would be a very worthy capital expenditure project. I would also like to see a new third level or further education campus in Cavan town. Such developments merit investment in the coming years and I have had meetings with the Taoiseach recently to discuss these specific issues.

The people of Cavan-Monaghan deserve infrastructural capital investment because they were part of the national sacrifices that were made. We achieved 460 new jobs in County Cavan in 2014, notably 83 in Lakelands Dairies, in Bailieborough, in Lagan Brick in Kingscourt, and recently 200 new jobs in Combilift in Monaghan. That is all good but we need further regional inward investment in counties such as Cavan and Monaghan. We need more IDA Ireland itin-

eraries and more investment. Of course, the broadband and the proper road structure will assist that.

I know this is reflected in other areas, but I am elected to talk about Cavan-Monaghan within the national context. Cavan-Monaghan was very badly hit by the dislocation of the construction sector. Many people who worked in the construction sector have lost jobs there. That major issue needs to be addressed.

The spring economic statement sets out an optimistic scenario coming out of the lost decade, as the Minister, Deputy Noonan, called it. It is a stark but valid description. People have been to hell and back, as they say in one of those orienteering activity places. Now that we are back we need to create an optimistic scenario and the spring economic statement sets out possibilities. The people who made the sacrifices now need to experience the dividend and it needs to be spread nationally and sectorally. Of course, initially it needs to be targeted more at the lower paid. While doing this, it is critical that we do not revert to boom and bust economics and do not recreate the same situation again. With the aid of fiscal rules and domestic prudence we need to steady the horses here because if we do not the people will go through another lost decade. That is our challenge.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: This is a very important debate. It is time for all of us to tell the truth about the economic recovery and not to hide behind the sort of speeches I heard coming from the Opposition a short while ago. Nothing makes reality clearer for anybody who has suffered under the recession than their actually getting a job. Moving into employment makes a huge difference to that home and that local economy, and how they feel and how they face the world every day. The reality is that this Government policy is working. In the constituency of Louth from where I come, in the month we were all elected to the Dáil, there were 17,356 unemployed. This month that has reduced to 13,844. In County Louth there are 3,512 more people working today than there were on the day we came into office. That is clearly a very significant and welcome development.

In County Louth in 2010 there were 1,322 people working in IDA Ireland client companies and this week it was 3,029, a doubling of the figures and extremely welcome news for us all in that county. Of industrial FDI, €1 in every €10 is coming to County Louth. In County Louth in 2010 there were 4,885 people in Enterprise Ireland client companies and last year it was 5,434, which is again a significant increase. It shows that Government policies are working. People are getting jobs. Families are better off. People have more money in their pockets. They are feeling more secure in their employment. They have greater confidence in the future. More businesses are being set up. That is the reality and the truth.

Obviously it is not enough and we need much more investment in job creation throughout the country. However, the trend is in the right direction. This is a point at which the whole economic situation has clearly changed for very many people. It is a turning point in our economic cycle and clearly the Government policies are working. People have more money in their pockets now in terms of the tax they are paying because we have reduced the highest rate of tax and we will continue to reduce it. The Government has announced that whatever Government is in power over the next five years - we hope we will be returned to office - there will be more reductions in income tax, more reductions in the USC, and more investment in new schools, health centres and other essential infrastructure.

The discussion has commenced on public sector pay. Clearly increased social protection

will be important. We have faced challenges over the past ten years. More than 500,000 new people have come into the country. We have the highest proportion of young people under 15 in Europe. We have the highest fertility rate and we have more people living longer than ever before. Many things are changing in our economy and with our people, and we are dealing with them in the appropriate way.

The increase in the number of older people will mean that for every year up to 2021 we will need to invest €200 million per year in services for older people. By 2021 we will also need 3,500 new teachers to look after the 50,000 additional second level pupils in our schools and the 20,000 additional third level students. At the end of all this will be much greater employment. The Government has committed to full employment by 2018.

We now need to improve the social infrastructure, in particular in my constituency we need to deal with the significant issue of social housing. Every day in my office I see people who are concerned that the rent allowance is not adequate for them and the Minister needs to tackle this. I welcome some flexibility in this matter that depending on the size of family the cap can and must be changed. However, there is a significant shortage of housing anyway. Notwithstanding the Government programme to build more housing in County Louth, which I welcome, it is not enough over the period of time that we face now.

While there is land zoned for housing in County Louth there is a significant necessity for the local authority to fast-track planning applications. I have spoken to the new chief executive officer in our county and she is top class in every way. I have asked her to be proactive in encouraging more people to get involved and build the houses that are so badly needed. Assistance offered by the local authority through pre-planning meetings and encouragement to people to invest and build certainly represents the way forward.

I listened to Deputy Ross. However, he did not mention that at the height of the disastrous economic situation which was brought about by the bankers and the Fianna Fáil-led Government, our ten-year bonds, which are critical for future investment for any Government, had a yield of 14% and that is now below 1%. That is very significant.

The deficit - the amount by which we were overspending - was €15 billion a year when we came into office. That was €15 billion of money we did not have. We have reduced that deficit to €4.5 billion a year, which is still significant, but we hope to have it below 2.3% this year so that we will be in a position to balance our budgets in future. Between €1.2 billion and €1.5 billion will be provided in this year's budget to cover tax reductions and expenditure on social and economic infrastructure. The public has suffered greatly, but poorer families suffered more so because they have smaller incomes on which to live. This Government will not only make work pay but we will also help those who rely on fixed incomes, pensions or disability benefits. As the money begins to come back into the economy, it is incumbent on us to ensure their boats also rise. That is the balance we must strike between job creation and social protection.

It is only by putting people back to work that the economy will improve. If we take 10,000 people off the unemployment register, we can save €98 million. That is money the taxpayer does not have to provide to keep people on social welfare. The income these people earn and the tax they pay will bring huge benefits to the economy. This Government is on the right track and this is the right time to be having this debate. The time has come and the change is here. It is our job now to ensure the budget delivers on our commitments.

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Deputy Sandra McLellan: As Sinn Féin spokesperson on children's affairs, I intend to focus on child care and the contributions made by Ministers to the debate. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform stated that a successful child care policy will help people to participate in the economy and that we need to find a balance between the needs of children, parents and the wider economy. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has established a working group on the issue of child care and is calling for submissions. The child care crisis has reached breaking point in this State. Parents, workers and child care providers have all been calling for an immediate focus on finding lasting solutions to the challenges in the sector. Time is of the essence and strategies urgently need to be put in place. I welcome that the Minister, Deputy Reilly, has acknowledged the urgency of the matter but I am not convinced that a lengthy consultation process and calls for submissions from the public are the best solution to this immediate crisis. I recognise that consultation is needed but stakeholders and children's organisations have been giving their input and recommendations for many years. Parents have voiced their opinions through these groups and they are waiting for change. There is growing sentiment within the sector and among parents that the decisions being made around consultation are delaying the desperate need for progress. The interdepartmental group set up to address the issue is apparently meeting regularly. I have repeatedly asked the Minister when can we expect an update on what is being discussed but I am routinely told that this group of representatives from seven Departments and their advisers are working on a plan. Policy documents and reports from the most knowledgeable of people in Irish NGOs and children's organisations have already outlined proposals and solutions. Are they being taken on board?

The spring statement boils down to the announcement that the Government will have between €1.2 billion and €1.5 billion available for tax cuts and spending increases, which it intends to split on a 50:50 basis. Cuts to taxes should provide an extra few euro a week to some people but the taxes imposed through water charges and on other living standards will ultimately cancel that money out. This is why the debate on tax credits for child care is made redundant. Tax credits will do nothing to improve the quality of child care or parents' ability to access it. Any extra money in the pockets of struggling families will be used for what they most need at any given time. Tax credits will not improve the quality of early years services and or help the most disadvantaged. The best way to achieve the affordable, high quality child care that is so badly needed in this State is to invest in services and link that funding to quality. The children's organisation Start Strong has pointed out that research from the OECD suggests the best way to make child care both affordable and high quality is to directly subsidise places in early year services, and to tie that funding to quality. We need to learn from other countries rather than repeat their mistakes.

Investment is the key to sustainable long-term growth by expanding the productive capacity of the economy and increasing employment and incomes. Last year the Government pledged that budget 2015 would introduce measures to assist low income families by improving the system of child income supports such that those moving from welfare to work will retain payments for children to ensure that people are better off in work. The increase in child benefit and the introduction of the back-to-work family dividend is welcomed but it is well documented by child stakeholders that the lack of high quality affordable child care will keep many families in poverty. Austerity budgets over recent years included cuts to child benefit which put additional pressures on families whose incomes are already stretched as a result of the recession. Child benefit was cut from a peak of €166 per month to the current rate of €130. The increase to €135 from January 2015 and to €140 from 2016 is minimal when compared to recent cuts. The back-to-work family dividend announced in budget 2015 is intended to help families move

from social welfare to employment by allowing them to retain the qualified child increase, QCI, of €29.80 per child per week. Families will keep the full QCI for the first 12 months after taking up a job and 50% of the QCI for the second 12 months. However, the largest cost faced by many families when moving from social welfare is the cost of child care. The average cost of a full-day place is €167 per week. The €29.80 back-to-work family dividend is insignificant when viewed from that perspective. This commitment does not support parents wishing to take up or return to work. We need an investment in quality and affordable child care so that parents can return to work in a dignified and realistic manner.

The Government also pledged to increase access to subsidised child care and after school places by extending eligibility. International research shows that early care and education services only benefit children if they are of a high quality. Quality of child care in this State is inconsistent and variable. Improving quality must be the central aim of early years policy. Although the Government is committed in theory to a second free pre-school year, the sector has called for improvements in quality for the first year and to make access universal in practice rather than in name. Children with special needs are frequently denied access to the free pre-school year due to a shortage of appropriate staff and special needs assistants in creches. The Government's promise of universal care is in name only.

The after school child care scheme did not provide the solution to after school services for children that the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection promised. Only 267 children use the scheme compared to the 6,000 places proposed in 2012, for reasons such as accessibility. The scheme, which was launched with great fanfare by the Tánaiste in 2012, was to be allocated €14 million per year. The allocation was intended to provide over 6,000 part-time after school child care places for the children of low income parents. Significant cuts have been made to the scheme's funding have been made and uptake is minimal but the Tánaiste continues to fly the flag for the scheme by portraying it as one of the success stories of this Government. The scheme has not worked and credible new proposals must be made. Investment is needed.

A recurring message on which the Government has tried to relay in its spring statement is that we are, apparently, beginning to move out of the recession. If this is so, the Government has a duty to start immediately investing in critical services, such as child care. The Government's attitude towards child care and the needs of families must change. We must start investing in our youngest children. We in Sinn Féin believe that investment in services that will better the quality of lives is more effective than nominal tax cuts that will amount to little more than a few euro a week. Token gestures solve nothing in the long term. However, given the Government's commitment to a 50:50 plan in tax cuts versus spending, I call on it to put investment in quality child care high on the list.

As a country, we invest very little in our young children, less than 0.2% of GDP. The average investment in OECD countries is 0.8% of GDP. In my capacity as special rapporteur for the upcoming Committee on Health and Children report into child care in Ireland, I have been meeting with a large number of representatives from both the sector and parents and have found that the overarching issue is the serious under-funding of the sector. It is unrealistic and short-sighted to presume improvements can be made while the resources are not being provided to make those critical changes. It is common sense that investment in child care is ultimately an investment in children and the future of society. Affordable and accessible child care for all types of families should be a right, not a luxury. Child care is not only about caring for children, but about the education and development of the individual from his or her earliest formative years. The attitude and terminology needs to change. The child care sector deserves equal

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status and treatment to that of every other stage of childhood education and development. The Government must acknowledge that.

A long term vision and plan for the sector is urgently needed. The Government demands the further professionalisation of the sector and quality improvement. However, in order for that to happen, proper resourcing and wage structures are essential. A clear message from meeting with workers and providers is that they are extending themselves as far as they can to keep services open and running to a high standard. The commitment to the welfare of children, of both employers and employees, is unquestionable. They are calling for any changes in policy to be children focused. What we need to see now is a matching of that commitment from the Government in the form of real solutions.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Here we are at the end of a great week of the Government's spring statement being told all is well. Fair enough, but any future recovery must be a fair recovery. Any benefits must go to those on low incomes, in particular low paid workers, and towards restoring and improving public services. Jobs have been created and this is welcome, but this is down to the fact we are coming from a situation where we have very high rates of unemployment and there are other external factors. Many people have emigrated in the intervening period and wages being paid across many sectors are lower than they were six or seven years ago. It is in that context that jobs are being created.

The Government has put yet another commission in place, the low pay commission, but what is needed is action. Sinn Féin has launched a document calling for decent work and a living wage in which it puts forward its proposals. We are often challenged in the House to produce our proposals. We launched them within the past week and they are here in black and white. We would welcome the views of those on the other side of the House on them, in particular the views of the Labour Party who might see a common cause in them.

The latest position is coupled with the fact that taxes and other impositions, such as the local property tax and water charges, are placing a heavy burden on households and many people now are significantly worse off than they were. It is also the case that recovery in employment is not evenly spread. In my own county of Laois, unemployment remains high and the fall in the numbers on the live register has not been so great. We welcome any fall in unemployment numbers, but the numbers of long-term unemployed remain sky high. This applies across the midlands region. Some 7,388 people in Laois are unemployed and the number unemployed in Kildare is over 15,000.

This is reflected in a range of ongoing social problems. Last week, figures were released which showed that Laois had the highest rate of claims for exceptional needs payments from community welfare officers, in other words, emergency payments. Many households, including those with members who are in work, also continue to be burdened by debts. Mortgage debt in particular is a huge problem. There have been hints from the Government that it will raise this matter with the banks, but the banks have basically told the Government to get lost. That is what has happened. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, has attended their annual general meetings and that is what he has been told. The Government has not used the 98% share that Joe and Mary public have in AIB to try to address the issue even with that bank.

The statistics show that many people in County Laois are in mortgage distress. Some 76% of people in the county who are on shared ownership loans are in arrears and what is most worrying is that 60% of those households are in arrears of three months and more. This is the

case despite the fact that local authority staff are trying to do everything they can to address this problem and to come up with solutions. The figures for households with private mortgage loans are equally as worrying. According to the most recent figures, some 16% of mortgages in Laois are in arrears of three months or more and in Kildare the figure is 12.4%.

The Government is not dealing with or facing up to this issue. The fact is that the Labour Party and Fine Gael gave the banks and lenders a veto on any settlement for those in mortgage distress. We pointed out the problems this would cause nearly three years ago, but were ridiculed for that. The Government asked what we would propose and we said what we needed was an independent agency with the power to compel the banks and lenders to accept reasonable proposals and see them through. We advocated this three years ago and advocate the same again now. We urge the Government to do this. There has been some talk about doing this in recent days and we want the Government to move towards that.

Much has been made of the potential of the mortgage-to-rent arrangement as a possible solution, but the numbers approved so far are derisory. There has been just one mortgage-to-rent arrangement in County Laois. The Government has failed to deal with the issue of spiralling rents and the growing gap between the rent allowance threshold and actual rents. This is causing homelessness, not just in cities but in the country where we now find people sleeping in cars. Some 90 people showed up homeless at Laois County Council in the first three months of this year.

The situation is causing huge stress also for families living in private rented accommodation. Some of these people come to our clinics every week because they are in danger of losing their accommodation. There is a housing crisis. A dampener is being put on house building by the new building regulations. We want building regulations, but they should be realistic regulations that work for and do not strangle the building of extensions and one-off houses. This issue needs to be addressed.

Yesterday, the Joint Committee on the Environment, Community and Local Government was to discuss a report on the housing assistance payment. That report includes very worrying figures on the numbers of people who are dependent on emergency accommodation. Of most concern is the fact that a huge number of these people have children. In County Laois, there are over 1,800 households on the housing waiting list and I believe another few hundred should be on it. In County Kildare, the number of households on the waiting list is now heading towards 8,000. This is unsustainable. We need a housing programme similar to what we had in the 1930s, and in the 1950s under a Fine Gael-led Government, and similar to those we had again in the 1960s and 1970s. Temporary accommodation is no substitute and merely acts as a subsidy for private landlords.

In regard to the home tax and water charges, it is noticeable that the Government appears to be content to ignore this issue for the time being. We were to have legislation and I would have hoped it would have come before the House this week. However, all Dáil business was suspended to allow for the spring statement. The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Kelly, has failed yet again to bring the legislation before the House. That is hardly surprising, given the Millington, SiteServ and IBRC controversy and given also that the cost of water metering jumped in the space of a month in 2013 by approximately 40%.

In that context, we should look again at the Government's claim that the economy has turned a corner. It may say that and some figures may be put together to show it is happening.

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The Government has been less than up-front if we consider how it has dealt with issues. The water charges underline this approach to the economy. The Government has introduced a fake scheme called the “water conservation grant” of €100 per household that has nothing to do with the conservation of water; water will be wasted because of it when people see there is no incentive to conserve water. It has nothing to do with having more efficient use of water or stopping wastage.

We have had a week of the Government slapping itself on the back. The problem is that while the Government is doing this, citizens are carrying a heavy load on their backs. There are people under significant stress and under much pressure, and that is affecting mental and physical health. All of us meet these people every week in our clinics, offices and on the street. These are people who are broken mentally, physically and financially. They cannot cope and they have suffered years of trying to deal with mortgages. Results of a survey in England were published this week which demonstrated the stress arising from mortgage issues. When doctors examined the people over a period, they found that the stress was similar to that experienced by people on battlefields during war. We can see that in people’s faces. The issue of mortgage debt has not been dealt with, either in the private area with respect to AIB, Ulster Bank etc. or the local authority loans. We must face up to that for the good of society, our own good and that of our children. It would even ease the burden on our health services as this affects those services. People are really suffering because of this.

This week has been a diversion to distract attention from the fact that we continue to pay money to the after-effects of the banking bailout and what has had to be mopped up by the Government. Spring statements cannot hide or change certain facts. Low-income families continue to be hit hardest, and particularly those in need of accommodation. The Government has failed to deal with key crises in the sectors of housing, mortgages, health and child care. Disposable incomes are at an all-time low. The Government has had four years to address this but in some ways, many people are telling me they are now in a worse position. What we are seeing now is window dressing and electioneering.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies Joe Costello and Willie Penrose are sharing time.

Deputy Joe Costello: We are sharing time in an unbalanced way. I will only take five minutes. I welcome the publication of the spring economic statement. It may not seem obvious to many people, and particularly those on my left, but this all started with the blanket bank guarantee approved by Fianna Fáil-----

Deputy Brian Stanley: Which we opposed.

Deputy Joe Costello: -----and Sinn Féin and the Greens.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It is on the record.

Deputy Joe Costello: It certainly is.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It was 17 October 2008.

Deputy Willie Penrose: Deputy Stanley was not here at the time. His party voted for it.

Deputy Joe Costello: I can quote the names. Some of the same people are still talking about burning bondholders and telling the troika to take a hike.

Deputy Brian Stanley: On a point of order-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is no point of order. The Deputy only has five minutes.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Deputy is misleading the House, as he has done recently. Sinn Féin voted against that on 17 October 2008.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: These are political charges.

Deputy Joe Costello: The Deputy is eating into my precious time. I will bring in the list the next time and show it to the Deputy so he can see exactly what happened.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Yes. It was 17 October.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: No, it was 30 September.

Deputy Joe Costello: From the moment Sinn Féin and others agreed to give a blanket guarantee to Anglo Irish Bank's €34 billion debt, Ireland was committed, effectively, to a special bailout deal with the troika, and that was negotiated by Fianna Fáil with the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the European Union Commission. It was agreed from 2010 to 2015 but we managed to exit the programme more quickly due to the good economic methodology and so on used by this Government.

With respect to the spring statement, during that period we were excluded from the normal European Union budgetary process because we were within our bailout system. We could not avail of what we had voted for in 2012, the fiscal stability treatment. All this provides for the first time for the member states to engage in a process of consultation. There is a European Semester, with every country doing a spring statement outlining budgetary principles, parameters and policies for discussion with a view to ensuring that the terms of the growth and stability pact are adhered to by all member states, so as not to have the blow-outs we have seen in various economies in the past. The spring statement is proof that Ireland's economy has been stabilised and has returned to normality from being the sick economy of Europe under Fianna Fáil and the Green Party.

The news is positive for the future. Ireland is the fastest growing economy in the EU, with 4% estimated growth in 2015. Unemployment has been reduced by a third from 15.1% in 2012 to 10% in 2015. There will be €1.2 billion to €1.5 billion available in the autumn budget, to be divided 50:50 between tax reductions to reward work for low and medium earners and spending increases to invest in our public services. A multi-year budgetary process will be put in place in October 2015. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, will publish a new capital investment plan in June this year which again will allow further debate prior to the budget. The Minister, Deputy Howlin, will shortly begin discussions with the public service committee of congress to restore in a sustainable way the 14% or €2.2 billion reduction in pay that was taken through the financial emergency legislation. The public sector sacrificed much in the interests of the national economy in the past number of years, and it is extremely important to recognise that the majority of public servants are low-paid. They deserve to benefit from the recovery as quickly as possible.

In July, again before the budget comes about, there will be further public consultation with civil society groups, a national economic dialogue to facilitate a transparent and inclusive de-

bate about the challenges faced and the spending options we should prioritise. For the first time in the history of this country, there is a formal structure in place for all stakeholders and public representatives to engage in the budgetary process. It will be the norm for the future and it will be a multi-annual process. Political parties will no longer be able to trot out vast swathes of expenditure willy-nilly and they must come within the €1.2 billion to €1.5 billion expenditure parameters agreed with the European Union. Proposals must be costed and any that would increase expenditure must be matched with funding commensurate with the proposals.

With the spring statement being the norm from now on, the process should be welcomed by all instead of being derided by certain sections of the Opposition and the media. The citizenry of the country will find it most beneficial and it will put an end once and for all to the multi-billion euro uncostered proposals from the Opposition seeking to delude the public. It will also put an end to the secrecy surrounding that most important date in the Dáil calendar, budget day. We are setting the process in train, which is welcome, and I strongly recommend the spring economic statement before us.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate. Not only is this Government's spring statement an event of significant importance to the country but it also has a significant ring about it. The notion of a "spring statement" carries both the promise of spring and the tangible growth of summer, and for those of us in Irish society who have our dinner in the middle of the day, spring is always warm and warmly welcomed. We sense growth in every fibre of our being and see it within our grasp, hoping it will be realised for all our people who have suffered so much.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Willie Penrose: On Tuesday, RTE carried an interview from Ms Áine Lawlor on the lunchtime programme, who is one of our best, most informed and knowledgeable broadcasters. She interviewed a professor of economics who explained that it made sense for this Government to borrow for day-to-day expenditure. He explained that with interest rates so low, the stimulus triggered would more than cover the cost of borrowing. That would appear to be a portent of happy days. These are happy days, at least for some, but for too many, happiness is still some distance away on the horizon.

Everybody in the House knows that Ireland has a large number of people desperate to work and who are anxious for the country to return to growth. They are still so hobbled by debt that it is the responsibility of the Government to fix the issue. These people are not fools and they did not take inordinate risks. These are the people who forsook emigration and continue to go to bed hungry in the cold and dark. They are deserving of our praise and commendation because it is they who weather the storm in the bilges of the sinking ship of Ireland's economy. They can smell the sweet scent of the harvest as the country reaches the safe harbour of recovery but they remain chained and shackled below deck by debt and frozen by the unnecessarily drawn out process of bankruptcy. While three years may appear short, when added to the wanton deprivation of a lost decade it acquires the appearance of a sentence of indeterminate length. It is too great a period to ask. It matters not whether a person is shackled by mortgage debt or chained by personal debt, all of it is debt. It is of the first magnitude, therefore, that Ireland quickly draws a firm line beneath its past. We must get these people back to work and restore their dignity and sense of self-worth.

Need and entitlement are the new objectives. The country needs the individuals in question

to contribute to the economy again. They want to contribute and are entitled to do so. Their contribution to the nation's needs will be joyously measured when they resume their central role in family life, which is so dear to the well-being of this nation but which has been all but destroyed by fear, anxiety, loss, loathing, emigration and mental stress.

Let us place to one side the predictable response of the ill-informed and ignore the crass suggestion that the people in question are wasters or should not have been given loans for whatever reason. What is done is done. If their borrowing was imprudent, the lending was clearly more imprudent. Why should the pain always be visited on the unfortunate borrower?

While we cannot change the past, we can influence the future, which is as close as tomorrow, the day after that, next week and the week after that. It is time to acknowledge the contribution to the recovery made by citizens, specifically those at the worst end of the spectrum of those with financial difficulties. That such people are still standing means they have courage and a will to survive that defies logic. They have shown extraordinary resilience and are enormously talented. Who among those who have husbanded tiny sums to feed and clothe their families would not be talented in the basics of economics? The individuals in question are true survivors. They are not the subject of dramas or documentaries but the real people of Ireland. They deserve the help and acknowledgement of this House and our compliments. They deserve a stimulus package and freedom from the chains and shackles that keep them drowning in the bilges of this ship of state that is safely docked for the rest of us.

We justify borrowing for a stimulus package. We do not need to justify reducing the bankruptcy period to 12 months, which would be a self-contained stimulus package. Its dividends will be reaped from the day a bankruptcy order is made as it would set out for people a clear path forward, one that is tangible, attainable and stimulating. It is the function of government to help those in need and this Government has a responsibility to do so. It is also common sense.

I propose to highlight an issue that is close to my heart, namely, the failure of RTE to accommodate or facilitate on its broadcast media Irish-originated music, whether singers, producers or songwriters, of all genres from folk and pop to classical and country music. Irish music attracts thousands of people to dance venues and concerts but does not find favour with the national broadcaster, which will undoubtedly claim that no one listens to this type of music. I have news for RTE. A recent weekend of country and traditional music in Mullingar attracted more than 2,000 people of all ages. Moreover, almost 300,000 people will attend the Fleadh Cheoil in Sligo in August. Is RTE aware of artists such as Nathan Carter, Michael English, Derek Ryan, Jason McGilligan, Johnny Bradley and Johnny McNicholl, all of whom attract thousands of young followers? Why do the national broadcasting channels not feature specific programmes to accommodate these artists? RTE broadcast various programmes focused on Irish music years ago but has now deserted us.

I extend my best wishes to the broadcaster, Donncha Ó Dúlaing, on his retirement last Saturday night after more than 50 years in broadcasting.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I understand RTE intends to cease broadcasting the “Fáilte Isteach” programme, which has special resonance for elderly people and Irish people abroad. Is this not another sign that the national broadcaster will up sticks at the first opportunity and an illustration of a view in RTE that the culchies are alright and do not matter because they are outside

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the Pale? If it cared to check, it would find that people outside the Pale also pay the television licence fee of €160. It is time to acknowledge Irish music of all genres and commission dedicated programmes to allow it to take its rightful place in this country. We had such programmes in the 1960s. What is wrong with Irish music now? Is it a case of turning up our noses because it is Irish?

I have listened with great care over the years to the well-rehearsed mantra repeated across the health service that money will follow the patient. This policy, we were told, would deliver benefits such as better outcomes, greater throughput and output, more efficiency and effectiveness, improved case-mix and shorter turnaround periods. As far as I can determine, this objective has been binned in respect of the Midland Regional Hospital in Mullingar, which in recent years has catered for a significantly increased level of activity with a noticeable decrease in its budget allocation. The hospital provides very good care for patients not only from its natural hinterland of counties Longford and Westmeath, but also from County Roscommon to the west and counties Meath, Offaly and Kildare to the east, without any additional allocation being made available to accommodate its additional workload.

If the policy of having money follow the patient is to have any meaning, the Health Service Executive should match its sugary words with deeds. We need only consider the wrangle in the past six weeks when a firm commitment by the HSE to have 35 additional staff appointed to the Midland Regional Hospital in Mullingar started to unravel only a short period after it was given. Ten midwives, ten emergency department nurses and 15 other staff were to be placed across hospital wards where pressure had been clearly identified. More than 560 patients spent time on trolleys in March, which is the second worst record in the country after St. Vincent's Hospital in Dublin. The number of patients on trolleys was 125% higher in March 2015 than in March 2014. People in Mullingar want all the recommendations of the emergency department task force report implemented without any side-stepping or obfuscation. Acute beds which have been closed since as far back as the previous Fianna Fáil-Green Party Government must be reopened. On average, seven babies are born each day at the Midland Regional Hospital in Mullingar. It is vital, therefore, that the additional nurses promised for maternity services are appointed.

The health service nationwide will need additional resources. These must be complemented by a significant improvement in outcomes and a change in work practices to permit X-ray machines, PET and MRI scanners and all other radiological equipment to be utilised on a 24 hour basis.

The Midland Regional Hospital is part of the Dublin east hospital group. The aim of the hospital is to deliver a quality-driven, people-centred service to the population of the Dublin east and midlands region, in particular the Longford-Westmeath area. The hospital has 204 beds and provides the following services: accident and emergency; radiology; general medicine; general surgery; obstetrics and gynaecology; paediatrics; pathology; dermatology; and outpatient services, including ophthalmology. It also provides diagnostic radiological and pathology services; physiotherapy; occupational therapy; speech and language therapy; cardiac diagnostic and rehabilitation services; pulmonary function services; laboratory services; and respiratory services.

The out-of-hours general practitioner service, MIDOC, was relocated to the hospital in September 2014 and is accommodated in the outpatient department. In 2014, the hospital had 21,594 inpatient discharges, with an average length of stay of 3.17 days and dealt with 8,276

day case procedures. Some 2,796 deliveries and 32,859 emergency department attendances were recorded. Expenditure in 2014 was €61.43 million, while the allocated budget for 2015 is only €57.9 million. One does not need to be a mathematician to work out that the hospital will have a major deficit this year.

The hospital has a number of key areas for development. A design team has been appointed to develop a project consisting of operating theatres and associated developments as a single build project consisting of a new operating theatre department with a dedicated obstetric theatre; a new endoscopy department; a new combined critical care unit; a rehabilitation ward; and a therapies department for physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and treatment facilities. It is also planned to update the current hospital development control plan to allow for further expansion of facilities in the years ahead. In addition, work has commenced on remodelling and upgrading the emergency department. I hope this important project will be completed by the end of the first quarter of 2016.

The hospital has highlighted the need for an MRI scanner as it currently shares a scanner with Tullamore and Portlaoise hospitals. This scanner, which is based in Tullamore, is operated through a public private partnership arrangement. One machine cannot cope with demand from a population of nearly 250,000. Members of the community are willing to raise funds towards the cost of providing a new scanner. I ask the HSE to provide co-funding for this equipment.

Provision must be made for the appointment of a consultant geriatrician at the Midland Regional Hospital in Mullingar and the establishment of a community and elderly care liaison team for the Longford-Westmeath area. Other requirements include the development of an in-reach and outreach service to nursing homes, the development of an ambulatory care assessment unit for older people using the day hospital model, step-up care beds and domiciliary visits other than nursing homes in the local hospital area, with a clinical case manager role for older people, and support for the education of staff in nursing homes. Much remains to be done.

The unemployment rate has fallen below 10% and 90,000 new jobs have been created. It is important that a sustained effort is made to ensure the benefits of employment growth are not confined to large urban areas but are spread nationwide, especially to rural areas. As an advocate for the midlands, I raise again the continuing failure by the IDA to get some industry to locate in the industrial park in Marlinstown, Mullingar. This is an ideally located site housing two major indigenous manufacturing industries which are doing extremely well. Notwithstanding the many positive features associated with the site, its location and the town of Mullingar, which has excellent facilities, efforts to attract foreign direct investment have been fruitless to date. In the context of the policy shift by IDA Ireland where the midlands is now subject to a special focus of its development team to highlight the region's attractiveness and suitability, has Mullingar been elevated to the priority status which it deserves for such a campaign? It is the least the people of Mullingar and the wider north-east region deserve rather than copious platitudes and voluminous words. While the ultimate decision as to where a company locates resides with the company itself, I hope IDA Ireland will redouble its efforts in this regard.

Much of the debate on the statement focused on taxation and multinational enterprises. While multinationals account for a large proportion of our exports, the sector only employs a small share of the workforce. Up to 90% of Irish-owned firms are small and medium-sized enterprises, and 69% of private sector workers work in SMEs. Since 2008, employment in SMEs fell much more than it did in the multinational sector. Future employment growth depends on SMEs. Despite a great deal of rhetoric about the importance of the self-employed and the

SMEs, some of the provisions of the economic statement were detrimental to the sector.

There is no justification for the 11% universal social charge rate imposed on the self-employed, particularly as they are not entitled to the same level of benefits as those on lower USC rates. Given the outrage over the low corporation tax paid by Apple and other multinational companies, it is worth noting the 11% USC rate paid by the self-employed earning more than €100,000 is the same as the percentage of tax paid on profits by the multinationals. Unlike the multinationals, the self-employed person pays a 40% marginal income tax rate in addition to PRSI contributions. What is the justification for a marginal rate of income tax of 55% for the self-employed while PAYE workers pay a marginal rate of 52%?

It could be argued that because of the level of insecurity and risk the self-employed must endure, they should pay a lower marginal rate than those in secure employment. Some left-wing politicians and commentators seem to think that the entire self-employed community is well-off. Some, however, take home little more than what they would earn on the minimum wage. It is very inequitable that tax credits given to PAYE workers are not available to the self-employed and low earners. Despite this rhetoric we hear from the Government claiming it is supporting the self-employed and those setting up small businesses, the income tax system discriminates shamefully against the self-employed. A self-employed worker earning €15,000, half the average industrial wage, will pay 14.9% of tax on that income while his or her counterpart in the public service will only pay 1.9% of the same sum. The self-employed person will pay €2,235 while the PAYE worker will pay only €285. The self-employed person will be entitled to fewer benefits despite his or her large tax contribution.

After the collapse of the building industry in 2008, many self-employed builders found themselves almost destitute. Despite having paid substantial sums in income tax, they found in some cases they were eligible only for a means-tested supplementary welfare allowance. Due to the way the building industry is organised, many building workers are forced into self-employment and, while earning no more than PAYE workers, they are entitled to fewer benefits. Far from being a path to riches, being self-employed or establishing a small business is often a high-risk activity with little return.

One of the most misleading figures quoted about Irish industry is that it is the most profitable in the EU. When the multinationals are removed from the picture, Irish firms are among the least profitable in the EU, coming third from the bottom after Lithuania and France. While employers' PRSI is low in Ireland, other business costs, such as energy and professional services, are among the highest. It is important risk-takers are rewarded. The Government must address some of the inequities identified in these areas. The divide in this area is growing. We are going to depend on self-employment. We have to look at pension provision in this area too. I am aware of the issues in this regard having been employed and self-employed. The self-employed must pay for everything, be it a licence or whatever. This comes out of a non-existent profit and one's overdraft. Banks are now cutting out overdrafts.

Coming from a small rural area, I know there are many protests about the closure of services in such areas. I am not joining any more of these protests, however. While Government policy can contribute to this, the very people who close these services are the people themselves. There are facilities there which they should use.

Deputy Noel Grealish: Use it or lose it.

Deputy Willie Penrose: Exactly. The Aldi and the Lidl stores are great with lower prices. I know people have very little money and have to get best value. Shoppers can gravitate to those stores but that will wipe out small rural shops, leading to no shops between two major towns. Once the multiples have everyone in, they will increase their prices. We must look at rates and other incentives to keep rural shops open. Otherwise, we will just have big towns with big stores, having wiped out rural Ireland. Then there will be crocodile tears. I am not joining any more protests in this regard. People should save their shops and post offices themselves by using them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan who is sharing time with Deputy Noel Grealish.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: Bhíos i mo shuí anseo tráthnóna Dé Máirt ag éisteacht leis na hóráidí ó na hAirí. Bhíos ag tnúth le hóráidí dearfacha ón Rialtas seo.

It was to be expected that the Government, the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform would make the speeches they did, speeches that would present their work over the past four years as positive. There is no doubt about the situation inherited from previous Governments, the crisis, the mess and the catastrophe. Their speeches acknowledged difficult decisions had to be taken with significant sacrifices made by the people.

The problem I have, however, is that not everyone made sacrifices and the pain was not experienced proportionately. Yes, there have been repairs to the economy and the outlook is brighter. People, however, do not feel statistics in their pockets or wage packets. It is claimed the economy is growing at the fastest rate in Europe with 4.8% in 2014, with a predicted 4% growth this year and a stable economic growth of 3.75% on average for the rest of the decade. This is meaningless, however, to many people unless they see an improvement in the money they take home in wages or in their social welfare benefit or pension and until they have disposable income after the bills are paid. Until then the percentages and the statistics come across as pure rhetoric and propaganda. What effect will 4% growth have on those public servants whose salaries generally are down 14%, on those whose pensions have been decimated, those other groups in society who have really suffered, such as those with disabilities and housing issues, and in the areas especially of health and education?

I have no difficulty with a spring, summer or winter statement. I like the idea behind this of standing back and taking stock of where we are, how we got here and where we are going. Maybe we do not have enough philosophical debates in this Chamber. I have heard several speeches on the spring statement. They are glowing from the Government’s side but critical from the Opposition. I have also heard criticisms about the amount of time given to this debate. There would be a criticism if there were not enough time, however. It is important everyone who wants to contribute should have an opportunity to do so.

The disappointment is the way in which we approach this debate. It is the same old, same old with no debate or real engagement on the issues. We are still rooted in the traditional roles of them and us. We had a small example of the alternative during Private Members’ business on Tuesday night on mortgages, with contributions from Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly on this side and the Minister of State, Deputy Simon Harris, on the other side. There was almost a glimmer of how it might be in this Chamber if we had real debate.

Another disappointment with this statement is the use of phrases such as, “We must never

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again repeat the boom-and-bust economic model” or “Prudent policies support growth and job creation”. Where is the engagement with the Opposition on how to work on this? There has to be another role for the Opposition besides just opposing. There are good ideas on this side of the House but politics continues to be adversarial and confrontational. We are all public servants in this House. I do not know any other sector in the public service, in health and education, where teachers, nurses, social workers or doctors work in an adversarial and confrontational way. Everything is done in a congenial atmosphere with consensus building and working together. That is the rational human being in me speaking rather than the political. I will be dreaming of and hoping for a new way of doing politics.

No one expected a pre-budget statement of who is getting what. I would have liked to have heard more, however, about a vision that will guide us forward on the values that are going to be uppermost, as well as an acknowledgement of the areas and people who were hardest hit and the areas of crisis that would be prioritised. One of these areas is housing. I was disappointed we do not have a vision or an action plan included in this economic statement on this matter. The largest number of calls coming to me every day is about housing. Rents in the private rental sector are increasing between €100 to €400 a month for individuals, couples and families. Many of them cannot pay the increases, even those in employment.

We have had our scandals in the past around child abuse in industrial schools, the mother and baby homes, the Magdalen laundries and, in recent years, children living in direct provision.

The next scandal is the way in which children are being treated when their families become homeless. They have to live in bed and breakfast accommodation or a hotel room and rely on takeaway food. There are also issues regarding their education, physical and mental health, the lack of social events and sports facilities. I hope it will not take a tragedy involving one of those children before the issue is seen as urgent.

Landlords cannot discriminate on the grounds of sexuality, ethnicity, religion or colour, but they can discriminate against those who are offering rent allowance. Deputy Donnelly’s motion last week contained commonsense and practical solutions for mortgage arrears. Many of them had been agreed with the Government at the Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform to try to deal with this mortgage crisis. When will we see action to make a real difference in preventing people from becoming homeless?

The size of families is increasing and we also see adult children returning to the family home. Making money available for home extensions, which can be erected quickly, could help to alleviate the lack of residential space.

There was an opportunity to recognise the housing crisis in the spring economic statement, thus giving real hope to people, especially families with children and also single men. Some of them may never get a local authority flat or apartment in their lifetime. Rhetoric and fine words will not build houses.

Government Ministers have spoken about job creation and everybody wants to see jobs, but we have a working poor. The use of zero hour, dead-end contracts is a worrying trend. Such payments do not allow people to live in dignity. In recent years, employers have taken advantage of the economic crisis to phase out staff on pre-recession contracts, while phasing in

contracts that offer no stability or any prospect of a dignified life.

The Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, spoke of his plans to increase employment, replace lost jobs and attract returning emigrants. That is all great, but significant segments of society must accept poor working conditions, low pay, few or no benefits, and ridiculous contracts. Jobs are being created but they are not economically viable enough to allow people to live in dignity. There is a disparity between the growth on paper, which the Government highlights, and the lack of growth being felt by ordinary people.

Whatever about able-bodied people weathering a recession, there is one group that finds it extremely difficult. They are the people with physical or mental disabilities, or both. They should not have suffered in this way. Over 600,000 disabled people and their families were not protected during the worst recessionary times. A guiding vision is required for them to move forward.

I am sure that other Members of the House have also received the letter from St. Michael's House about issues of concern for severely affected school leavers. The school completion programme took massive hits and it also had to make up for the shortfall from other cuts to Traveller teachers, career guidance and counselling. Their work was not really appreciated. I took hope, however, from the most recent reply I received about this matter from the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Reilly. The Spring Economic Statement should have included a vision for the most vulnerable sections in society.

The effects of the recession, including cuts, have been felt in my constituency of Dublin Central. For many months, we have had a major battle over community development programmes for the most marginalised. I am aware of the stress, anxiety and tension that has created. There have been some positive outcomes, however, for the Inner City Co-op and the Tolka Area Partnership.

Drug addiction is not confined to Dublin Central but it is an ongoing issue there. I wish the Minister of State, Deputy Ó Ríordáin, well in his new portfolio. There have been issues concerning drug-free accommodation and detox beds.

We have also seen the effect of cuts to community policing. Major work was done by the community policing forum in building up relationships between local authorities and the Garda Síochána. Cuts to community policing have resulted in open drug dealing on so many streets in the north inner city. Although it is a cliché, it is true that we can judge a society by how it treats vulnerable people. I do not think we have done well in that regard.

Ireland is respected overseas and despite the recession we have been able somewhat to maintain our overseas development aid. We are a major contributor in times of disaster, as can be seen currently in Nepal. However, we are moving further away from the 0.7% target figure of gross national income for overseas aid.

We could be a strong advocate for human rights, workers' rights, tax justice and preventing illicit flows of capital. We must ensure that Irish firms doing business abroad are totally transparent in their negotiations.

Nobody enters politics to damage their country; we are all here because we love our country. We want to do our best for the country and its citizens. Any recovery and growth is welcome. However, the facts for people on the ground belie what was said in the spring economic

statement. I have tried to outline those facts in my contribution.

The recent TASC report showed that there is a growing inequality gap which is approaching US levels. That problem has to be taken on board. There are other parameters to measure success besides economic ones. They include quality of life, especially for the most vulnerable.

The holy grail of a 12.5% corporate tax rate is fine, but can we be transparent about it? Can we see exactly who is paying what, and are we getting the full 12.5%?

Deputy Noel Grealish: I am delighted to have an opportunity to speak on the spring economic statement that was issued by the Government on Tuesday. Yesterday, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, spoke about the employment lost over the period of the recession being fully recovered by 2018. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, made much of employment increases in every quarter over the past two years. I want to acknowledge what has happened in my constituency of Galway West and south Mayo, involving the recent job announcements by Apple. It is right next door to me and I look forward to visiting the plant in Cork next week and meeting Apple's senior executives there. It is an €850 million investment involving 300 jobs. We must acknowledge the tremendous work that has been done by the Government and the IDA, as well as Apple's decision to pick Galway.

I also welcome the announcement earlier this year by Zimmer which is setting up a base in Oranmore involving 250 jobs. I compliment Adrian Furey, the general manager of Zimmer, who is a native of Oranmore. It is a great achievement for him to return to Oranmore and provide such employment there.

Emigration was missing from the spring economic statement. In the past five or six years, there has been huge emigration from all towns and cities, but particularly from rural Ireland. No Minister has mentioned that subject in their contributions to the spring economic statement, however. Many families in rural towns and villages have been affected by emigration. GAA and soccer clubs have also been drastically hit. Four years ago, there was one GAA club in the Australian city of Perth, while now there are nine. That shows the level of emigration with young people leaving this nation in recent years. In addition to Australia, they have also emigrated to Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. It is true that emigrants are returning home, but only some of them.

Hopefully, the economy will grow more, but it is currently only growing in major towns and cities. Rural towns have not benefited from that economic growth. I hope that we will see our brightest and best young people coming back to this country again. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Deenihan, is working to achieve that.

There is one sector of society that has not enjoyed the benefits of an improving economy. Figures released last week by the Central Statistics Office show that while the number of people on the live register has fallen substantially, those with dependants have grown as a proportion of the total. Four years ago, 24% of those signing on had child or adult dependants, or both. The latest figures show that this has now jumped to 29%.

While the overall number of people on the live register has fallen by over 96,000 in the last four years - a lot of it due to emigration - the number of those with child dependants has risen. This is a shocking indication of how young families are continuing to suffer. Doubtless, the high cost of childcare is a major factor preventing parents of young children from getting back into the workforce.

The cost of child care can be the equivalent of a second mortgage for most families. That has resulted in a huge number of poor working families. It is imperative that the working group on child care, established by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, can come up urgently with a targeted solution to a problem that is preventing a substantial section of our population from enjoying some of the fruits of the recovery.

I heard few details yesterday of any real relief for those who have paid most for the price of austerity. The middle class, ordinary working people are those whose wages have been cut, in some cases by up to 20% in the public sector and up to 30% in the private sector. It has been even more in some cases. They have been hit by property tax and water charges.

Many of them bought their houses at the height of the boom but are now in negative equity and struggling to meet their mortgage payments. They still have to pay the universal social charge, a temporary emergency measure introduced in 2011, and even though the economy is heading in the right direction the Government will not abolish what is the most hated tax.

There is no relief for the people in middle Ireland who suffered the most but are getting nothing in return. We must start giving back to those people who should be treated as a priority.

The spring economic statement also dealt with the plans for increased housing provision but most of those measures will take years to implement. Previous attempts at solving the housing crisis would not instil confidence that they will be successful.

The waiting list for housing in Galway and elsewhere in the country is out of control due to the fact that many people are finding themselves in the unfortunate situation where they are unable to continue to pay their mortgages or rents. An allocation of €58 million was received recently by Galway City and County Councils to buy, build or lease homes for social housing needs but the houses are not available. Every Deputy in the House can confirm that. How long will it take to build houses? That waiting list will get longer.

An article in the *Connacht Tribune* stated that there are 4,401 people on the housing waiting list as of 26 April. That figure has risen by over 670 in the past year. Osterley Lodge is full to capacity. People are being put up in hotels because there are no houses available. I challenge the Government to come up with some solution to that problem.

I have a short-term solution. While we are waiting for all these new houses to be built the councils should allocate some of the social fund towards renovating derelict private houses and renting them from their owners. There are many private houses that are derelict in which an elderly person might have died and the house left to a son, daughter, niece or nephew who does not have the money to renovate it. If such houses were renovated they could be rented to the State, which would alleviate some of the problem and be beneficial in terms of renovating old, derelict houses. I ask the Government to consider that solution, which could work well in terms of helping the families in these areas. Also, I would like to see the old family home or the old uncle or aunt's house done up.

A major issue is the home sharing scheme and respite services. Every Deputy in this House will have families coming into their clinics on that issue. It is very difficult to sit at a table with a family who are struggling with a loved one who needs respite care. The respite care grant is being cut. It is not even available in Galway. I have tabled Dáil questions on that issue and the reply from the Minister was that it was a matter for the local health manager but if one meets the local health managers they say it is a matter for the Brothers of Charity but they do not have the

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funds to provide the service. I beg the Minister to provide the funds for these services because these families are at breaking point. They cannot cope. Some of them will have a nervous breakdown, and the children will then have to be taken into State care.

There are over 400,000 people on hospital waiting lists. I recall some years ago Fine Gael putting down a motion of no confidence in the then Minister, Mary Harney, when the waiting list figure hit 130,000. It is now at over 400,000. Mary Harney brought in the National Treatment Purchase Fund, which reduced the waiting list, but the former Minister for Health, Deputy James Reilly, did away with it. I am dealing with a case involving an 87 year old man whose hip operation has been cancelled five times. The man is in agony.

I will conclude by quoting from an article in the *Irish Independent* this morning. I offer my condolences to the late Tommy O'Brien, who collapsed at his daughter's wedding. It should be the greatest day for any couple to celebrate their daughter's marriage but he collapsed and died later as a result of a massive heart attack. Eoin, his son, addressed the congregation at his funeral. He stated:

The truth of the matter though is that Tommy shouldn't be laying in front of us here today. He was due for a heart by-pass last September and it was continually postponed due to the waiting lists - well that waiting list is now one name short and we are down a wonderful man.

Our anger at losing Dad in this way is hard to quantify.

There are political figures in the congregation today. We can accept your sympathy and your kind words, but we shouldn't have to accept this level of health service in a first world country.

In conclusion, Eoin stated: "To you I say 'please do more'". I ask the Minister to please do more to help the most vulnerable in our society.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): I call Deputy Bernard Durkan who I understand is sharing time with Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I believe we have two separate slots.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): Deputy Durkan has 15 minutes.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I think I have 20 minutes now and, according to the Whips Office, my colleague has a separate slot.

I listened attentively as Deputy Grealish mentioned a very important issue because I heard the same views expressed in the middle of the boom when money was falling out of the trees. It was not possible to focus on the issues at that time but enough of that, we will not go there.

They say that Moses wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. In those days poor old Moses did not have the benefit of the GPS and so he wandered around for all of 40 years. When I was a child I never understood what was wrong with him. He never found the promised land but at least he was within sight of it. Listening to the members of the Opposition over the past few days it seems their intention is to lead the people into the wilderness when the promised land is in sight. That is an extraordinary development, and in biblical terms there would have been an instant massive retribution.

The members of the Opposition have not been very inventive. They have accused the Government parties of more of the same and said there is a lot of back-slapping and self-congratulation on this side of the House. Nothing has changed on that side of the House because the Members are as negative as they have been every day for the past four years. I cannot understand how there could be any congratulations or back-slapping on this side of the House. The Members opposite never ceased to forget where they are coming from and where they are going, and they keep reminding us of the same negative things. There has not been a single positive word from them in four years, with one or two notable exceptions who I will not mention. I am tempted to mention them-----

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: Go on.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: -----but the order of the day now appears to be that everybody is mentioned, particularly people outside the House who have no possibility of answering any accusations.

The members of the Opposition seem to have forgotten one very important factor. One speaker, Deputy Shane Ross, correctly stated earlier that this Government inherited the most awful economic situation the country ever experienced. He went on to say that the Government was lucky. It was not lucky because every negative event that could have happened both within and outside this House happened. Challenges were a daily occurrence. In the first two years in government there was not a morning that a controversy did not come down the tracks. It was doom and gloom on issues such as whether the euro would collapse. The prophets of doom and gloom were saying we should have rejoined sterling. We were told repeatedly that the cause of our demise was the euro, and that we should have burned the bondholders. At that time, when we needed €16 billion that we did not have to spend on our public services, they said we should have burned the bondholders but we would not have been able to borrow any more money in the international markets and we could have starved.

What did we avert? From what did we save ourselves? From what did the people of this country save themselves? In the past four years the resilience of the people and the leadership of the Government averted disaster. They averted a situation where salaries and wages across the public service would have been reduced by 65%. While it is correct that there were cuts all over the place which hurt a lot of people, it was not 65%. We were told we should emulate the Icelandic model, the Swedish model or the Finnish model. One would not see so many models in a fashion show. Then the Greek model was trotted out. There is not much talk about the Greek model now. They do not remind us too often now of its benefits. I presume they have forgotten it on the other side of the House. More important, there was talk of a second bailout in 2011-12 when the Government had been in office for barely a year. It was inevitable, we were told. The children of this nation were suffering and their children's children were going to suffer and there was nothing but oblivion in store. There was as black cloud over the nation that was never going to lift again. People were leaving the country in their hundreds of thousands. We were reminded of all this on a daily basis. I congratulate the Irish people for having the resilience to stand up to that barrage of negativity and the total lack of confidence in their ability to revive themselves and to rise up again. We were told on numerous occasions that we should spend more and spend our way out of the economic disaster. That was always the policy of Keynes and there were those on the other side of the House speaking about him as if he was a buddy of theirs with whom they were drinking in the pub every second night. They were wrong about that too. The policies followed by the Government, harsh as they may have been, brought results and saved the country the worst excesses of what could have happened.

What we have to talk about and think about now as a people is how the worst was averted. All due credit goes to the people of this country and the Government for the leadership it gave. If there had not been leadership over the past four years, this country would have slid below the surface and not reappeared for many years.

One of the things that has been mentioned was the cyclical nature of development in the economy over the years. We have been told this is inevitable, but it is not. With proper forward planning, one can avert all these pitfalls or at least minimise them to a huge extent. If we look at the situation that faces us now, what are the basic items of infrastructure needed for a growing economy over the next 20 years? We need an adequate road structure. We need an adequate supply of water that is on tap at all times. That is needed to a much greater extent than was the case over the past 20 years. We need investment in urban and rural areas to have that supply. It is a taboo subject, however, because according to the Opposition no one wants to pay for water. They say we have the right to water. Of course, we have the right to water. Everybody has the right to water and can go to the river or the well and take it from there. That is what we did in this country for many centuries. However, we have a different situation now. There is a greater demand and a greater need for investment in basic water infrastructure. If we do not now provide the infrastructure required, we will have failed the next generation. To those who admonish us on a regular basis that we do not do in time the things we should, I ask what are we to do now? Do we succumb to the promises of the Opposition and spend more money on ourselves or do we spend it on infrastructure and provide for a long, ongoing and steady economic development in this country? Which do we choose? We have heard people call on the other side of the House for spending money we own in one of the major banks. We have 89% of the value of the bank. Implicit in that is to get our hand in the till and toss it out to people for whatever purpose. It is the craziest notion I have ever heard. I have never heard anything like it in my life and I am sure no one else in the House has either. What we must do now is be careful. We have dragged ourselves up albeit with huge sacrifices. Now that we have done so, let us take the next steps carefully. Let us make absolutely certain that we do not dump on ourselves again and walk ourselves into another cul-de-sac to find our way blocked again. The next part of that vital infrastructure is transport. That means rail, road, air, sea and bus to bring the people of the country closer together. We live in a global economy nowadays. Ireland is not the isolated place it used to be. We have access to modern transport and technology which we must use to the best of our ability to spread the economic benefits of good planning throughout the country for the foreseeable future. That can go on for up to 50 years with steady improvements and an absence of the cyclical downturns we have experienced in the past.

Another thing I am a bit worried about is the fact that some Opposition Members have become desperate. I can understand why. They must be very disappointed. Their predictions of just a few years ago have all fallen by the wayside. The Government must continue along the same road for the next couple of years. It must be prudent and careful in what it does, encourage investment and encourage employment. Unfortunately, the prophets of doom will be out of business. What will they be able to say to the community? They will have to say "Actually, we were wrong". They are going to change their tack to something else, obviously, and try to find another scapegoat in order to further their own ambition. That is a political ambition that has nothing to do with reality. I mention in particular some other things that have been trotted out over the past number of days in relation to the ailments and ills of our economy. When the people on this side of the House were in opposition, we were ironically blamed for some of the things that happened despite the fact that the then-Opposition was excluded until the last-minute phone call at 7 a.m. to say: "The country is broke, we have a very serious problem and

now have to call in the Opposition.” That is how much notice we got. People have forgotten that. There is no more reference to it on that side of the House.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: It reminds one of the Arms Trial.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Absolutely. Nobody refers to it on that side of the House. It is one of the things we have had to live with. During the period of doubt about the IBRC and other institutions, I was the recipient of countless phone calls from small savers on a daily basis who were inquiring about what they should do with their few shillings. They said they had been saving for a few years and asked if they would have to take their money out of the banks and hide it in boxes under their beds. Several people did that. The reason was they were afraid the banking system was going to implode, that bondholders would be burned and that they would have nothing to offer their families or even enough money to bury themselves. It was a sad state of affairs. I hope we averted that particular problem.

Another area that is taboo now is energy. We tend to avoid the difficult issues. I predict that if the country does not address over the next four or five years the energy problem and our energy requirements, as with water, we will find ourselves beset by carbon penalties that will cripple us. It will not be the European Union, but the international community that will impose those penalties on us. Whether we like it or not, if we fail to put the machinery in place to increase dramatically the alternative energy available to us, a high price will be paid. It will be paid, *inter alia*, by the farming community as it will not be possible to complete Food Harvest 2020. Certainly, in the aftermath of the abolition of milk quotas, the expansion of the dairy and beef industries cannot take place and will be hit by huge penalties and fines across the board. We can do all these things, however, if we plan in time and adopt the necessary measures.

Another aspect of vital infrastructure is housing. Housing is a vital part of the economy and it is in an awful state currently. There is a simple reason for that. There was no forward planning. For 15 years there was no particular planning for local authority housing. There were no targets. It was handed over to the private sector and voluntary housing agencies. These agencies are excellent in dealing with special needs housing, sheltered housing and other particular areas of housing. However, for the general thrust of local authority housing, there is only one answer: build enough houses through the local authorities and ensure the local authorities are to the fore in meeting that market. That has the effect of balancing the value and the cost of housing generally throughout the economy. It means there is competition, provided by the public sector, in the marketplace. There is no harm in having a little competition between the public and the private sectors. If we have that competition, we will have houses that are good, valuable, safe and reliable. These houses will last a lifetime and will be available to people on the housing lists.

Deputy Stanley mentioned that there are almost 8,000 people on the local authority housing list in my constituency of Kildare. More than 7,000 people are on that housing list and there are housing emergencies every day. Kildare was one of the places that experienced a boom during the building boom. Houses were being built to beat the band on a daily basis. I have hope for the plans put in place by the good people in this House.

How many more minutes do I have? I want to leave five minutes for my colleague.

Deputy Kevin Humphreys: He will have only four minutes and 30 seconds now.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am sorry about that. I am sure the Chair can extend the four

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minutes and 30 seconds. Perhaps if we have long minutes - Irish minutes.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: It is now four minutes and 10 seconds.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I will conclude by saying that there are many other things that I would love to deal with but it is not possible to do so in the length of time available. Shared ownership loans have been referred to. We have done a lot of work on them as well and we are going to do it.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): Is Deputy Durkan sharing his last few minutes?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am operating on instructions received.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): The Government's slot can only be 20 minutes.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I will therefore concede to my colleagues, each and all of them, and remind them that at some stage in the future I expect them to do the same thing for me.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): That is very generous of Deputy Durkan. I call Deputy Fitzpatrick who has four minutes.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I welcome the opportunity to speak today on the spring economic statement. I first entered politics in 2011 when the people of Louth and east Meath gave me the great honour and privilege of electing me to represent them. When we took office in 2011, we were faced with the biggest financial crisis in the State's history. We had lost our financial independence, had to rely on a bailout to keep the country going, more than 300,000 people had lost their jobs, emigration was the only option for our younger generation and our economy was in free fall. In short, as a direct result of Fianna Fáil's reckless policies and its sheer greed in wanting to hold on to power, our country was on the verge of collapse.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: We must remember that this was only four years ago. When I read the spring economic statement this week and consider the progress we as a country have made in that period, it is not difficult to understand why the economy is now the envy of our partners in Europe. The Opposition parties are in denial. It does not suit their political aims to have an economy that is growing or a people who are finding their feet again. If we had followed the advice of Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil, I dread to think of where we would be today. Their advice was to default or leave the eurozone. They were prepared to walk away from 40 years of economic progress in Europe.

Where are we today? The facts speak for themselves. The bailout is over. Austerity is over. The troika is gone. Our economy is growing. I know better than most that the recovery is both fragile and weak and is not yet secure. I meet people every week who continue to suffer as a direct result of the collapse of the economy. I hear stories of families struggling to make ends meet and parents missing their children who have had to emigrate to find work. Too many people are still out of work. The people of Ireland have made great sacrifices over the past four years for the sake of Ireland. We must never forget that. They must be rewarded for their hard work and determination. It has been proven time and again, and I see it every week in my clin-

ics in Dundalk and other parts of Louth, that people who have secured jobs are the ones who are starting to reap the benefits of the recovery that is taking place. In Dundalk alone there have been more than 1,000 new jobs announced by companies such as eBay, PayPal, Prometric and SalesSense, to name a few. The unemployment rate has fallen by almost 30% and by almost 24% in Ardee and in Drogheda, respectively. To put this in perspective, the number of people who have come off the live register in County Louth over the past four years is almost 3,500.

We know this is still not enough. This Government has set out a clear plan to get Ireland out of the mess left behind by the Fianna Fáil economic crash, namely, the creation of sustainable jobs. Our spring economic statement has set out a four-year plan with clear targets for jobs creation, including 100,000 new jobs over the coming months, which is one year ahead of plan. By the end of next year we will have net immigration and by 2018 we will have replaced every job lost due to the Fianna Fáil economic crash. By 2019 we will have more people in employment in this country than ever before.

We are driving towards an economy that will have full employment and in which every person who wants to work will work. The Government and I know that these targets are ambitious but we also know they are achievable. We plan to grow the economy by between 3% and 3.5% each year. There will be no more boom and bust cycles. As the Taoiseach said, we are never going back to the “when we have it, we spend it” approach of Fianna Fáil and nor will we follow the “even if we don’t have it, we’ll spend it” approach advocated by Sinn Féin. Our economic plan offers reward for hard work and not quick profits for speculation.

The universal social charge was introduced by Fianna Fáil. I am pleased to see that we are now starting the process of phasing it out of our tax system. In our first budget we removed more than 330,000 low-income families from the universal social charge net and in the previous budget we removed a further 80,000. By the next budget, we will have removed more than 500,000 people from its net.

I am pleased with the progress we are making but understand that more needs to be done. The people have a very clear choice moving forward. They can choose a stable government that will secure our recovery or a government that will wreck our future with populist promises it simply cannot keep.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): I call Deputy Fitzmaurice who was allotted 20 minutes, but there is only four or five minutes remaining.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the House for the opportunity to speak on this issue and understand that the Chair may have to call time on it shortly. The spring statement is a new idea in Ireland. I am not that long in this House, but from what I understand it had been circulated in recent years. It is basically a statement of where we are and a projection of where we are going. There are positive things in it. We do not need to be always negative. The projections include figures of between €1.2 billion and €1.5 billion in revenues with which we can try to alleviate some of the difficulties facing people at the moment. That is to be welcomed. I hope the forecast will stay on target during the course of the year. It would be great if there was even more available to help alleviate some of the problems because people in Dublin and every other part of Ireland face many difficulties. There is a projection of more than 2 million people in employment, which is good. We need to keep a focus, however, on the quality of these jobs and the salaries being paid. Some of these jobs are low-paid, but at the same time, every job created is a job to be welcomed.

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There is one major problem. We seem to be living on an island of two Irelands. Dublin seems to be faring well, which is a good thing and no one begrudges that. There appears to be a lot of work in Dublin and a lot of foreign direct investment companies are coming to Dublin. While this is welcome, the knock-on effect involves problems with housing and traffic congestion. Problems may be also caused in places where there is some prosperity.

The serious housing issue needs to be addressed. I have spoken with a few county councils around the country. The day of the budget last October was my first day in the Dáil. Everyone would welcome the announcement on social housing, but one should dig into the reality of that. We have great dreams in terms of what we are announcing, but the money has not yet been utilised because, when one decides to do some of these jobs, greenfield sites are considered, meaning that planning permission must be acquired and the land must be bought. All of this takes nine, ten or, if there are objections, 11 months. Many of the houses in question will not come on stream this year. It may be even a struggle to bring some of them on stream next year despite the announcement of X amount of houses this year. When we make an announcement, there should be substance supporting our claim that we will deliver. It should not just be aspirational. This is important.

I welcome the fact that some towns and cities are picking up, but other towns across Ireland have not yet seen an increase in prosperity.

Messages from Seanad

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): Seanad Éireann has passed the Vehicle Clamping Bill 2014 [Seanad] and the Roads Bill 2014, without amendment.

Topical Issue Debate

Mental Health Services Provision

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this Topical Issue after many attempts. I thank the Minister for Health for his presence. Undoubtedly, he will be aware of the impending decision of An Bord Pleanála regarding the national forensic mental hospital facility to be constructed in Portrane. There are grave concerns within the community about the routing of construction traffic, estimated at 30 trucks per day, in both directions through a small regional road and the village of Donabate. Approximately 10,000 people live between the two towns. The area's roads infrastructure is not up to the standard one would expect for such traffic movements.

I should preface my statements by saying that this project is very welcome among people in Donabate and Portrane, where there is overwhelming support for it. Of the 50 or so people with whom I have corresponded, only one questioned the decision to locate the facility in Portrane. As it so happened, that person was from Dundrum, which is from where the facility is being relocated.

The traffic issue will not go away. A decision will be made by 29 May. Although it may come sooner, I understand that there is a possibility that a decision may be delayed depending on whether An Bord Pleanála seeks additional information from the HSE or decides to assess its inspector's report. Traffic for the project will pass four schools of hundreds of children, a sports

centre and a number of sporting clubs that are located around the site of St. Ita's Hospital in Portrane. The alternative is a temporary road, which forms part of the Donabate local area plan passed by Fingal County Council a number of years ago when I was a member of that authority. The temporary road project was to cost in the region of €1 million, but the offset cost that the HSE will have to meet to repair the local roads after and during the facility's construction will run into hundreds of thousands of euro, as we saw when the wastewater treatment facility was being constructed in Portrane in recent years and Fingal County Council had to reinstate roads that were completely destroyed by a far smaller number of heavy goods vehicles, HGVs, entering the site.

A hospital being built means large-scale precasts and units for lift shafts and the likes. These require long vehicles, which cannot pass one another on the bridge into Donabate village. For example, buses cannot pass one another on that bridge. Three roads meet there. The bridge was built when the rail line was created in the middle of the 1850s. Although there is new tarmac on the bridge, I am not convinced it can support two 50-tonne trucks at the same time.

While I do not expect the Minister to involve himself in the planning process, he has opportunities to speak with the HSE and to convey to it the importance of re-examining this issue on foot of An Bord Pleanála's imminent decision. I would be interested in hearing his comments on the matter.

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I thank Deputy Farrell for raising this issue for discussion. I am taking this debate on behalf of my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, who is on Government business elsewhere.

The Government has provided €125 million new ring-fenced funding since 2012 to develop and modernise mental health services in line with A Vision for Change. Along with the need to expand and enhance community-based services such as general adult teams, psychiatry of later life and child and adolescent mental health care, we have also prioritised key mental health infrastructural developments under the HSE capital programme, including the replacement of the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum, CMH. The provision of new facilities to replace the CMH and to otherwise enhance forensic mental health facilities nationally is a Government priority.

This project is being delivered in two phases. Phase 1 comprises core project requirements at St. Ita's Hospital, Portrane, as follows: a 120-bed national forensic hospital to replace the CMH; a new ten-bed mental health intellectual disability forensic unit; and a new ten-bed child and adolescent mental health forensic unit. Under phase 2, it is planned to provide three 30-bed intensive care rehabilitation units, ICRUs, to be located at Portrane, Galway and Cork, which are envisaged upon completion of phase 1. A fourth ICRU is intended for Mullingar, involving the conversion of an existing facility.

The HSE capital programme allows for the completion of phase 1 of the project - Portrane - with design work to be progressed only on phase 2. Phase 1 was designated in September 2014 as a strategic infrastructural development and proceeded on this basis. As is the case with the design, planning and delivery of major health capital projects, every effort is made to address all relevant issues during the construction phase in line with traffic management or other best practice issues associated with such projects.

While the project is progressing satisfactorily overall, the HSE has been conscious of the

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need to address various local concerns and thereby minimise future risk, such as site access and agreements with residents. These have been the subject of detailed consultations, as reflected in the HSE's submission to An Bord Pleanála. A decision is expected from An Bord Pleanála towards the end of May.

Subject to receipt of planning permission, enabling works will commence on-site shortly thereafter. Construction of this significant health capital project is expected to be finalised in early 2018, with the facility scheduled to become operational later in the year following equipping completion. I stress that any intervention in the statutory planning process on this matter would be entirely inappropriate, as the Deputy acknowledged. The HSE will, of course, take full account of any issues arising from the expected An Bord Pleanála decision. In the wider context, all efforts should continue to deliver without undue delay the modern national mental health facility now being advanced.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister for his response. I acknowledge the very significant capital infrastructural investment that is being made in my constituency. This particular piece of critical infrastructure has been welcomed by the local community, but the three-year construction phase will have a very detrimental effect on people in the area. My concern is that the price to be paid to advance the project may be too high, perhaps even so high as the loss of a life. This is a village with four schools, a community centre, sporting organisations and so on, all located on the narrow local roads in and around the Donabate area.

The Minister mentioned the consultation process. I participated in that process and can say with confidence that the HSE did not take on board the views of the community. This was particularly evident at one meeting I attended together with the local Minister. The point was made by residents on several occasions that it was impossible to justify routing construction traffic over the bridge I mentioned, which is more than 100 years old and is most likely not up to the standard required to accommodate such traffic. The HSE needs to re-evaluate how this project is to be delivered. It is somewhat ironic that it might end up with somebody having to be put in the care of the HSE as a result of the construction process itself.

I appreciate fully what the Minister is saying in terms of it not being appropriate to interfere in the planning process. However, if there is an opportunity for him to discuss the matter with the HSE, following the decision of An Bord Pleanála, I ask that he emphasise the need to take on board the grave concerns of residents and public representatives in the area.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I very much appreciate Deputy Farrell's point. I know Donabate well enough from my time on Fingal County Council alongside the Deputy some years ago. I understand people's concerns about heavy goods vehicles going through the village and the impact on the bridge during what is a very substantial construction period. I cannot interfere with the planning process that is before An Bord Pleanála but I have discussed the matter with the chief executive officer of Fingal County Council and certainly will discuss it further with the HSE, once a decision is made by An Bord Pleanála, with a view to ensuring the impact on residents in Donabate is minimised and any safety concerns allayed.

Medical Inquiries

Deputy Denis Naughten: As a consequence of suspected cases of misdiagnosis in seven hospitals, with questions raised over the skills of three locum doctors, thousands of scans have

had to be reviewed and hundreds of patients recalled. This news comes some years after the issue of delayed X-ray diagnoses at Tallaght hospital and similar issues at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda emerged. The HSE assured us in 2010 that procedures were in place to ensure X-ray readings would neither be delayed nor misread. Why then has the system let patients down once again?

When a patient has a test performed and receives an all-clear result, he or she is naturally relieved. Now, however, some patients not only have an anxious wait to find out if their all-clear result was correct but there is also the fear that a delayed diagnosis could lead to other complications. Why has it taken so long to identify this problem? Why are some of the patients who are affected finding out what is happening through the media?

The period in question is 2013 and 2014. We were assured in 2010, as I said, that national guidelines for radiological reporting were in place and being fully complied with by all acute hospitals throughout the country. As such, this issue should never have arisen. When it did arise, it should have been identified through the review process that was built into those national standards. That did not happen. The doctors in question moved from hospital to hospital within the State and have since moved outside the jurisdiction. Will the Minister indicate what is being done to protect patients in the United Kingdom and Australia who are now under the care of these doctors?

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: As I live in Drogheda, issues relating to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital are of great concern to me and my constituents. As Deputy Naughten notes, we have been here before. In fact, there is a major sense of *déjà vu* about the new revelations regarding cases of misdiagnosis. A report in the *Irish Independent* of 5 November 2008 related that nine cancer patients had their diagnosis delayed and one of them, who had since died, had missed a major chance of a cure for her cancer. This has been a problem for some time.

I am concerned at the lack of a dynamic within the HSE to deal with this issue. Heads must roll as a consequence of what has happened. How were the three consultants involved, one of whom worked in three or four of the hospitals, allowed into the system when they were not fit for purpose? A Google search of the literature indicates that significant mistakes can occur in reading around radiology, with an error rate of 2% to 20% indicated. However, we were assured that this would never happen again. Given that we know three doctors were involved, why has only one misdiagnosis case been reported in the media? Will the Minister explain that?

When was the Medical Council informed about this issue and what is it doing about it? Why is it the case, as reported in *The Irish Times*, that the doctors concerned cannot be brought back to this country by *mandamus* to be interrogated as to what happened? Either we are hiring consultants by way of a Google search or we have proper supervision and procedures in place. The fault here does not lie with the Minister but with the HSE, which is not delivering for patients in this regard.

Is the technology in these hospitals fit for purpose? In other words, is it possible that some of these errors occurred because the technology in use was not the best available in the marketplace? What protocols will be put in place to ensure that more than one set of eyes is cast over these scans, to use the Minister's phrase in an interview he gave earlier today? If it is necessary to send scans to specialists outside the State for a second read, then that is what we should do.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: As I mentioned in a radio interview earlier today, I was first in-

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formed of this issue this morning and may not have all the information. Indeed, I am not sure anybody does have all the information. However, I certainly will provide whatever information I do have.

As I understand, in 2013 and 2014 questions were raised by clinicians working in our acute hospitals regarding the work of three locum or temporary radiologists. The hospitals involved were Bantry, Kerry and Cavan-Monaghan. It is not believed that the locum or temporary consultants are linked in any way. These three reviews in the three hospitals have been completed and all patients who required follow-up investigations have been contacted. The HSE has provided assurance that if patients at these hospitals have not been contacted by the hospital or their GP already, they have no cause for concern.

I understand a significant number of X-rays - in the thousands, as Deputy Naughten noted - were reviewed and only a small fraction, 100 or so, required follow-up and a repeat scan. Regrettably, one incident of delayed diagnosis has been confirmed. The HSE is following up appropriately with the patient and will provide whatever support is necessary. There is full and open disclosure, in line with policy.

As part of the HSE's risk assessment process, a review may require an audit of work carried out by a locum consultant in other hospitals. As two of the locum consultants also carried out some work in other hospitals, reviews in those hospitals are being undertaken.

In the case of two hospitals, Wexford and Roscommon, I understand that no patient safety concerns have been identified. Drogheda and Connolly hospitals are currently carrying out a preliminary audit over a short defined period to identify any possible errors or safety concerns. This preliminary work is being undertaken to provide assurance to patients that their X-rays or scans have been correctly assessed and reported. In both cases, it involved somebody who worked in those hospitals for a four-week period in 2013. Reviews will be necessary in a number of other hospitals where the consultants also worked.

I have been assured by the HSE that none of the locums involved is currently working in any Irish hospital and reports, as appropriate, have been made to the Medical Council. The reviews were carried out in line with the HSE safety incident management policy and the faculty of radiologists quality assurance guidelines. All cases have been managed, escalated and reported in accordance with the HSE safety incident management policy. Where further action was recommended, patients have been supported.

Radiological services will be improved through the new hospital groups. Within groups, a networked approach will be adopted, allowing the major centres to direct and manage services. It will also allow for greater quality control, quality assurance and frequent audits to pick up errors and identify patterns of poor performance.

I would encourage Members to know all the facts - I do not know them all yet - before jumping to conclusions and calling for heads or assuming that people have done wrong when that is yet proven. As Deputy O'Dowd pointed out, even the best radiologist in the world will have an error rate of 2%. When one gets two radiologists together to look at the same scan, they do not always agree. No matter what guidelines or procedures are in place or what assurances may have been given in the past, we will always have errors. That is why we must have audits regularly, we must have reviews and why sometimes we have to recall patients, which is what has occurred in this case. So far, of 5,000 or more scans reviewed, only one delayed diagnosis

has been identified and that relates to only one of the three consultants. That is an enormous tragedy and I feel for the person involved. They will have the full support of the HSE in getting their treatment and are getting that now. What we have is well below the error rate of 2% so far. Things may change, more things may happen and there may be more information in the future. The facts of this are only emerging but let us stick to the facts and not jump to conclusions or start hanging people or calling for various actions to happen before we know everything that happened.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The most worrying aspect of the Minister's response is that there are a number of other hospitals involved. Can he indicate in how many more hospitals these locum consultants worked? How many more patients will have to worry until they get clarification in this regard?

The reason this issue arises is because we are so reliant on locum consultants. As the Minister will know, consultant radiologist posts in Roscommon County Hospital have been vacant for a number of years. We have been trying to get approval to recruit consultants. We have no permanent consultant radiologist at that hospital. Can the Minister give me an assurance here that those appointments will be made?

I wish to make two further brief points. The first is that the Minister failed to answer a key question. If patients in Ireland were potentially put at risk in regard to these doctors, patients in the UK and Australia where those doctors are now working are also potentially at risk. I raised an issue here in the past regarding a consultant who was not up to standard here and who continued to practise in the UK. I want an assurance that no other patient is being put at risk, be it in this jurisdiction or any other jurisdictions, if these doctors are not up to scratch.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): We are running out of time, Deputy.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Second, why are we not using the key quality indicators that were set out in the Royal College of Surgeons standards in 2010 which would have identified this problem at a much earlier stage?

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: The facts of all of this emerged not from a statement from the Minister or a statement from the HSE, but from a report in the national media in *The Irish Times*. Why was a statement in regard to it not made by the HSE? How can we believe the HSE when it obviously kept this information from public view? We would not know of it if *The Irish Times* had not put it into the public domain, and the Minister would not know of it either. He only learned of it this morning like ourselves. Let us be honest and factual about this matter. Such incidents have happened before. People have died before their time. The result of a previous inquiry stated that somebody would not have died if they had been caught in time and their X-ray had been read properly. That is a fact.

The Minister stated in his reply that "Drogheda and Connolly hospitals are currently carrying out a preliminary audit over a short defined period". We do not know what is going on. The Minister said that "reviews will be necessary in a number of other hospitals where the locums worked". What is going on? The Minister is badly served - as are we - by the statement he read out. I want to know the full facts as I live beside a major hospital that serves the north east. The commitments we were given that this would never happen again in 2008, 2009 and 2010 were absolute and they were accepted, but this is happening today.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I do not have full information so I can only give the Deputies the

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information I have and I certainly will not withhold any information from them. I do not know the exact number of hospitals in which these three locums worked. That is being figured out at the moment. What I can say is that when it comes to the one locum associated with the one delayed diagnosis, all those cases have been traced. What is now being done, as I have been informed, is a trace-back of the two locums, against which no delayed diagnosis has yet been identified.

It is the case that we rely heavily on locum consultants in the Irish health service. The fact that we have now concluded an agreement with the IMO on salary scales will make it easier to hire full-time consultants and hospitals now have much more autonomy within their payroll budgets to hire people for full-time posts. We will, however, always have locums, particularly in smaller hospitals. A small hospital with, say, three or four radiologists or cardiologists or other consultants, is very much dependent on locums when one of the consultants is on maternity leave, out sick or away. It is different in bigger hospitals. If they have a rota of 15 or 16, it is possible to cover for one or two absences but that is not the case in smaller hospitals. That is an issue with smaller hospitals and we need to face up to it. The hospital groups will help. Additionally, when it comes to radiology, in particular, NIMIS technology will help because it has all scans on a digital screen. It is not in all hospitals yet but it will be. It allows for remote reporting and for audits to happen elsewhere. Measures have been taken to contact the hospitals overseas in which these three doctors are working. It is very important to bear in mind that no findings have yet been made against any of the locum consultants to whom we are referring.

Industrial Disputes

Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan): The next Topical Issue is in the names of Deputies Broughan, Boyd Barrett and Deputy Dooley who are sharing the time slot.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Tomorrow is International Workers' Day and it is astonishing that a Government with Labour Ministers would have countenanced the privatisation of significant portions of Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann networks. The stonewalling of the NBRU and SIPTU by Minister, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, and his colleagues has brought us to the awful situation where between 400,000 and 450,000 bus commuters will be left with no bus transport tomorrow and Saturday. Some 93% of workers with Dublin Bus and 95% of Bus Éireann staff felt they had no choice a few weeks ago but to vote for strike action. We have just had a news flash that the strike is going ahead, which is very disappointing. We welcomed that there was some engagement at the Labour Relations Commission.

Both SIPTU and NBRU have outlined their profound concerns for future pay and conditions of the workforce resulting from the proposed tendering and privatisation of Dublin city and national bus routes. Recent assurances from the companies and the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, may be worth no more than similar assurances given to the Aer Lingus workforce, as Deputy Clare Daly noted this morning. We have the example of the UK since the Thatcherite period in the mid-1980s when its national public bus network was privatised and eventually ended up as a cartel divided geographically between five operators.

The Taoiseach and the Minister have repeatedly spoken about the public service obligation subsidy of €90 million. They did not mention that the subsidy has been slashed by the Government and its predecessors since 2011, year after year. The PSO for Bus Éireann was cut by €15 million, down from €49 million to €34 million. In the case of Dublin Bus, the PSO only rep-

resented approximately 30% of turnover whereas in many other European countries, PSOs are in the region of 70% of turnover. Both companies have produced surpluses in recent years and have brought forward many driver and route efficiencies, including network direct in Dublin.

It is very disappointing that even at this, the 11th hour, negotiations have not succeeded. I strongly urge the Minister to address the six areas of concern to the 6,000 staff and their trade union representatives. What progress, for example, has been made on registered employment agreements? It is my personal view that the Minister should simply abandon this crazy plan and put all of his Department's resources into developing a proper Dublin and national bus service.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: If the Minister wants to avoid major disruption to hundreds of thousands of people over the May Day bank holiday weekend and prevent workers, who do not want to be on strike, from going on strike tomorrow, he should abandon this crazy plan to privatise 10% of the routes of Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus. A lot of mud has been thrown and confusion sown on this issue but the bottom line is that this is the beginning of an ideologically driven attempt to privatise bus services. The consequence of that will be to assault the pay and conditions of bus workers and to adversely affect the public transport system as a public service for those who need it. Essentially, what this Government is about is making public transport a purely profit-oriented business. That is absolutely retrograde and should be abandoned.

My own area will be devastated by the first round of privatisation. Six routes are affected, namely 75, 45A, 59, 63, 17 and 114. What characterises many, though not all, of those routes is that they serve areas that are a little bit off the beaten track and where many elderly and young people live. They would not necessarily be hugely profitable routes and if this plan goes ahead these routes will be lost, sooner or later. There is no way for private companies to make money from such routes other than by cutting the routes, reducing the service or attacking the pay and conditions of their workers. The problem with public transport in this country is simple. We provide one of the lowest subsidies to public transport in Europe at 29%; it is 39% in London, 57% in Zurich, 79% in Lyon, 68% in Brussels and so forth. That is the basic problem; we are underfunding public transport in order to force it towards privatisation. We should abandon that plan and avert the strike tomorrow.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: It is deeply unfortunate that we find ourselves, at the eleventh hour, in a situation where tens of thousands of people will be without public transport in the coming days. The blame for that lies firmly at the feet of this Government. The fateful decision was taken by a Labour Party Minister, in consultation with the former Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Varadkar, before the current Minister came into office. Notwithstanding that, an ideological position is being pushed by Fine Gael which has led to this crisis.

The Minister took the opportunity yesterday to suggest that it was a decision taken by a previous Government that led to this situation. However, he knows well that the 2008 Act was based on a European Commission regulation of 2007 which required legislation to cover competition. The legislation that was introduced in 2008 sets out very clearly in section 52 that the existing routes could be maintained by both Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus, based on an awarding mechanism that would see them retain what they currently have. Instead of using the provisions in the legislation to introduce competitive tendering for new routes, thereby protecting the core public transport network, this Government has chosen not to use section 52 of the legislation or, indeed, the agreements that were reached with unions at the time. It has chosen a path of dismantling the public transport system that is currently in public ownership. That is why the workers identify rightly, on behalf of the next generation, that if they do not take a

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stand now, commuters will be disenfranchised and routes and services will diminish in line with what happened in other jurisdictions, particularly in London.

I appeal to the Minister, through the NTA, to call off the process of competitive tendering and go back to the table to see how he can achieve his ideological goals in a manner that does not impact on the travelling public or the workers.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I thank the Deputies for raising this issue which is of huge concern to commuters throughout the country and to workers in our public bus companies. On Tuesday, I issued a statement which dealt comprehensively with the industrial relations issues involved in the current dispute between SIPTU, the NBRU and the bus companies. I confirmed that no current employees of the two companies would have to transfer to another employer should their company be unsuccessful in retaining one of the routes being tendered out in the current process. As this means that the terms and conditions of all those employees are fully protected, my statement provided a framework for the unions to return to the LRC to formalise an agreement with the companies on that basis and to agree a process to deal with any implementation issues which might arise. This statement removed any industrial relations basis for strike action by either union against the companies and should have led to an immediate calling-off of the strikes planned for this weekend and on five subsequent days in May. This has not happened and attempts have been made to justify the disruption this action will cause to the public and the damage it will cause to the companies, by reference to a range of issues which have already been addressed or which relate to Government policies and legislation which are entirely outside the control of the companies and are not a valid basis for legitimate industrial action.

To remove any doubt or confusion which may exist in the public mind, I want in the short time available to me to address again some of the points raised by SIPTU and the NBRU. First, they have stated that no bus worker should be compelled to move to a private operator under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment), TUPE, regulations. As stated, I confirmed on Tuesday that such a commitment can be given to all current employees for the tender process that is now under way. The unions have also said that the NTA must effectively regulate private operators who breach workers' conditions of employment. This is not an industrial relations matter between the unions and the two companies and is not a valid basis for industrial action against them. However, the NTA has already indicated at the LRC that it will develop a basic set of principles for inclusion in a statement of contractor employment standards for contractors on relevant public transport service contracts. This would indicate that it is NTA policy to ensure contractor compliance with employment law and the authority will apply a performance regime that would include performance deductions where breaches of contract obligations have been verified and not dealt with. The ultimate sanction, of course, is termination of the contract.

The trade unions have stated that labour costs must not be a considering factor in the contract tendering process. This is not an industrial relations matter between the unions and the two companies and is not a valid basis for industrial action against the companies. Furthermore, this is not a provision that is used in tendering processes. The unions have said that where legacy costs arise from lost tenders, workers must not be asked to fund these through restructuring. The companies have already given this commitment and will restate it in discussions at the LRC. In any event, legacy costs will not be significant because of growth in the overall market. Finally, the unions have said that registered employment agreements, REAs, for bus workers should be entered into by employers. The Government has approved the drafting of legislation

on REAs and sectoral employment orders, which is due to be published within weeks. Following enactment, it would be a matter for parties involved in the bus market as to whether they want to instigate discussions on an REA or approach the Labour Court for a sectoral employment order. Therefore this is not a valid basis for the current industrial action.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: The Minister mentioned a statement of contractor employment standards, SCES, for proposed private operators on 10% of the PSO routes. However, across a wide range of policy areas, including finance, banking, energy and communications, regulation has not worked. We have cartels in energy with companies charging what they like.

I also asked about the registered employment agreement, which the Minister said would be published. Why has it not been published? Why has this work not been done? The Minister said sectoral employment orders can be made, but he has given no details. There is nothing here for very worried workers and their families.

The Minister referred to TUPE but we know the weaknesses of TUPE. It does not cover pensions and so on. There is no basis in EU or Irish law for the steps he is now taking.

We do not need this privatisation. It is not necessary. It was foisted on us by the late Séamus Brennan of Fianna Fáil. This is a Fianna Fáil production now being directed by Fine Gael to bring us a privatised public bus sector. The two of them will probably be together after the general election in a Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael Government.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: The Deputy should not hold his breath.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: This is what has been planned. This is what the *Irish Independent* wants to happen with Fine Gael having perhaps eight seats in Cabinet. They invented this.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: No, we did not.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: The late Séamus Brennan wanted to privatise a quarter of the bus network.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: That is correct, but he never got his way.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I urge the Minister and I urge Labour Party Ministers to abandon this policy and give Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann the resources they need to produce the kind of good bus service we want. He should not bring us down this road, which has ended up with cartels and price-gouging in the UK, overseen by the current Conservative-led Government.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: When we hear the Minister's response, which has failed to address either the questions we asked or, more importantly, the concerns driving the bus workers to go out on strike tomorrow, I have to say they are right and justified to proceed with that industrial action to force the Minister to back down. This is about the Minister's policy and not all these technicalities and legalities. It is about his policy and the obsession of Fine Gael in particular to privatise public services.

We need to be clear and the public needs to be clear that when those workers go out on strike against privatisation, they are acting in the interests of the entire public. As a result of privatisation there will not be a single extra bus route or bus journey on any of the routes that

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are outsourced. The only thing that will change is that in order to make money, those private contractors will have to cut the wages and conditions of workers or cut the services, or both. In the long run, services such as the ones I mentioned in outlying areas, of which our area will be particularly hard hit, will go because they will not be seen as profitable from the point of view of profit-hungry contractors.

We are saying the Minister should abandon the plan to dismantle the public transport system. It is wrong.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Yet again the Minister has announced what he believes to be the solution to this strike - that workers could remain with the two parent companies. All that he does every time he reiterates that is to prove that this is ideology over economics from the Government's perspective. If Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus have to retain staff they no longer require because they no longer retain the services, they will become more inefficient, making it more difficult for Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus to compete for the awards the Minister will be issuing from 2017 to 2019.

It is not acceptable for the Minister to say that somehow because of growth in the market these people will be subsumed into those companies because if the Bus Éireann network in Waterford is dismantled and the growth is in Dublin, does he expect these workers to travel from Waterford to Dublin to work? It is farcical. I know it was about the Minister putting his finger in the dam of the strike that is emerging, but it undermines the efforts he is making if it is supposed to be done under value for money. I ask the Minister to accept that the proposal based on Fine Gael ideology is wrong, to pull back at this late hour and ask the NTA to step back from competitive tendering.

As the strike is going ahead tonight, I ask the Minister to do two things. He should ask Iarnród Éireann to halt the works that are planned on the rail network over the weekend. Will he sign whatever order is appropriate to open up the bus lanes to commuters during the strike period?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Anybody who is going on strike tomorrow will not find themselves required to change company due to the tendering process that is under way. It is an intervention that is unprecedented in the recent history of both companies. It was made by the Government because I recognised the concerns that workers have regarding a change. I am also very conscious that what will happen tomorrow will cause immense harm to the company and to the travelling public. The losses for both companies will be in the millions of euro and millions of journeys will be affected by what could yet happen tomorrow.

The Labour Relations Commission and all that is available there provided a forum within which the framework I have outlined could have led to dealing with detailed matters of implementation. That would have allowed the residual issues that existed to be dealt with.

One matter that has been further emphasised throughout today is the issue of legacy costs. I have emphasised again here this evening as I did earlier that legacy costs as a result of this process will not have to be dealt with by the companies. As a result of what could happen tomorrow, great legacy costs will be conferred on both companies due to the scale of strike action that will happen. I will not be asking the taxpayer to pay for that cost.

I believe we will have a bigger bus market with a bigger Bus Éireann and bigger Dublin Bus within it. As we increase investment in both those companies we should do so in such a way

that the best value can be gained for the taxpayer and where a degree of tension can be introduced for that market to ensure services are provided well and taxpayers' money is well spent.

Credit Unions

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for having accepted this particularly important Topical Issue matter. I also thank the Minister of State, Deputy Harris, for coming in to deal with it. I hope he will take seriously the issues I am raising.

The Minister of State will know from his party colleagues the huge controversy that has surrounded the closure of Newbridge Credit Union, both locally and nationally. Locally it was a union of enormous significance. Its building dominated the local streetscape in very much the same way that it dominated the local community. The size of the building reflected the importance of that organisation to the community as a whole and its loss has had a devastating impact on the community at large and in particular on low-income families.

The impact on low-income families has been further exacerbated by the contemporaneous closure of the local parish savings club on foot of legal advice arising out of the role of the charities regulator. As a result, Newbridge has become a playground for moneylenders and the least well off in the community are suffering most. Those are the difficulties we have to contend with.

The particular issue I wish to raise is death benefit or life assurance. One of the significant benefits that came to members of credit unions and a benefit that was of particular importance to people of relatively modest means was that on death they could avail of a benefit of up to €12,000 or €12,500. The understanding was that when the credit union transferred to Permanent TSB, all of the loans, deposits and benefits accruing to members would also transfer. It was only realised in recent months that Permanent TSB will not provide death benefits. This is important to all members but it is particularly significant to people on modest means and older people for whom this was their only life assurance provision. It provided a fund that would bury them when their time came. People were alarmed to discover that Permanent TSB will not be honouring the commitments made by the credit union.

The State has committed €53 million to fund the transition of the credit union to its new manifestation. Given the amount that has been paid to Permanent TSB and the costs incurred in the process, some of which were questionable in terms of the role played by the Central Bank and the Department of Finance, there is a moral imperative to ensure that people who had this benefit in the past can continue to enjoy it in future.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and giving me an opportunity to provide information to him and his constituents. The Central Bank received approval from the High Court under the Central Bank and Credit Institutions (Resolution) Act 2011 to transfer the assets and liabilities of Newbridge Credit Union, excluding the premises, to Permanent TSB. This action was necessary to safeguard members' savings as the only alternative available to the Central Bank was liquidation, which would have meant the loss of unprotected savings of €11 million. These included the savings of charities, schools and individuals.

On foot of a request from the Governor of the Central Bank, the Minister for Finance agreed

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to pay Permanent TSB a financial incentive of up to €53.9 million to support the transfer. This consisted of €23 million in cash up-front, €4.25 million for restructuring and integration costs, €2 million for other transferring liabilities and a maximum of €24.7 million to cover additional costs resulting from all loans being written off with nothing recovered. A 50:50 risk sharing agreement is in place whereby the resolution fund will absorb 50% of losses on loans performing below their transfer value and share 50% of gains on loans performing above their transfer value. The financial incentive provided in the Newbridge case is fully recoupable from the financial services sector over time in the form of a levy.

The strategic approach taken by Permanent TSB to the former Newbridge Credit Union, including the provision of any insurance coverage for customers, is a commercial matter for that entity. The Minister for Finance was informed by the Central Bank that Permanent TSB wrote to the former members of Newbridge Credit Union in December 2014 to state its intention to fully integrate the business of the credit union into the local branch of Permanent TSB. This correspondence included details of Permanent TSB's approach to life insurance on deposits and loan protection insurance, which was a commercial decision taken by Permanent TSB. All questions regarding those assets and liabilities, as well as queries on ongoing customer products and services, can and should be addressed to Permanent TSB in the first instance.

The Minister for Finance emphasises the Government's recognition of the important role of credit unions as a volunteer co-operative movement and the distinction between credit unions and other types of financial institutions. The Government's priorities remain the protection of members' savings, the financial stability of credit unions and the sector overall. In February 2015 the Central Bank approved the extension of the common bond of Naas Credit Union to incorporate a number of other areas including Newbridge. This will ensure that credit union services are again available to people in the Newbridge area. The Government is determined to support a strengthened and growing credit union movement and we encourage the movement to work with stronger credit unions so they can provide a viable option for assisting weaker credit unions. Each and every action taken by this Government on the recommendation of the Central Bank was aimed at protecting members' savings, including charities, schools and local savers in the Newbridge area.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I support the objective of protecting savings but the issue of death benefit or insurance is a different matter. The Minister of State revealed that responsibility for this has been passed to Permanent TSB but agents of the State entered into an agreement with that bank before the credit union had been subsumed. The issue of death benefit should have been considered as part of this agreement. A considerable number of people are suffering because a benefit they expected to receive after being members of the credit union for several decades will now be denied to them. That is wrong and the Department of Finance should rectify the matter immediately. An information note circulated to people in advance of the credit union being subsumed stated that the legal agreements underpinning existing loan and other arrangements would not be altered by the transfer because Permanent TSB was simply going to assume the same rights and responsibilities formerly belonging to the credit union. That was people's understanding until December 2014, when the process was at an advanced stage. It is not too late to revisit this issue and do the honourable thing on behalf of the longstanding members of the credit union who expected to be able to rely on this death benefit.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will bring the Deputy's views to the attention of the Minister for Finance. I am sure the Deputy did not intend this but I reject any criticism of Department of Finance officials or the Minister in respect of this matter. Every action taken was on the basis

of protecting members' savings. I am sure the Deputy accepts the bona fides of the Department and the Government in that regard.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I do.

Deputy Simon Harris: The other option was liquidation, which would have been more expensive and, more important, would have put savings at risk. The Minister for Finance, on the recommendation of the Central Bank, has put in place funds and measures to address the problems in Newbridge. The Deputy and other colleagues from that area have outlined to me the difficulties this has caused. I am pleased that the Central Bank has made a decision that will ensure credit union services can continue to be available.

As Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW, I am exploring how we can provide Intreo services from the former credit union building, as well as other opportunities to allow the community to benefit from the space provided. I look forward to working with local representatives and community groups in that regard.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.40 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 6 May 2015.