



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 14 Eanáir 2016*

*Thursday, 14 January 2016*

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

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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## Ceisteanna - Questions

### Priority Questions

#### Motor Insurance Regulation

1. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if he will reconstitute the Motor Insurance Advisory Board, which was previously successful in reducing motor insurance premiums, particularly to examine the profitability of the industry, the settlement of claims and the impact of false and exaggerated claims on premiums; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1516/16]

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle. On a personal note, I wish the Minister, Deputy Noonan, all the best. It is good to see him in good form and working away following his health difficulties before Christmas. I wish him the very best.

The issue I raise in this question is the need to re-establish the Motor Insurance Advisory Board to examine the rapid escalation in motor insurance premiums. There has been much focus on insurance companies as a result of the flooding issue, which we will discuss later. This is a very important consumer issue and I hope the Minister will agree to the re-establishment of the board.

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan):** I thank Deputy McGrath for his personal good wishes and for raising this very important issue this morning. As Minister for Finance, I am concerned that there should be a stable insurance sector and that risks to policy holders and to the wider financial system are limited. I am aware of reports of the increasing cost of motor insurance. However, the ability of the Government to influence insurance pricing is limited, as insurance companies are required under European law to price in accordance with

risk, and neither I, as Minister for Finance, nor the Central Bank of Ireland have the power to direct insurance companies on the pricing of insurance products.

The Central Bank advises me that competitive conditions within the insurance market intensified in recent years and that many firms focused on maintaining market share, which provided an impetus towards lower premiums. Competition on premiums was subsidised by investment income and other measures. Recent reversals in investment markets have generated investment losses that are a drag on profitability. In the view of the Central Bank, the recent premium increases are aimed at restoring core underwriting profitability and securing the financial position of the firms concerned for the long term.

While the provision and pricing of insurance policies is a commercial matter for insurance companies, this does not preclude the Government from introducing measures that may, in the long term, lead to a better claims environment that could facilitate a reduction in claims costs.

The question of the cost of insurance is a complex one involving a number of Government Departments, State bodies and private sector organisations. Whilst I do not intend to reconstitute the Motor Insurance Advisory Board at this time, I have asked my officials to examine the factors which contribute to increasing costs of insurance. This work is part of an overall review of the insurance sector which my Department will undertake in consultation with the Central Bank and other Departments and agencies. This work will continue over the coming months and will involve engagement with a number of parties both public and private.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I thank the Minister for his reply. These are more than reports of increases in motor insurance premiums - over the last 12 months or so, motor insurance premiums have increased by up to 30%. The industry predicts that over the course of 2016, increases will be of the order of 25%. Somebody who paid a premium of €400 in 2014 will probably pay €650 to €700 after this year. That is simply not sustainable and the evidence suggests that younger drivers and people driving older vehicles, in particular, are being hit with the highest increases. We have been here before. The Motor Insurance Advisory Board, which was established in 1998 and first reported in 2002, made a series of recommendations which, when implemented, made a discernible difference to the cost of motor insurance premiums. There is no transparency in the sector. Seven out of every ten claims are settled out of court by insurance companies, with no register or evidence as to consistency with regard to the settlement of those claims. I welcome the fact that departmental officials will examine the sector but I ask the Minister to go further and to formally re-establish the aforementioned board.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** As I said, the Department is conducting a review at present and will consult with various interest groups, both public and private. Certainly there are issues that need to be addressed but under European law insurance companies must cover risk and must price in accordance with risk. If the risk is high, obviously premiums go up. Neither the Central Bank nor the Department of Finance can intervene to direct or influence the pricing policy of insurance companies.

I am informed by both the insurance industry and the Central Bank that the frequency of claims has increased over the past year. This is associated with improving economic conditions. They also state that the number of large claims has increased. The Central Bank further states that a number of changes taking place within the claims environment in Ireland are making that environment volatile. This in turn increases the claims costs for insurance. The changes mentioned include the changes in the courts' jurisdiction since February 2014 which

has led to concerns in the sector that this will lead to increased legal costs. Furthermore, claimants are now more likely to engage a solicitor to handle claims and insurers report that this has led to cases taking longer to settle and has increased the cost per claim. There are also proposals to introduce periodic payment orders. There are changes happening in the sector so it is timely that we would conduct a review, led by the Department of Finance. While I am not re-instating the Motor Insurance Advisory Board, we will see what recommendations come from the departmental review which should be concluded in a matter of months.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I thank the Minister for his reply. The reasons behind the hikes in insurance premiums are many and varied. They include an increase in the cost of settling claims, an increase in the incidence of fraud, a lack of consistency in court awards and a lack of transparency around out-of-court settlements involving insurance companies and claimants. These issues require examination and must be dealt with. In that context, I welcome the fact that the Minister has asked his officials to lead a review. I ask him to clarify that the review is specifically focused on the motor insurance sector and will result in recommendations which will be on the desk of the Minister's successor - whether that be the Minister, Deputy Noonan, himself or another Minister for Finance - in the coming months. Hopefully, the outcome of the review will be similar to what was achieved in the past when the Motor Insurance Advisory Board made its recommendations, one of which was the establishment of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board. While that body has proved to be very successful, it also requires a review, given the passage of time and the fact that it has been overtaken by developments.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** The scope of the review is to examine the insurance industry with particular emphasis on why premiums are rising, particularly in recent months, in what many people consider to be an unjustified manner. Premiums are certainly rising very rapidly. There will be a particular focus on motor insurance. Insurance in Ireland has been fraught for some time. The Central Bank has explained that for some time investment income was used by insurance companies to keep premiums lower and to bolster their positions. However, investment income has gone down now so the companies are raising their premiums. We will have the full review and the Deputy is very welcome to make a submission to the Department of Finance to raise any particular issues along the lines of those he has raised today and I will ensure they are examined fully.

## **Universal Social Charge Abolition**

2. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Finance in absolute terms, and as a percentage of the predicted available fiscal space, the cost of abolishing the universal social charge within the next five years; the gain for a person earning €185,000 of such an abolition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1515/16]

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Guím gach rath ar an Aire tar éis a chóir leighis. Is maith an rud é go bhfuil cuma breá folláin air arís.

There is great pressure on the infrastructure of this State and on our public services. There is also great pressure on low and middle income earners. However, there is a dangerous habit in this State of governments shifting the tax base from stable personal taxation to more volatile tax bases. What would be the cost to the people of Ireland of the tax break proposed by Fine Gael which will mostly benefit the wealthy in the future?

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**Deputy Michael Noonan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an dea-ghuí maidir le mo shláinte.

This is a very interesting question because, one way or another, all parties are either maintaining the *status quo* in respect of USC or advocating change. In that context, it is important to put the debate on a firm statistical footing at least, whatever the opinions might be subsequently. In reply to Deputy Tóibín's specific question, the indicative gross fiscal space over the 2017 to 2021 period is some €10.9 billion in cumulative terms, as outlined in budget table A.9. A decision not to index the tax system would add a further €2 billion to the level of space available over the period, of which some €500 million relates to the USC, bringing the total potential fiscal space to €12.9 billion. It should be noted that the indicative fiscal space highlighted in these budgetary annexes requires a number of assumptions, including in relation to reference rates for potential growth, deflators and certain other variables used in the calculation. These inputs are based on current projections and are likely to change over time.

In 2016, the universal social charge is projected to raise approximately €4 billion in Exchequer receipt terms, with this level expected to increase as employment and wage growth continue in the years thereafter. Were the USC abolished, the full year impact, incorporating recent changes to the USC, would cost approximately €3.7 billion. It should be noted these USC projections assumed some indexation of the USC, which increases the cost of abolition. In terms of broad order of magnitude, were the USC abolished over the medium term, this would absorb one third of the currently available gross fiscal space.

Since coming into Government, I have already made several significant changes to the USC to increase its fairness. As a result of a review of USC by my Department, the Government decided in budget 2012 to increase the entry point to the USC from €4,004 to €10,036 per annum. This removed an estimated 330,000 individuals from the charge in that year. Further increases in budgets 2015 and 2016 brought the exemption threshold to €13,000, resulting in a situation in which an estimated 29% of income earners will be outside the scope of USC in 2016. Furthermore, I also reduced the three lower rates at which USC is charged and increased the thresholds for these rates. These measures, together with the introduction of a new 8% rate on income over €70,044, further enhanced the existing progressive nature of the USC. I have committed, if given the opportunity, to continue to progressively abolish the USC as part of a wider reform of the income tax system to reward work and reduce the marginal rate to no more than 50% for all workers to make Ireland more attractive for mobile foreign investment and skills, including for our returning emigrants.

The Deputy requested that I provide details of the gain which would accrue on the abolition of the USC to an individual earning €185,000 per annum. An employee with that income level has an annual USC liability of approximately €12,342 but I do not propose to provide a benefit of this scale to such a high earner. As in the previous two budgets in which the benefits of USC and income tax cuts have been capped at €70,000 in earnings it is my intention, should I be given the opportunity, to present further budgets to claw back some of the benefits of USC abolition for the highest earners. I will be setting out the details of my party's position on this issue in due course.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Minister said there was a fiscal space of roughly €12 billion. Is that over five years?

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** Yes.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Okay. That is obviously a higher estimate than would have been in discourse previously, which was €8 billion over the next five years. However, the key issue is the effect that cutting USC will have. There is no doubt that workers need a break. They have suffered massively over the last number of years and we need to ensure that they have money restored to their pockets. The problem I have with the debate on the USC and its abolition is that without the detail of any clawback sought on upper earners, the Taoiseach would for example have a tax cut of €12,340 on his wage. Someone on €100,000 would have a tax cut of €5,500 on their wage.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** A question, please.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Someone on the median wage - and we must remember that half the population earn €28,000 or less - would receive €860 back. Given those major disparities in the amounts that would be returned, is it not the case that the abolition of the USC is an unfair way to redistribute some of the benefits in the State?

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** Yes, but the Deputy's arguments are based on the assumption that it is the Government's intention, if re-elected, to abolish USC completely for all levels of income. That is not the position. As I have done previously, and particularly in the last two budgets, we capped the benefits at €70,000. We will have a clawback so that these very high benefits will not accrue to high earners. I am not introducing a budget this morning. I am simply signalling that there will be a significant clawback, so the figures the Deputy has quoted are effectively redundant and will not apply. The details of the clawback will be provided in the course of the early days of, or before, the election campaign. Effectively, we are talking about an election commitment with regard to how, if we are re-elected, we will handle the USC over the next five years.

The Deputy questioned the period involved. Last October we put the 2016 budget in place, and that is fully funded. Therefore, what we are looking at for the future concerns 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and, indeed, 2021. In the same way as the 2016 budget was introduced in October 2015, there is an opportunity for the incoming government to introduce the 2021 budget in the autumn of 2020 if they go the full term. There is therefore a five-budget spread right out to 2021.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I sense that there may be a row-back in terms of Government policy, because the Taoiseach was advocating a €4 billion USC return to the State over the next five years. Whether it is 50% of the fiscal space returned in USC or one third, as the Minister says today, that has to be contrasted with the level of investment in the State. In the spring statement, the Minister said that Government investment would decrease from 1.8%, which is the figure today, to 1.5% in 2020. That would mean that Irish Government investment was the lowest in the European Union. In real terms, that means that projects such as flood defences will not get the necessary investment to which they are entitled.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** A question, please, Deputy.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It also means that other issues, such as the creaking M50 that becomes chock-a-block after one accident, will not be resolved. It means that infrastructural projects like the Navan to Dublin rail line will not be built. How is it that we will try to achieve European levels of investment in public services and infrastructure on what is an American tax base?

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**Deputy Michael Noonan:** First of all, there is no row-back. What I have said this morning in reply to the Deputy's question is absolutely consistent with what I have done in the past in terms of USC - capping it at €70,000 and ensuring that high earners do not have extravagant benefits. They are proportionate benefits to people with an income of €70,000, and something similar will be proposed when we abolish USC completely. It will be replaced by some form of clawback for high earners.

Second, the Deputy switched to the issue of investment. A lot of what was in the spring statement has changed because circumstances have improved. Even though it is not 12 months ago, the fundamental statistics are now much better than they were at the time of the spring statement. Looking forward, it now looks as though we are going to balance the budget in 2017. That, in effect, means that we will not be assigning funds to reduce a deficit because we will not have a deficit.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** So investment will increase for the time being.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** Yes. As the Deputy will recall, we have built into the capital programme a review after two years. There will be resources if we balance the budget because, rather than a three-way split of tax reductions, expenditure increases and deficit reduction, the latter goes off the table. I will be strongly advocating that at least a large proportion of that money be used for both social and economic infrastructural investment, so there is space there. If one looks at the spring statement, however, things change rapidly and it is hard to give a precise figure. In primary colours, however, I am indicating the direction in which I intend to go.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I do not like to interrupt Members, but I ask you to stick to the time limits. Otherwise, we will not get to the ordinary questions that backbench Deputies are entitled to ask.

### Home Repossessions

3. **Deputy Seamus Healy** asked the Minister for Finance if he will insist that Allied Irish Bank and its subsidiary the Educational Building Society and Permanent TSB, which are in majority State ownership, desist from seeking repossession of family homes through the Courts and withdraw all such existing applications before the Courts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1426/16]

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** Allied Irish Banks, the Educational Building Society and Permanent TSB, PTSB, are in majority State ownership. They are adding to homelessness and the housing crisis by repossessing family homes. I am asking the Minister, as the majority shareholder, to instruct the banks to desist from this practice.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** I would like to thank Deputy Healy for raising this question. As he is aware, I have no direct function in the relationship between the customer and PTSB, or AIB and its subsidiary EBS. Notwithstanding the fact that the State is a shareholder in these institutions, I must ensure that these banks are run on a commercial and independent basis to ensure the value of the banks as an asset to the State.

Decisions taken by the banks are a matter for the board and management of the relevant institution. The relationship framework agreements define the arm's-length nature of the re-

lationship between the State and the banks in which the State has an investment. The banks are therefore entitled to pursue all options open to them in order to realise the value of their impaired assets, within the significant constraints imposed by their regulator, the Central Bank and the law as it applies.

The Government has put in place a broad strategy to address the problem of mortgage arrears and family home repossessions. The primary focus of this strategy is to support those home owners in difficulty with their mortgage repayments and, in so far as possible, to avoid repossession of family homes. In recent months, the Government agreed measures to enhance awareness of and access to the insolvency framework. We expanded the mortgage-to-rent scheme, making it more accessible. In addition, my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, introduced the Bankruptcy (Amendment) Bill 2015, which will, among other things, reduce the normal duration of bankruptcy from three years to one year.

The Central Bank of Ireland's code of conduct on mortgage arrears also provides protection as it sets out requirements for lenders dealing with borrowers who are facing, or in, mortgage arrears on their primary residence. It ensures that borrowers struggling to keep up mortgage repayments are treated in a fair and transparent manner by their lenders and that long-term resolution is sought by lenders with each of their borrowers.

The number of mortgages in arrears continues to fall. There are almost 121,000 restructuring arrangements in place and the vast majority of these are working. The figures demonstrate that most families can, working with their financial institutions, find an arrangement to make their mortgage commitments affordable. Active engagement by indebted borrowers with their lenders is key to achieving sustainable resolutions. I would urge borrowers in arrears who have not already done so to take that step by contacting their lender directly, or the Money Advice and Budgeting Service, MABS, for an independent assessment of their situation and advice on available resolution options.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** There is a tsunami of homelessness in this country. Last November, the Dublin Homeless Executive provided figures according to which some 1,425 children in 677 families were in emergency accommodation. The Dublin Simon Community said that was unacceptable and shameful. Focus Ireland said that the Government had failed these families. The Master of the High Court, Mr. Edmund Honohan, criticised the banks and accused them of hounding home owners to suicide.

*10 o'clock*

He criticised the fast-tracked repossession regime that the Government has allowed to be introduced in the courts. These banks are majority owned by the State and it is open to the Minister to instruct these banks to desist from repossessing family homes. In Tipperary alone, 100 families are facing repossession. The Minister should insist that this stop.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** Deputy Healy raised the very important issue of homelessness and the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, brought forward proposals last year that have blunted the edge of this particular social crisis. Certainly, over the Christmas period there was less sense of a crisis with homelessness than there had been earlier in the year. The measures introduced by the Minister, Deputy Kelly, have been working and, please God, they will continue to work.

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On the wider issue of repossession, which was the topic of the Deputy's notified question, there is some interesting data published by the Central Bank. During the third quarter of 2015, legal proceedings were issued to enforce the debt security on private dwelling house mortgages in 1,687 cases. During quarter three, there were 798 cases where court proceedings concluded but arrears remained outstanding. In 329 cases, the court granted an order for repossession or the sale of the property. A total of 422 properties were taken into possession by lenders in the quarter, of which 207 were repossessed on foot of a court order. The remaining 215 were voluntarily surrendered or abandoned. The idea that tens of thousands of houses are being repossessed is just not correct. A small amount goes through the system. With the changes made by the Minister for Justice and Equality and with MABS assisting directly people before the courts, I hope the number will diminish even further. It is the policy of the Government to put arrangements in place so that people can live in the family home.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** The Minister is the majority shareholder in these banks and he has obviously given permission to the banks to repossess family homes. He could equally instruct these banks not to go down this road and repossess family homes. He could call an emergency meeting of these bank boards and instruct them not to repossess family homes. I ask him to do so immediately and if bank directors do not agree, they should be sacked, as the Minister has the power to do so as a majority shareholder. This is urgent and, irrespective of the Minister's comments, thousands of families in the country are facing homelessness because of banks in which the State has a majority shareholding. The Minister could give instructions to stop these repossessions and I ask him to do so immediately.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** There is a relationship framework, signed by my predecessors in office, with the banks and the essential component is that the political side will not interfere in commercial decisions. That is for a very good reason as we do not want to politicise the banks. It would be a very sad day for the country if the first port of call for a person seeking a loan had to be the local Deputy rather than a bank manager.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** We are not asking anybody to do that at all.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** There will be no political interference with the banks. On the question of repossessions, 207 houses were repossessed on foot of a court order, which does not equate to the tens of thousands of houses sometimes mentioned in commentary. There are 121,000 restructured mortgages on private dwellings, with a success rate of 86.6%. That means the arrangements stick in just under 87% of cases. The problem is being solved progressively. I appreciate it is very hard on people and I can appreciate that people who lost their jobs do not have money. I also appreciate the concerns and how upset people are. In a very extreme situation, the issue is being handled reasonably well by the banks.

### **Mortgage Interest Rates**

4. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if he is satisfied with competition levels in the Irish mortgage market, particularly the impact on standard variable rates; his views that action is required to ensure equal treatment between existing and new mortgage customers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1517/16]

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** As the Minister knows, I have consistently raised the issue of standard variable interest mortgage rates being charged in this country, particularly the rates

being charged on approximately 300,000 existing bank customers on a standard variable rate. There is a marked difference between the rates they are being charged and those being offered by financial institutions to new customers. That is not good enough and the issue still needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, competition does not look set to resolve the matter and the question is what action the Minister is prepared to take.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** The Government's position is that competition is the best way to achieve a sustainable long-term solution to the issue of high mortgage repayments. The Government made a commitment in the statement of Government priorities for 2014 to 2016 to applying downward pressure on mortgage rates by increasing and supporting competition in the market and it has undertaken a number of initiatives in this regard. As the Deputy knows, I have specifically taken steps to ensure the banks provide options for mortgage holders to reduce their monthly repayments. Last May, I requested a report from the Central Bank on the topic that was subsequently published. I also met representatives of the six main mortgage lenders in May and outlined my view that the standard variable rate being charged to Irish customers was too high. The banks agreed to review their rates and products and, by the beginning of July, to have simple options to reduce monthly mortgage payments for standard variable rate customers. In September, I concluded a series of follow-up meetings with these banks and the reality is that the majority have put options in place to allow many borrowers reduce their repayments. These options range from lower variable rates to new suites of variable rates based on loan-to-value and reductions in fixed rates.

I, therefore, encourage borrowers to contact their bank to see what is available to them in their circumstances or consider moving to another bank, where possible, if the offer is not satisfactory. In this regard, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, website, [www.consumerhelp.ie](http://www.consumerhelp.ie), is a valuable source of information on the rates charged by various financial institutions. In addition, the CCPC is currently running a mortgage switching campaign and it has a mortgage switching tool on the website, which should allow borrowers compare rates charged across institutions. Furthermore, I am pleased to note that some lenders offer repayment of legal fees or cash incentives to borrowers switching mortgage provider.

I asked lenders to provide simple options to reduce monthly mortgage payments for standard variable rate customers and the reality is that the majority have put options in place. I am pleased to see that the majority of lenders have offered their new reductions and products to both new and existing customers. I am also pleased to see that the banks continue to introduce new initiatives as the competitive dynamics in the market increase. As recently as last week, one bank introduced a 0.5% reduction on managed variable rates for new or switcher mortgages with a loan to value of 80% or less. Another bank reduced its standard variable rate in December.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** There have been new initiatives for new customers but the progress for existing standard variable rate mortgage customers has been extremely limited or non-existent in some cases. We can consider the rates at which banks can currently access funds. In October, Bank of Ireland raised five-year money at just over 0.7% and AIB can raise money at similar rates. The Bank of Ireland standard variable rate is six times the rate at which that bank can raise five-year money on the markets, which is outrageous. It is simply unjustifiable.

I would be the first to acknowledge that banks must make a margin and profit, so I have no difficulty with that. Existing standard variable rate customers are being screwed by the Irish

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banks and nobody is doing anything about it. That is unacceptable. Many people are not in a position to switch as they are trapped for a variety of reasons relating to their own financial circumstances. It is not good enough. The Minister started the process in May last year but he did not see it through. He made the threat of imposing a levy or legislation but that has not come about.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** Competition is working in the market now and it will continue to work as more institutions get involved. The Central Bank's statistical release of 11 December 2015 stated that mortgage interest rates generally declined during the third quarter of 2015. Variable principal dwelling house rates declined by 17 basis points over the second quarter, with corresponding buy-to-let rates falling by 14 basis points. Aside from new competition in the market, switching represents the best way to foster competition between the lenders currently operating in the market. Central Bank research suggests that 21% of existing private dwelling home, PDH, variable rate mortgage customers could save by switching their provider and I encourage customers to ascertain whether options are available to them to reduce their payments by switching provider or product. I expect that if the financial institutions are convinced there is a threat they will lose existing customers, they will reduce the rates currently charged to customers.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** There certainly is a degree of competition for new mortgages and for those who are in a position to switch. I would be the first to advocate to those who have equity in their homes and who are in a position to switch their mortgage from one provider to another to avail of a better interest rate to do so. People of course should shop around and I have asked the Central Bank to consider introducing a code of conduct on mortgage switching. Such a code is in place if one wishes to switch one's current account but no such code is in place if one seeks to switch one's mortgage. Many people are put off by the hassle involved in switching their mortgage-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** A question please. Thank you.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** -----but they certainly should do this where they can. However, this does not take away from the fundamental fact that many people do not have this option and are trapped. They are trapped by reason of financial circumstance such as a reduction in their income or they may be in negative equity and other banks are not interested in taking their business.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** They are being denied interest rates that could result in a reduction in their monthly repayments in the order of hundreds of euro.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call the Minister. Thank you.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** This is a cohort of people Members really should be trying to help. A fixed rate is not an option for everyone because one loses flexibility if one enters into a fixed rate arrangement.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** Yes, but in the majority of cases, those inhibitions do not apply. However, there is a very significant inertia in the desire of people to switch to a different mortgage provider even when they can make significant savings. It is hard to understand this at times and probably is to do with the fact that if people have a mortgage for several years, even

if they are to make cash savings, they do not see the purpose of switching. There is an inertia in the system and the various mechanisms have now been put up online to help people who wish to switch to do so.

On the general review of the banks, I met the banks twice. This is an ongoing issue and as I meet the banks in the future, if I am back in office, this will be a high priority on the agenda of any meeting with the banks.

## **Tax Code**

5. **Deputy Seamus Healy** asked the Minister for Finance if he has read the most recent Credit Suisse global wealth report; if so, his views on the staggering inequalities it suggests in the distribution and concentration of wealth here; if, given this report it is now a matter of urgent priority for the Government to establish a database on wealth distribution and to place a wealth tax on assets of households in excess of €1 million to ensure greater equality in the distribution of wealth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1427/16]

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** This question asks whether, in view of the staggering inequalities in wealth in Ireland, the Minister will establish a database on wealth and whether he will introduce a wealth tax for households with wealth in excess of €1 million.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** I thank Deputy Healy for this question. The Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report 2015 provides a range of data in the area of global household wealth, its composition and distribution over the period 2000 to 2015. The report covers all regions and countries and brings together available data from a variety of sources. The authors of the report acknowledge the study of global household wealth is still in an early stage of development and that no country in the world has completely reliable information on personal wealth. This obliged them to assemble and process information from a variety of different sources. The authors state that much work remains to be done to refine estimates of wealth by country and to improve the estimates of wealth distribution within countries.

The most comprehensive source of information on wealth distribution in Ireland is the household finances and consumption survey, HFCS, released by the Central Statistics Office earlier this year. The data relate to 2013 and indicate that wealth inequality in Ireland for that year, as measured by the Gini coefficient, is lower than the euro area average. The results also show that wealth is less concentrated at the top of the distribution here in Ireland than the euro area average.

Ireland already taxes wealth in a variety of ways, such as capital gains tax, CGT, and capital acquisitions tax, CAT, which are levied on an individual or company on the disposal of an asset in the case of CGT or the acquisition of an asset through gift or inheritance in the case of CAT. Deposit interest retention tax, DIRT, is charged at 41%, with limited exemptions, on interest earned on deposit accounts. The local property tax, which was introduced in 2013, is a tax based on the market value of residential properties. The domicile levy introduced in budget 2010 also constitutes a form of wealth tax. It is aimed at high wealth individuals with a substantial connection to Ireland, regardless of whether they are tax resident, to ensure they make a tax contribution to this country in a year of at least €200,000.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** The Credit Suisse bank report shows the top 10% own 58.6% of

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wealth, while the top 5% and top 1% own 46.4% and 27% of the wealth, respectively. This concentration of wealth at the very top is extraordinary on any democratic basis. Moreover, the most affluent 20% in Ireland own 73% of the country's wealth, while the poorest 20% owned just 0.2%. The poorest 10% have negative wealth, while the combined wealth of the top 5% is nearly double that of the entire middle 60%.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** A question please. Thank you.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** In view of these extraordinary levels of wealth at the very top, I again ask the Minister whether he will impose a wealth tax on households with wealth in excess of €1 million. In addition, will he create a database of wealth?

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** There are not recent reliable data in Ireland on wealth distribution. It has only been very recently, particularly in the Central Statistics Office, CSO, report published in 2015, that reliable data have been emerging. These data indicate that wealth inequality in Ireland for 2013, that is, the year examined, is lower than the eurozone average as measured by the Gini coefficient. The results also show that wealth is less concentrated at the top of the distribution here in Ireland than the eurozone average. Central Bank analysis of the data also indicates that while wealth inequality has increased since 2011, it is actually lower than was the case in 2006, the earliest period for which data are available.

As part of the research programme agreed between my Department and the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, covering macroeconomic and taxation issues, a research project involving detailed analysis of wealth distribution and taxation has been included. It is intended that this research project, based on the household finance and consumption survey published in 2015 by the CSO will commence shortly. It should be noted that the data gathered by the CSO as part of the HFCS were not collected for the purposes of calculating the potential yield from a wealth tax but to collect general information on the financial situation and behaviour of households. As I have stated on a number of occasions, the Government has no plan to introduce a wealth tax although all taxes and potential taxation options of course are constantly reviewed.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** The most recent institutional sector accounts published by the Central Statistics Office show that net financial assets of households are €25 billion above peak boom levels. They have grown massively over the past five years and there is no levy, charge or tax on them. In addition, the Central Bank report for the third quarter of 2015 reported that Irish household net worth was €595.7 billion, which is €13 billion higher than was the case for the previous three months. These figures represent obscene levels of wealth at the very top of society. Is it not possible and right to tax these levels of wealth to ensure public services in the hospitals and educational system? I suggest the Minister does this immediately.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** As the economy recovers, obviously the value of assets is increasing. However, there are capital taxes in Ireland which are, in effect, wealth taxes. When assets are transferred on the death of an owner, inheritance tax applies and if assets are transferred prior to someone's death, gift tax then applies. In addition, money on deposit in banks is liable to a DIRT rate of 41%, which also is a form of wealth tax. The residential property tax is a tax on homes, that is, it is a tax on fixed assets and that also is a wealth tax. There is an inconsistency among the Opposition spokespersons in that they want to abolish the lawful property tax, which, effectively, is a strong tax based on the value of assets, and at the same time are calling for the introduction of a wealth tax. The Deputies cannot have it both ways.

### **Mortgage Arrears Proposals**

6. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Finance his plans for new initiatives to tackle the mortgage arrears crisis and the cases of long-term arrears in particular. [1337/16]

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** This question also relates to mortgage arrears. I do not believe that a householder in mortgage arrears which exceed the value of the house would consider a property tax a wealth tax. Also, the banking sector does not exhibit proper competition. It is, in effect, an oligopoly, with 85% of the market in the hands of two banks.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** There are 91,291 families in mortgage arrears. If one accepts that there are typically three people in a household, this means approximately one third of a million people-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy needs only to provide an introductory explanation of his question.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I usually get 30 seconds to do so.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I can assure the Deputy that he has been given his 30 seconds.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** One third of a million families are locked into struggles on this issue.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy can put that question to the Minister later.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** The Deputy will be aware that Central Bank residential mortgage arrears data published last month indicate that the level of mortgages in arrears continues to decline and has done so for the past nine consecutive quarters. It is particularly welcome that the latest bulletin reported that all maturity categories of arrears, including the over 720 days' category, declined in quarter three of last year and it is to be hoped that this downward trend will continue. In addition, the Central Bank data shows the impact that has been made when borrowers engage with their lenders. Almost 121,000 principal dwelling home, PDH, mortgage accounts were classified as restructured at end-September, of which some 86.6% were deemed to be meeting the terms of their restructure arrangement.

The Deputy will also be aware that on 13 May last the Government announced measures focused on strengthening the framework to support mortgage holders in arrears. More recently, the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, signed the commencement order for an important recent reform under the Personal Insolvency (Amendment) Act 2015, which allows for an independent review by the courts if a fair and reasonable proposal for a personal insolvency arrangement, PIA, which includes mortgage arrears on the debtor's home, has not obtained the necessary majority consent from creditors.

In addition, the role of the Money Advice & Budgeting Service, MABS, has been enhanced. The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton, launched the new dedicated mortgage arrears service before Christmas, which assigns to MABS a greater role in offering appropriate

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information, advice and assistance to mortgage holders through all stages of the mortgage arrears resolution process and beyond. There will be three key strands to the dedicated mortgage arrears services, namely, the MABS helpline; specialist advisers to assist mortgage holders in identifying the best sustainable mortgage resolution option for them, and court mentors to assist home owners facing court proceedings.

It must be remembered that over 87% of principal dwelling home mortgages are not in arrears. It is also worth repeating that where a borrower actively engages with a lender with a view to agreeing a sustainable arrangement to address his or her mortgage arrears, it is more likely that an equitable arrangement will be found and that the borrower will be able to remain in the family home.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The point I was trying to make earlier is that typically there are three people in a household and that given there are 91,000 mortgages in arrears this means that nearly one third of a million people are locked into this struggle, most of whom are people in my age category and are likely to have young families. There is a real human tragedy at the heart of this particular issue.

It is interesting that the former Governor of the Central Bank, Professor Patrick Honohan, has stated that he has major regrets with regard to the process of unwinding the mortgage crisis in this State. The only protections that the family had in law have been removed and have not been replaced with a proper replacement. The Central Bank has also diluted the code of conduct on mortgage arrears on behalf of the State. As such, many of the resolutions referred to by the Minister are repossessions or so-called voluntary repossessions. When these are aligned with split mortgages-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** A question, please.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** -----this means that problems are either being kicked down the road or that a family will lose its home. Given this human catastrophe, which is affecting almost one third of a million people, what new initiatives does the Government propose to introduce to alleviate the pain for these families?

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** As everybody here knows, when this Government came into office five years ago, the situation in this area was disastrous and it appeared it would not be resolved. Following the putting in place of a series of measures, which have been constantly reviewed, significant progress has been made. It now appears that this is a solvable problem. Over time, as the economy improves, it is solvable.

We have succeeded in bringing about a situation whereby, because of all of the initiatives applicable, there are very few repossessions of family homes. I provided the statistics in this regard in response to a previous question. As far as I can recall there were 420 repossessions last year, 215 of which were voluntary. The number of repossessions is, as I said, very small. The Government policy is that people will remain in their family homes. The restructuring process is working. Some 121,000 mortgages have been restructured, 86% of which are standing up. In other words, the householders can afford the new arrangements and are complying with the new rules. Things are improving. While there may be a small residue over time, which will not be in a position to make new arrangements, as the initiatives continue we would hope that resolutions will be found for them also.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Minister. I will let you back in.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** The initiatives are constantly reviewed. The initiatives introduced in the past 12 months by the Tánaiste and the Minister for Justice and Equality have added to the portfolio of interventions and have been successful also.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The problem I have is that voluntary repossessions are often recorded as solutions. I have worked with more than 100 people in mortgage distress. Voluntary repossession is often a euphemism for, “There’s no choice left for you but to go”.

I would like to focus at this point on the mortgage-to-rent scheme. According to the Labour Party, 3,500 people will avail of this scheme. Since last October, 246 have done so, which equates to approximately ten people per county. That is a phenomenally low figure which represents 0.002% of people in mortgage distress. In terms of the State-owned banks, this means 15 homes have gone into-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Sorry, Deputy, this is Question Time.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is Question Time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Would you put your question, please?

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I am building the context of the question, a Cheann Comhairle.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There is a time limit.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The point is that the State-owned banks have delivered only 15 mortgage-to-rent solutions.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** A question, please.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I understand there has been-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** A question, please, Deputy. There are other backbench Deputies who want to have their questions answered.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** There are elements of what the Government has done that we believe are unfair. What new initiatives is the Government-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Sorry, Deputy, would you please resume your seat? Thank you.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** -----going to introduce to ensure this-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is unfair to backbench Deputies that spokespersons run over time. It is now almost 10.30 a.m. and we are only on Question No. 6. Would you please resume your seat?

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** A Cheann Comhairle, this-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call the Minister to provide a short reply.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** A Cheann Comhairle, in fairness-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There will be no more questions.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Minister, when responding, was given more than five minutes

to do so.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Resume your seat, please.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** We get very little time to ask questions.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Would you mind resuming your seat?

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** If the Ceann Comhairle did not continually interrupt me-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Would you mind resuming your seat?

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is very hard for me to ask my question when I am being constantly interrupted.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Would you put your question?

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I would be able to put my question in the time allocated if I was not being continually interrupted.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are moving on to the next question.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is unfair.

### **Economic Growth Initiatives**

7. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance the status of Ireland's yield in growth, taxation and general Government revenue from the European Union quantitative easing programme; the impact on Ireland when the quantitative easing programme concludes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1275/16]

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** Over the past year I have asked many questions of the Minister in regard to the expanded asset purchase programme. Has the Department of Finance undertaken any real work to track the impact of quantitative easing on specific areas of the economy? Obviously, the growth rate in 2015 was very welcome, as was the additional revenue in taxes. Did quantitative easing not play a significant role in that, or has any attempt been made by the Minister to quantify it?

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** Under the European Central Bank, ECB, expanded asset purchase programme, often referred to as quantitative easing, QE, the eurosystem, comprising the ECB and the national central banks of the euro area, has been purchasing €60 billion of public and private assets per month and plans to do so until at least March 2017, or until inflation returns to levels consistent with price stability, defined as inflation close to 2%. Purchases of sovereign debt began on 9 March 2015. While it is difficult to estimate directly the beneficial impact of QE on growth rates here since this policy began, it is nevertheless clear that QE has boosted nominal growth, and this is one factor behind the strong tax and general Government revenue growth in 2015.

Assessing what the final impact to the Irish economy will be by the time the QE programme concludes is also difficult to estimate at this stage, not least because of the contingent nature of the end date. The ECB has stated that QE will conclude only when euro area inflation returns to

levels consistent with price stability. This outcome will help businesses across Europe to enjoy better access to credit, boost investment, create jobs and thus support overall economic growth, which should offset the impact of withdrawing QE. Thus, by helping to create jobs and supporting overall economic growth in all euro area countries, including Ireland, the withdrawal of QE will signal the resumption of more normal growth activity in the euro area.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** The Minister said it was very difficult to estimate. Last April or May, the Minister gave me a similar reply, and said he might be able to produce some kind of figures. He is indicating that the withdrawal of QE would have a very significant impact. The figures he and the CSO recently gave us on growth rates until 2021 show a significant decline in growth down to 2017 and 2018 for whoever forms the next Government. Is it likely that the withdrawal of QE will have this significant impact, or is it possible that QE will go on in some shape or form?

The Governor of the Central Bank of Ireland, Professor Philip Lane, and the governing council of the ECB are the people who take the key decisions on it. To what extent does the Irish Government impact on decisions?

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** We can attempt to measure the effect of QE. In the October 2014 budget, the growth estimate for 2015 was 4%. We put some money back into the economy, which increased demand in the domestic economy and drove the 4% higher. In 2015, two tail winds occurred which had not been accounted for in the budget. One of these was QE. Although I had campaigned for it for three years, I did not expect it to be introduced as early as March 2015. I thought it would be introduced in autumn 2015. Therefore, we had not factored it into the budget. The second tail wind was the unexpected decline in energy prices at the start of 2015.

If we take it that it would have been reasonable to expect growth of approximately 5% for 2015 as a result of the budget, QE has had some impact on the fact that growth was 7% in 2015. QE kept interest rates down and, more importantly, reduced the exchange rate of the euro. As a result, our export sector exported more and earned more money. However, it is very difficult to quantify.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** Looking back, it is a pity in some respects that Mario Draghi and his colleagues did not embark on a QE programme earlier. The major down side to QE in the British and Japanese experience has been an increase in inequality. Owners of assets tend to do very well, going back to the point Deputy Healy made about the Credit Suisse report. Is this a concern for the Minister?

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** It is a matter of monetary policy and, while I have much control over fiscal policy through the budget, monetary policy is for the ECB and the national central banks. Monetary policy is for the new banking union, driven by the people in Frankfurt. I advocated QE when it was very unpopular to do so in Europe. I campaigned for it for approximately three years and, eventually, a majority moved on side making it possible for Mr. Draghi and the people in Frankfurt to move, without objections in the German constitutional courts, to implement QE.

QE seems to be working. Europe is slowly rising and across all countries, including Greece, there is positive growth, which many people attribute to QE. The commitment is that it will continue until 2017, when it will be reviewed to see if it will be continued. I cannot see it as a

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permanent feature of monetary policy. It will end at some stage. The most serious internal risk to our prosperity is the size of our debt, and we must keep pushing it down. The risk arises not from the debt itself but the interest on the debt. If QE is removed and interest rates increase, it will have an adverse impact. We need to be better positioned on the overall burden of debt by 2017, which we will be.

## NAMA Operations

8. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance when the National Asset Management Agency will complete its original mandate; what he expects the financial outturn to be; if he will formally expand the role of the agency; when he expects the agency to be formally wound up; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1325/16]

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** As we move towards the end of the current Dáil, it is timely that the Minister for Finance give the House an update on the work of NAMA. When does the Minister expect NAMA to complete its original mandate given in 2009? What does he anticipate the financial outturn to be? Will he formally expand the role of the agency? It is moving towards taking the role of a development agency. When does he expect NAMA to be formally wound up?

**(Deputy Michael Noonan):** I thank the Deputy for this very important question. Yesterday, I signed off on the most recent quarterly report for NAMA to go to the Government next week. We will publish it immediately after that, providing a very full update on the quarterly position with reflections back on the annual position.

Under section 10 of the NAMA Act 2009, NAMA's principal commercial objective is to achieve the best achievable financial return for the State, having regard to the cost of acquiring and dealing with bank assets and its own cost of capital and other costs. The NAMA board is seeking to fulfil this objective through three major strategic initiatives, each of which is predicated on conditions in the Irish market remaining favourable and on NAMA being in a position to retain specialist staff.

First, NAMA aims to, and remains confident it will, redeem all of its senior debt, originally €30.2 billion, by 2018. This is two years ahead of schedule. By the end of 2015, it had redeemed a cumulative 73%, or €22.1 billion, of its senior bonds, and it is well on its way to meeting its end-of-2016 target of 80%, or €24 billion.

Second, NAMA has committed to facilitating the timely and coherent delivery of key grade A office, retail and residential space within the Dublin docklands strategic development zone, SDZ, where a number of assets secure NAMA loans. Already, out of a total of 3.8 million sq. ft. of commercial space to be ultimately delivered, 2.5 million sq. ft. is either under construction or has received or sought planning permission.

Third, NAMA has committed to funding the delivery of 20,000 residential units on a commercial basis by the end of 2020 on sites securing NAMA's loans in the greater Dublin area and in other locations.

NAMA is satisfied, based on current market conditions, that these commercial and residential delivery programmes can be funded without compromising its debt redemption targets and

will enhance its projected terminal surplus.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I thank the Minister for the reply. Can the Minister confirm that the estimated financial surplus at the end of NAMA's work is approximately €2 billion? NAMA paid approximately €32 billion for loans with a total book value of €74 billion. The fact that NAMA plans to support the construction of 20,000 homes on a commercial basis by 2020 is to be welcomed, provided it does not become a recipe for high cost housing and a source of huge financial returns for professional advisers. These homes are needed and will probably represent only approximately one fifth of the total number of extra homes that will be needed over the period.

Is NAMA moving from being an asset management agency to development agency? Does the Minister still envisage that it will complete its work by 2020 or even sooner, or does he envisage a longer term role for NAMA as a development agency as opposed to what was originally intended?

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** There are three points to be made. When the chairman of NAMA, Mr. Frank Daly, spoke at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, he said that subject to market conditions remaining favourable, NAMA "will have generated a surplus of the order of €2 billion to hand over to the Exchequer". That has been confirmed by the chairman. There was market failure on the housing side, as the Deputy knows, but it is repairing itself very rapidly now. To compensate for the market failure, we have got NAMA to provide houses. They are starter homes, by and large, as well as some apartments. There is a mix. I think there is a split of approximately 70:30. They are well under way. NAMA is seeking to meet its quota for 2016. It is doing this on commercial grounds. There is no anti-competitive practice or anything like that.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** Although the provision of 20,000 homes by 2020 would be an important contribution towards meeting the housing supply need that undoubtedly exists in this country, the Minister will appreciate that it would represent just a fraction of the total requirement. Other issues in the private sector, including access to finance and the viability of development projects that are seeking to get under way, still need to be tackled in conjunction with the work that NAMA is doing. Can the Minister confirm his plan for NAMA as it goes forward? It has to conclude its existing mandate under the relevant Act. The Minister has given his approval for NAMA to be involved in the construction of 20,000 homes by 2020, principally in the greater Dublin area. Does he envisage that this work will mark the end of NAMA's role? When will NAMA cease to exist?

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** NAMA expects that its deleveraging work will be completed by 2018. Its focus over the period from 2018 to 2020 will be on the completion of the docklands residential funding programme. As I have said, NAMA is in a position to fully pay all of its senior bonds. It also expects to pay its subordinate debt in full by 2020. In light of the extensive work and challenges that face NAMA over the coming years, I have no plans to formally expand the role of the agency beyond its current remit. It is also too early to speculate whether NAMA will have made sufficient progress on its various strategies to warrant consideration of its dissolution in advance of 2020, which is the date that was originally envisaged. We are leaving 2020 there as the relevant date. Perhaps NAMA will make more rapid progress than we envisage. I would like it to complete two important economic and social projects - the strategic development zone in Dublin and the house-building programme - that will stretch out for five years after its deleveraging work has been completed satisfactorily.

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## Tax Compliance

9. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance his stance on the European Union investigation into Apple's tax affairs here over recent years, particularly given the potential enormous sums at stake for the Irish Exchequer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1345/16]

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The EU Commission suspects that Apple owes this State up to €19 billion in taxes. It suspects that Apple evaded those taxes. That money could be used to solve our housing and hospital crises and to build the water infrastructure that this country needs without a requirement for water charges. It seems that the Minister does not want this money, however. Why does he not want it, given that the State so desperately needs it?

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** In June 2014, the competition directorate of the European Commission announced its intention to open formal state aid investigations into tax rulings provided by a number of companies in various member states of the European Union. This announcement is part of a much wider review of tax ruling practice that is currently being undertaken by the European Commission. In late 2014, the Commission announced that it was broadening its inquiries to include all 28 member states. As the Commission has acknowledged, Ireland has co-operated fully with the process to date. We will continue to do so. I emphasise that while the Commission has opened a formal investigation in relation to one particular case involving Ireland, it has not made a final determination on the matter. Ireland has provided a detailed and comprehensive response to the Commission investigation, demonstrating that the appropriate amount of Irish tax was charged in accordance with the relevant legislation, no selective advantage was given and there was no state aid. It would not be appropriate at this stage to speculate on whether the Commission would seek recovery in the event of it hypothetically making a finding of state aid. I remain of the view that there was no breach of state aid rules in this case and that the legislative provisions were correctly applied. Even if the Commission formed the view that there was state aid, Ireland is entitled to challenge this decision in the European courts. As the Government has already indicated, we will take such a course of action if necessary to continue to vigorously defend Ireland's position. As I have said previously, there is simply no question that the Irish authorities sought to give the company in question any kind of special tax deal.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The dogs on the street know that companies like Apple and other fantastically wealthy multinationals have used every means and mechanism available to them in this country and all over the world to avoid paying billions of taxes that are needed by this State and other states to fund the provision of services and infrastructure. The Minister is telling us that if the EU Commission finds that Apple should have paid this money - it is blatantly obvious to me that it should have done so because it was using a "double Irish" arrangement to evade tax - he will fight that. Rather than saying we want that money and asking for it to be given back to enable us to fund housing, water infrastructure and health systems and other services - we would still have money left over - the Minister intends to say he does not want it so that he will not upset Apple and the other multinationals. When one considers that people are suffering because of the lack of housing and other services, it beggars belief that the Minister does not want this money.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** The dogs on the street that the Deputy calls as his witnesses have never been renowned as great tax advisers. I suggest that he needs to base his argument

on stronger evidence. The position is that the EU Commission and the competition authorities in Europe have challenged the tax treatment of Apple by the Irish Revenue Commissioners and the Irish authorities on state aid grounds. There is no suggestion that there is anything wrong with our tax system. It is a state aid case. The most recent position is that they have sought additional information from the Department of Finance and Revenue. We have provided them with that information. I understand they have also sought additional information from the company in question. Their consideration of the position is continuing. We will wait for the result of that process before we decide on our next course of action.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** If we had listened to the dogs on the street during the boom period, we might have avoided the disastrous crash. The OECD and the European Commission are finally catching up with the dogs on the street when it comes to the multinationals that are doing their best to avoid paying tax and thereby starving states of billions in revenue that is needed for services and infrastructure. It is obvious that Apple and other companies were using elaborate mechanisms, including the so-called “double Irish” arrangement, to avoid tax. I find it hard to believe the Minister is already indicating that if the EU Commission finds against this State in this regard, he will go to court to ensure the State does not get €19 billion. We should be trying to get that money because it is desperately needed.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** What the Deputy has outlined is not the basis of a state aid case. State aid cases always have at their centre the contention that one company or one set of companies was treated more favourably than another company or set of companies involved in similar activity. That is the essential piece.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I know.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** It is not about how taxes are applied. The matter I have set out is at the core of what is being examined.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Those two things work together.

**Deputy Michael Noonan:** We will co-operate fully with the authorities in Europe. We will provide them with all the information they have requested. We will await their adjudication. Then we will see what the next step will be.

*Written Answers follow Adjournment.*

### **Hospital Emergency Departments: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

- considers the ongoing crisis in hospital emergency departments a denial of the right of timely access to health care with dignity and a betrayal of the Republic envisioned in 1916;

- remembers inspirational figures such as Dr. Kathleen Lynn, a 1916 veteran and founder of St. Ultan’s Hospital for the Children of the Poor, who pioneered public health initiatives in the most difficult and conservative of times, and recommits to the

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principle enshrined in the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil Éireann that “it shall be the duty of the Republic to take such measures as will safeguard the health of the people”;

- condemns the decision of the Government to not invest adequately in the defence of the nation’s health, which saw an entirely predictable worsening of the trolley crisis in the opening weeks of the centenary year; and

- concurs with the view of Dr. James Gray and other health care professionals who have described as a “national scandal” the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation figures that show the numbers on trolleys close to 500; and

calls on the Government to:

- increase the number of hospital beds in the system and reverse the flow of nurses and doctors out of our public health system by committing to ambitious multi-annual recruitment targets and allocating the additional €412 million necessary to increase nursing numbers by 2,500 and consultant numbers by 800 over five years;

- commit to incrementally increasing annual funding for the Fair Deal scheme by an additional €125 million in order to increase nursing home bed numbers by 900 additional beds in year one, 800 additional beds in year two and 700 additional beds in years three, four and five;

- commit to increase home help hours and home care packages in year one by 10% at an estimated cost of €31 million and by a further 10% on the baseline year in years two and three with a resulting rise in spending of €93 million; and

- establish an Emergency Department Taskforce on a permanent basis.

The Taoiseach famously promised ahead of the last election that he would “end the scandal of patients on [hospital] trolleys”. He has failed spectacularly to keep that promise.

Not only that, he has now refused to give a commitment to end the crisis if re-elected. This is completely unacceptable. Anyone who is not committed to ending the crisis in our emergency departments is not fit to be elected to the Dáil, never mind the position of Taoiseach. Our health system is in a state of constant crisis. This is not a matter of debate; trolley numbers have spiked, waiting lists stretch into years and medical staff trained at home are leaving in droves due to poor working conditions.

This crisis can be boiled down to two key failings on the part of successive Governments: first, an extreme depth of fundamental inequality in how patients are treated, differentiated on ability to pay and location; and second, the sheer incapacity of the system to deal with even demographic pressures, evidenced particularly in our emergency departments and maternity care.

Universal health care, not universal health insurance, is the solution. Sinn Féin is committed to the realisation of a world-class system of universal health care that is accessed on the basis of need, free at the point of delivery and funded by progressive taxation. We believe there is no greater good worth striving for. Whether it is a headline about elderly patients on trolleys in emergency departments or children waiting more than a year for speech and language therapy, the common thread across all these stories is the lack of capacity in the system to meet demand. A lack of capacity means that those in our society who need urgent medical care and attention

are left to suffer needlessly as governments dither and introduce tax breaks for the better off in society. An unnecessary tax break is of no use to anybody lying on a trolley in a draughty corridor, racked with pain and worry. When we talk about capacity, we talk about vulnerable people.

Many young Irish people want to become doctors, nurses, surgeons or dentists. They go to college and study for years in a system that grows more expensive by the year. When they graduate, they are faced with a health system ravaged by years of austerity, recruitment embargoes and funding cuts imposed by the Fine Gael and Labour Party Government and by Fianna Fáil before it. For too many, the choice is plain and emigration is the result. If we are to stem the flow of doctors, nurses and others from our health system and attract those who have already left to come home, then we must commence sustained action to address the single biggest factor influencing medical migration – the toxic work environment that currently prevails. *Ad hoc*, half-hearted recruitment drives will not cut it. To foster and maintain a productive and motivated medical workforce, we must put credible light at the end of the tunnel for staff showing that things will get better and will stay better. We must guarantee to this workforce that the intolerable staff-to-patient ratios will be improved and sufficient resources will be forthcoming which will allow them to practise medicine and provide health care, not firefight and pen-push. This requires a commitment to ambitious multi-annual recruitment targets with revenue allocated to back these up.

In a term of government, Sinn Féin proposes to recruit more than 6,600 consultants, doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists, vital administrators and allied health professionals to reinforce the front lines of our health system. Overcrowding in our emergency departments, and more generally across the health service, has long been at crisis point. The trolley watch figures provided by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, regularly highlight the impact of decades of Government failure to provide adequately for the sick and the vulnerable. The INMO trolley watch and ward watch figures for December 2015 show that the level of overcrowding has decreased by 13% compared to December 2014. However, a year-on-year analysis shows that there was an increase of 21% in overcrowding from January to December 2015 compared to the same period for 2014. Yesterday 356 patients languished on trolleys.

The crisis is partly a reflection of inefficiencies within the system. Not all hospitals discharge seven days a week, for example, but in the main it is directly due to lack of capacity in terms of staffing and bed numbers. There is also the shortage of exit packages, including in the provision of home help hours and home care packages and inadequate numbers of long-stay nursing home beds. Research on overcrowding in emergency departments consistently shows a direct negative correlation between emergency department waiting and length of inpatient stay and, very importantly, with overall outcome. Overcrowding is not just a bad use of resources, it has a direct impact on patient safety and mortality.

Sinn Féin is putting forward this motion in an effort to address seriously the situation in our emergency departments. We need to increase the number of hospital beds available in the system in order to move people from trolleys and into wards. We need to recruit more nurses into our emergency department and acute hospital system. We also need to increase home help hours and home care packages to help support older people in their homes and take pressure off our hospitals. Alongside these measures we need to increase funding for the fair deal scheme further to secure more nursing home beds immediately and we need to develop the capacity of our public nursing home provision. All of this requires serious investment and that is what Sinn Féin is committed to. We are committed to quality public services that benefit everyone.

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This motion refers specifically to inspirational figures such as Dr. Kathleen Lynn, a 1916 veteran and founder of St. Ultan's Hospital for the Children of the Poor, who pioneered public health initiatives in the most difficult and conservative of times, and it recommit us all, I hope, to the principle enshrined in the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil Éireann that "it shall be the duty of the Republic to take such measures as will safeguard the health of the people". The ongoing crisis in hospital emergency departments denies our citizens their right to timely access to health care with dignity and is a betrayal of the Republic envisioned in 1916.

This can be changed. Contained in this motion are realistic proposals that can do exactly that. We specifically call on this Government and the next Government to increase the number of hospital beds in the system and reverse the flow of nurses and doctors out of our public health system by committing to ambitious multi-annual recruitment targets and to allocate the additional €412 million necessary to increase nursing numbers by 2,500 and consultants by 800 over the five-year Dáil term.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** What is the Deputy's time allocation?

**Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** I have ten minutes. We call on this and the next Government to commit to increasing annual funding incrementally for the fair deal scheme by an additional €125 million in order to increase nursing home bed numbers by 900 in year one, 800 additional beds in year two and 700 additional beds in years three, four and five. We call on this and the next Government to commit to increase home help hours and home care packages in year one by 10%, at an estimated cost of €31 million, and by a further 10% on the baseline year in years two and three with a resulting rise in spending of €93 million and we call on this and the next Government to establish an emergency department task force on a permanent basis.

These are all realistic and achievable proposals. The only thing that is required is the will of the Government of the day to pursue such measures. One hundred years on from 1916, let us ensure that we live up to the ideals of those like Dr. Kathleen Lynn, ideals that are still as relevant today as they were back then. Let us implement the appropriate changes that have the potential to make a real difference - changes that will safeguard the health of all our people. I invite everyone in this House to join me in helping make that our shared and collective legacy.

I urge all voices in the House to support the Sinn Féin motion.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** Deputy Tóibín is sharing time with Deputies Gerry Adams, Dessie Ellis, Martin Ferris and Seán Crowe. The Deputy has ten minutes.

*11 o'clock*

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** One of the major legacies of this Government with regard to health care is that access to health care is reducing. Little by little, access is becoming more difficult in every route to health care. This can be seen at GP and ambulance levels, in overcrowded emergency departments and with regard to waiting lists. This State had 601 people on trolleys in a single day. In my region, Navan and Drogheda hospitals had 9,000 people on trolleys last year. That is equivalent to the population of the town of Trim being on trolleys in the period of a single year. It is a shocking scenario. This leads to delayed diagnosis, delayed treatment and sub-optimum health results. The practical facts for people are that their illnesses or injuries become worse and in some cases their lives will be shortened as a result.

The waiting lists contain shocking figures. There are 68,000 people on inpatient waiting

lists and 385,507 people are waiting for outpatient appointments. A total of 20% of the State's population has no medical cover whatsoever. Budgets for disability services have been reduced by €159 million. One in three ambulance calls in the State that are classified as emergencies are responded to late. For example, in a one year period in my constituency I was contacted by 40 people who told me that the response to their ambulance calls had been longer than one hour. In seven of those cases, a fatality was involved. I am not saying that the fatality is a direct result of the late ambulance but, undoubtedly, in many cases the health result is far worse when the ambulance is very late. There are children on painkillers waiting for more than six months for dental treatment, while 3,000 children are waiting for mental health services. There is also the backdrop of suicide rates in that regard.

I will discuss one case which I previously brought to the Minister's attention in a parliamentary question. It involves a number of different aspects of the health service, including accident and emergency. One of my constituents in County Meath lives four minutes away from the hospital. Her son called an ambulance for her after she suffered a stroke. The ambulance arrived 40 minutes late. She went into Navan hospital where she received decent treatment. However, she was clinically discharged for 13 weeks, unable to proceed to the National Rehabilitation Hospital due to the fact that it was under fierce pressure. When she went to that hospital, she received treatment and reached a certain level of rehabilitation whereby she was able to return home to live with care from her family. Unfortunately, about a year later she had another stroke. She went back into the hospital and very quickly had a good recovery. However, she was brought to the shower one day with the assistance of two nurses. One of the nurses was called away due to how busy the hospital was and the woman fell and suffered a head injury. As a result of that injury, she was brought to a Dublin hospital. That hospital gave her the wrong blood. She has been in a coma for three or four months and has had internal organ failure as a result. She is coming back very slowly. Thankfully, her mind is showing a strong level of clarity but she is in a bad way physically. She is 68 years of age but she probably will be unable to return home and is likely to remain in a nursing home.

Consider how much it would have cost to have an ambulance arrive on time on the first occasion. How much would it have cost to enable the two nurses to remain with the patient? How much would it have cost to have the necessary resources in the hospital to provide her with the proper bloods? Measure that against the cost of her nursing home care for perhaps 20 years or more. That is the key issue here. The Government is on a fool's errand. It is slashing back on access to hospitals and people's illnesses are becoming more acute, so the treatments that are necessary for them are becoming more expensive. The Government thinks it is saving a few quid at the start, but in the long run it is being forced to put an increasing amount of money into the health services.

Another aspect of access to health care in County Meath is North-East Doctor on Call, NEDOC. Before Christmas, it was brought to my attention that there was no doctor available for North-East Doctor on Call. People had to travel all around the country at night if they required a doctor, or they had to go to the accident and emergency department. Since Christmas, we have been told that a family with young children called to NEDOC in their locality and had to wait four hours for treatment. There were dozens of people waiting in a room which was not built to accommodate those numbers. NEDOC cover had to go from Drogheda to Athboy because there was no cover in Meath. That means all of County Louth is unavailable for doctor on call. What is the Government's response to this and investing in NEDOC? I understand its response is to run a pilot scheme whereby there will be a remote doctor in a location in Dublin

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speaking through Skype to a patient, possibly with a paramedic present. Will that paramedic be able to deliver prescribed drugs to the patient in that scenario? Is a diagnosis that is made 40 miles away from a patient of the same quality as one where the doctor is sitting in the room with the patient? Cutbacks in NEDOC are causing more trouble for patients and more trouble for the system.

Navan hospital was part of the north-east group. When the hospital in Monaghan closed, the trolley counts in Cavan spiked. When the accident and emergency department in Dundalk closed, the trolley counts in Drogheda spiked. It is now part of the Government's plan to close the accident and emergency department in Navan. The Minister visited the hospital and said it would be a long time before it will be closed, but current Government policy is articulated through the small hospital framework document and that states that Navan hospital will be reduced from a level three to a level two hospital. Navan will lose services with regard to coronary care, the intensive care unit and anaesthesia. That means the hospital will be unable to take the same amount of people.

I have also received information that the national clinical leads in the HSE responsible for policy in hospitals met Ireland-east managers in early December and agreed a series of changes to the delivery of hospital services in Navan which will convert that hospital to a level two hospital. The hospital staff were not told; I was the first to tell them about these decisions. They have not been told when these decisions will be implemented. The GPs in the area also have not been told when the decisions will be implemented. It should be noted that 130 GPs in the Meath area have stated that the health outcomes of citizens in County Meath will be radically reduced if the Government proceeds to reduce the accident and emergency services to shorter hours or to close those services. This is completely inconsistent with what the Minister said when he visited County Meath, as is the HSE small hospital framework document.

What we are seeing develop in the State is a reduction of access to hospitals, especially public hospitals, for people who do not have private health insurance. However, some of the private hospitals, particularly in the Dublin region, have opened emergency department services and they do not have the same level of trolley occupancy, waiting and so forth. The cleavage between those who can afford private hospitals and those who cannot is becoming even clearer. The backdrop for this is the Government gouging funds and staff from the health service over the past number of years. It shocks me that when I put questions to the Minister for Finance about his plans for the next five years, he replies that the major plan for those years is to reduce the universal social charge, USC, by €3.5 billion to €4 billion. At the same time we have this ongoing crisis. The Minister cannot have European public service delivery and European infrastructure based on American taxation. He is either rewriting the economic laws of the planet or he is lying to the people. It is very serious to allow this level of inaccessibility to the health service and this level of a health crisis for the people yet at the same time totally focus tax breaks on those on higher incomes.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** Tá mé sásta bheith anseo inniu chun labhairt ar rún Shinn Féin maidir le sláinte agus an bealach níos fearr atá againn chun freastal ar achan duine. Tá mé buíoch den Teachta Ó Caoláin a chur an rún seo le chéile agus tá mé fíor-bhuíoch go bhfuil an tAire, an Teachta Varadkar, anseo. The emergency consultant in Tallaght hospital, Dr. James Gray, last week described the scale of patients in our emergency departments as a disgrace. He said many of these patients were elderly and the most vulnerable in our society. It is actually worse than that. I have spoken to families whose sick and elderly members will not go to the emergency departments because they know they may be lying on a trolley for days.

Figures recently released by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation show that 92,998 people were treated on trolleys in hospitals across this State during 2015. This is the highest ever number of patients recorded since the Trolley Watch campaign began in 2006 and represents an increase of 21% in hospital overcrowding. It is also an indictment of this Fine Gael-Labour Party Government. In 2007, Deputy Enda Kenny promised to end what he called “the scandal of patients on trolleys” and that promise was broken. Four years later, in Fine Gael’s infamous five-point plan, it promised to create a completely new health system. Fine Gael promised to end waiting lists and apartheid in our health service and committed to equal access for all, more and better community care and fewer hospital stays. *Sin gealltanas eile atá briste.* In fairness to the Minister for Health, at least he made it clear that the five-point plan was not worth the paper it was printed on. In the first five days of this week there were 1,395 patients on hospital trolleys in emergency departments across the State. Of these, 121 were in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda in my constituency of Louth. On Monday and Tuesday, Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital had the worst figures in the State *agus ba sheandaoine iad go leor de na daoine seo.* These trolley waits and the spectre and misery of mostly elderly people, but also others, who are sick is an indictment of the Government’s health policy. As part of his response to all this, the Minister for Health, Deputy Varadkar, produced new proposals immediately prior to Christmas. These claim that there should be no more than 70 patients a day on trolleys. He also claimed zero tolerance of patients waiting more than nine hours on trolleys. On Tuesday, however, there were more than 200 patients on trolleys for longer than nine hours. In addition, a third of the 300 beds promised last autumn to tackle overcrowding still have not been delivered.

Fine Gael and the Labour Party have no intention of adequately resourcing the health service. Twice in recent months nurses in emergency departments have voted for industrial action. While the strike planned for today has been averted, which I welcome, the crisis in our health service remains. *Tá sé an-soiléir gur scrios polasaí an Rialtais na seirbhísí sláinte tosaigh.* What is happening in the health service is a direct consequence of Government policy. There is no other way to look at it. It is the responsibility not just of the Minister for Health but of every member of the Cabinet who voted for and implemented these policies. It is time the Taoiseach admitted that his Government seeks ultimately to privatise our health services. The Minister should take the opportunity during the debate to point out clearly that Fine Gael ideology favours a two-tier, private health model. He highlighted as much in various remarks recently.

Sinn Féin has put forward this Private Members’ motion in an effort to focus political attention on easing the situation in emergency departments. We are not all about protesting and pointing up the inefficiencies and deficiencies in the Government’s position. We have positive solutions to these problems and have published a fully costed health policy. I asked that it be sent to the Minister but I do not know if he has had the opportunity to peruse it. I see he has it before him. He will see in it that there is a capacity to realise a world-class system of universal health care assessed on the basis of need, free at the point of delivery and funded through progressive taxation. I ask the Minister not only to read that health document, but to implement it.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** This is a Government elected in a crisis which promised stability but now faces into election on the motto of the British Tories of offering chaos or stability. For many it is clear that the people offering chaos are actually Fine Gael and the Labour Party. Certainly for those in housing need, those who have lost their homes, those who are sick or disabled, young adults, those entering retirement and those with mental health issues, this is a Government of chaos. There is no stability for the people of this country who find themselves

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in need of the basic services the State should provide. There is no clearer example of this instability than our accident and emergency departments where hard-pressed doctors and nurses struggle to deal with overcrowded waiting rooms backing onto overcrowded halls lined with trolleys, often occupied by elderly people for extended periods that are utterly unacceptable in any context.

In my area of Dublin, Beaumont Hospital, James Connolly Hospital and the Mater struggle to meet the needs of patients every day. I read last week of a Mr. James Coyle of Cabra, a 72 year old man, who had to sleep overnight and be treated in a chair. He praised the staff who were doing their best in a desperate situation. The accident and emergency department had to close its doors for a period after Mr. Coyle arrived because it simply could not do any more. Not only is the system placing great hardship and suffering on those in need of care, it is breaking the backs of those caregivers whom we often hear lauded by the Government, as long, that is, as they are not threatening strikes or stoppages or asking the Government to do more. We often hear people being told to stay away from accident and emergency departments unless absolutely necessary. One has to wonder in this crisis who would go to accident and emergency unless there was no other option, which begs the question of how many people in need of care are staying away due to the widespread knowledge of the severity of this very real crisis. This is a major threat to public health, health workers and our families and loved ones. Speaking of Tallaght hospital, Dr. James Gray said of one patient:

This man, like the others in non-designated patient conduits, had no privacy, no dignity, was subject to constant noise torture, constant light torture, resulting in major sleep deprivation and pressure effects causing pain as a result of lying for an advanced period on a trolley not designated for same, as well as boarding conditions that constitute an infection control hazard.

In its eagerness to commemorate the Battle of the Somme, it seems the Government has sought to recreate its conditions in our hospitals. The Government will claim it inherited this mess. While that may have a kernel of truth, it would be fairer to say that the Government has compounded and exacerbated the mess. This is the result of a failure to reform the health service, to tackle its two-tier nature, to refocus funding to where it is needed and to treat nurses and front-line doctors with the dignity and respect they deserve. It is the result of five years of grinding austerity which has chiselled away at the foundations of the health service while the Government hoped and prayed for a saviour in the form of private health insurance.

In our most recent budget document, Sinn Féin showed how the Government could invest an additional €383 million in health. This would have tackled the trolley crisis, improved ambulance cover and disability services and reduced waiting times and prescription charges. Predictably, it was ignored by this austerity Government. We followed that document with the launch of our costed, staged and realistic plan for health to undo the damage of this and previous Governments. People with mental health issues are being turned away from accident and emergency departments. Often, there is no psychiatrist on hand, particularly at weekends. Many who need urgent and immediate help are left for hours on end. The winding down of mental health services delivered locally in Drumcondra, Clontarf and Ballymun and centralised on the North Circular Road is another example of the doublespeak of the Government. In A Vision for Change, the Government outlined how mental health services would be delivered locally. Tús Nua in Ballymun, which worked with more than 30 people at one stage, is now being wound down and, in effect, removed from the area.

**Deputy Martin Ferris:** It has reached the stage, not just in my constituency, but in all constituencies, at which people are afraid to attend accident and emergency departments. Who could blame them? The long waiting lists represent many people suffering in their homes and hanging on for long-awaited treatment, but the public face of the crisis is in the accident and emergency departments of the large hospitals. This is testament to the failed health policies of successive Governments, but it is the legacy of some outstanding failures in health over the past 20 years or so that has landed us where we are now. Ministers for Health like Brian Cowen, Micheál Martin, Mary Harney, Mary Coughlan, James Reilly and the current Minister are responsible for the cutbacks and disorganisation. They pandered to the private sector and ran down the public service that thousands of loyal, talented and hard-working front-line workers had built up over generations and that the people trusted to look after them when they were at their most vulnerable.

The worsening situation in Kerry contradicts the Minister's claim that the conditions causing the crisis in our hospitals are improving. Last week, 56 patients were lying on trolleys in Kerry General Hospital. Yesterday, 16 people found themselves in this distressing situation. Today, there are nine. These numbers are up to four times higher than they were during the same period last year. The hospital's Loher ward, which was supposed to cater for 30 patients, is being used in the short term as an oncology unit and will ultimately be used as a lab.

The reality for patients is that the crisis is only getting worse. The Minister's remarks show just how detached he is from the scale of the chaos and overcrowding that is gripping hospitals throughout the State. He is dismally failing to address the underlying causes of the crisis. Instead of doing his job, he is disgracefully attempting to lay the blame for the crisis at the feet of the heroic nurses who have worked through his slash-and-burn approach to the health service. The Minister is more focused on trying to spin himself out of responsibility rather than on actually tackling the crisis, which will only continue to worsen so long as we have health Ministers who are more focused on optics, PR lines and re-election than on running the Department of Health and prioritising patient care.

It is long past time that the Fine Gael and Labour Party Government accepted the scale of the crisis. The first step must be to engage constructively with the nurses and ensure their concerns are addressed and that we see tangible changes in our hospitals as a result. We need a Government that is prepared to invest in health and the delivery of front-line services. We need a Government that ends the two-tier system, which is something that can no longer be tolerated. People must have access to quality health care on the basis of need and not on the basis of income.

I have been dealing with a pair of cases over the past 12 months. Both patients are now dead. One was a young man with a history of attempted suicide. He was admitted to the Valentia ward of Kerry General Hospital on a Thursday evening and was released that Friday morning despite having been brought to the hospital by the Garda and signed in by his mother. He took his life that night. This is how much the Minister's health service failed that young man. The second patient was a woman in her late 50s who had a history of clots. She was brought to the hospital's accident and emergency department and lay there for 28 hours before it was discovered that her condition had been exacerbated. She lost her life two days later. That is testament to the health service for which this and previous Governments have been responsible. We need a health service that will do our people justice, in particular patients who are in need of care.

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**Deputy Seán Crowe:** I will declare an interest, in that I have been on a trolley within the past 12 months. Attending the hospital probably saved my life. My brother-in-law has also been on a trolley in the past week.

Some 4,000 patients were on accident and emergency department hospital trolleys or chairs during December. In the Dublin area alone, 1,318 patients were on trolleys. Last year in Talaght hospital, in my constituency, the news that a 91 year old patient was left on a trolley for 29 hours made headlines. That awful scenario was unacceptable to everyone, but the Taoiseach had the brass neck to blame hospital staff for the accident and emergency crisis. He conveniently ignored his and the preceding Fianna Fáil-Green Party Government's cuts of billions of euro in health funding, the removal of thousands of beds from the hospital system, the shortage of key staff, the lack of step-down facilities and the failure to roll out primary care facilities. By way of example of that last point, some of the primary care services allocated to my area ended up in the constituency of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Reilly. Waiting lists for life-changing operations have also lengthened nationally. It seems to be much easier for Government politicians to blame hard-working hospital staff or seriously ill patients for getting sick instead of blaming the broken health system that the Government has created.

What is happening in the health service is a direct manifestation of a continuity of cuts. According to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation's trolley and ward watch analysis, the number of patients on trolleys has increased 40% between 2012 and 2015. I accept the Minister for Health's contention that the crisis cannot be solved overnight, but his party has been in power for five years and a strike this week by nurses who were at the end of their tether because of understaffing and overcrowding was narrowly averted at the 11th hour. This Fine Gael-Labour Party Government has had five years in power while patients and their families have had to do their time suffering hardship on trolleys and queuing on long waiting lists only to be told that elective surgeries are cancelled because of a lack of beds or key staff.

According to *The Sunday Times*, the HSE appointed 55 additional general managers last year following the lifting of a ban on recruitment and promotion in the public sector. The HSE now has 268 general managers earning up to €80,000 per year each, a 26% increase on the 213 at the start of 2015. Is this the long-awaited reform we have been promised? The Government is approaching the health care crisis by continuing to bloat middle management levels and pushing front-line staff to breaking point.

The accident and emergency crisis is made worse by the lack of home care support, physio support and lengthy elective surgery waiting lists, yet the minutes of the HSE directorate meeting of 26 November, which I read last night, state that the HSE is aiming to make €20 million in cuts to social care home support and transitional care costs in 2016 to make up for the loss in revenue.

It is time to end the chaos brought about by this Government. Universal health care, not universal health insurance, is part of the solution. Sinn Féin's Better For Health policy paper shows how we would begin to address this problem in government. The costed policy document outlines how we would increase the number of hospital beds per 1,000 population, ensure adequate registered nurse or doctor-to-patient ratios and sufficient beds, roll out sustained investment in community services that allows for either appropriate care without hospital admission or discharge to appropriate care settings or both, increase nursing home bed numbers, increase home help hours and home care packages and establish an emergency department task force on a permanent basis. However, the Government has firmly closed its eyes and ears to the

problem and is hell bent on privatising our health services. Many of us in the community will fight that tooth and nail. This is personal for many people.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I understand the Minister is sharing time with Deputies O'Reilly and Mulherin. Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I move amendment No. 1:

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

"acknowledges:

— that timely access by patients to emergency care and improving waiting times in Emergency Departments (EDs) continues to be a primary focus of Government policy;

— that the demand for emergency services is growing in line with overall population growth (1% per year), a projected increase of over 19,000 in the number of people over 65 years; a growing number of people in the old and frail elderly category (nearly 3,000 aged 85 years and over) and the increasing burden of chronic illness in the population;

— that this Government made additional ongoing funding available in 2015 to address ED overcrowding and that a wide-ranging set of actions are being implemented by the Health Service Executive (HSE) and hospitals to achieve improvements in the delivery of care in EDs;

— the difficulties which ED overcrowding cause for patients, their families and hospital staff who are doing their utmost to provide safe, quality care in very challenging circumstances;

— that it is Government policy to support older people in their own homes and communities for as long as possible, that provision for such home and community based services was significantly strengthened during 2015, and that these levels will be maintained in 2016;

— that nursing home placements are required by those patients who can no longer live independently or return home even with appropriate supports, and that waiting times for the Nursing Home Support Scheme funding have reduced from 11 weeks at the beginning of the year to 3-4 weeks; and

— that optimum patient care, improving patient safety and overall population health at all times remain a Government priority;

notes in particular that:

— the Government has prioritised a number of initiatives during 2015 which have had a positive impact on trolley numbers:

— the Additional Winter Capacity and Closed Beds Initiatives were established in July 2015 to fund and support additional bed capacity during the winter peak period; as of Friday 8th January, 2016, 321 beds have opened or reopened with a further 127 beds to open or reopen during quarter one, 2016;

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— delayed discharges have reduced steadily from 830 in December 2014 to 533 on 11th January, 2016 which has freed up almost 300 beds to be used by acutely ill patients every day;

— an additional €35 million (over projected 2015 expenditure) of ongoing funding has been provided for the Nursing Home Support Scheme during 2016, which will deliver 1,222,750 total weeks of care, supporting an average of 23,450 clients per week for 2016; this is an increase of 649 clients per week on the 2015 position and an increase of 33,825 care weeks above the 2015 position;

— transitional care funding has supported over 3,800 approvals, which is significantly above the original target of 500;

— over 1,200 additional home care packages were provided by end 2015;

— 173 additional short-stay nursing home beds were open by the end of 2015, 149 of these in public facilities; and

— in addition, 65 short-stay beds opened in Mount Carmel Community Hospital in September;

— for 2016, the Department of Health will have total funding of approximately €13.6 billion (a seven per cent increase on the 2015 Budget) demonstrating the Government's commitment to addressing the reductions experienced by the health sector consequent on the economic downturn which commenced in 2008;

— a series of focussed campaigns are ongoing to attract frontline staff in order to meet patient care requirements:

— in the past 12 months there are nearly 900 more nurses working in the health service;

— since March 2011, over 300 additional consultants have been appointed to acute hospitals around the country, including 92 consultant appointments between January and November 2015;

— the number of non-consultant hospital doctors employed in the health service has increased by over 390 in the last 12 months and by over 1,000 since March 2011; and

— ED consultants have increased from 56 to 84 under this Government;

— on 11th January, 2016, revised proposals of the Workplace Relations Commission were accepted by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation National Executive in relation to the HSE National Escalation Policy, which will enhance patient safety and care in EDs; and

— the Emergency Department Task Force Implementation Group, convened by the Minister for Health, continues to ensure that a system-wide focus is maintained on addressing ED overcrowding challenges by Hospital Groups, working with the relevant community healthcare organisations; the Emergency Department Task Force Implementation Group has also been overseeing Hospital Groups' winter pre-

paredness and during this peak winter period, the Department of Health is engaging in weekly meetings with the HSE; and

supports the Minister for Health in his continued determination to bring about improvements in urgent and emergency care services.”

I welcome the opportunity to speak to the House again on what is being done to improve access to our acute hospitals, particularly initiatives to alleviate pressures in our emergency departments. I acknowledge once again the distress for patients and their families caused by cramped and overcrowded conditions in some of our hospital emergency departments. I am very cognisant that these crowded conditions make emergency departments a very challenging work environment for nurses, doctors and other hospital staff.

In recent weeks, I have taken the opportunity to visit emergency departments, many for the second or third time. These visits have enabled me to meet patients and families attending the departments. These interactions have often been difficult. My visits have also allowed me to see at first hand the challenges for health care staff who are endeavouring to provide high-quality care in these circumstances.

I welcome the fact that, for the first time since I was made Minister for Health, Sinn Féin has chosen to use its Private Members’ time to debate the issue of health. It has taken it almost two years, but I welcome that it has chosen at long last to rate health as an issue for Private Members’ time. However, the fact that it is only doing so in the dying days of this Dáil is clear evidence that health is not a priority for it. The party offers little more than soundbites during Leaders’ Questions. Unlike the water charges and property tax, improving health is not a red-line issue for Sinn Féin in entering coalition with Fianna Fáil, should it have the opportunity to do so. That also speaks volumes.

By contrast, this Government is committed to improving the health services, and we have adopted a four-pronged approach to address the causes and challenges of emergency department overcrowding: measures to reduce numbers coming into hospitals; measures to expand capacity within hospitals; changes to work practices and processes in hospitals; and measures to get people out of hospital sooner.

In addition to supporting major recruitment campaigns for doctors and nurses, the Government has allocated more than €117 million in additional funding during 2015. This funding was provided to enable the HSE and voluntary hospitals to implement a range of actions to reduce emergency department overcrowding, such as increasing bed capacity, reducing waiting times for funding for the fair deal scheme, and increasing access to alternatives to emergency department services.

From the Opposition benches, I have heard, and will again no doubt hear again today, much talk about the need for additional resources to solve the problems in our emergency departments, but, unfortunately, talk is all it is.

The dream team of Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil provided in their alternative budgets for 2015 nothing at all to address emergency department pressures. In contrast, we have provided €117 million and a further €51 million to reduce waiting lists. It is fair to acknowledge that the parties recognised the issue in their more recent alternative budgets for 2016, having ignored the matter entirely for 2015. Sinn Féin promised to provide €86 million and Fianna Fáil promised more, €90 million, but that is still less than the €117 million the parties in government actually

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provided in 2015 and the further significant funding we are providing this year. The parties opposite call for more resources but their own policy papers promise less. I look forward to hearing the speakers opposite explain this contradiction in their contributions, referring specifically not to their recently published pre-election policies but to their existing alternative budgets for 2015 and 2016.

Both parties talk a lot about the need to hire more staff, but Sinn Féin's plans are to cap consultant and management pay and increase their taxes, in a move that would be guaranteed to make recruitment even more difficult than it is already. They propose to pay general practitioners €120 per year per patient for unlimited visits, which would surely render many practices unviable. I doubt that it would be possible to agree it by negotiation with general practitioners.

Fianna Fáil, in its alternative budget, made no provision for the Lansdowne Road pay restoration for nurses, young doctors, ambulance drivers, paramedics and therapists. I do not see how we could possibly recruit more staff if we did not fund, or renege on, the commitments made in the Lansdowne Road agreement.

It is little surprise that, in the case of Fianna Fáil, joined-up thinking is so absent. After all, it ran away from the health Ministry in 2004 after Deputy Martin's period as Minister for Health and Children. During this time, the Fianna Fáil-led Government, supported by Independents, promised to end waiting lists permanently within two years and ensure sufficient bed capacity in hospitals. Perhaps this is a matter for its next billboard. Instead, Fianna Fáil set up the HSE. Thereafter, it was so scarified by the experience that it was happy to leave the Ministry to Ms Mary Harney, even after the demise of the Progressive Democrats in 2007. It was prepared to leave it to an Independent rather than take on responsibility itself.

As part of the health strategy developed during Deputy Martin's period as Minister, 3,000 additional hospital beds were to be provided. In fact, in the period that followed, 2005 to 2011, the number of acute beds was reduced by 1,245, or 10.3%. Trolleys remained a persistent problem. Yesterday, the number of patients on trolleys, according to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation's Trolley Watch figures, was 356. This is down 27% on the same day in 2011. I am using Trolley Watch figures because Ward Watch figures were not collected at that time. The problem was 27% worse under Fianna Fáil after 14 years of rule. On the relevant day in 2011, the figure was 492.

As for Sinn Féin, we have seen its health policy in action in Northern Ireland. Just like Fianna Fáil, it has done everything possible to avoid taking direct responsibility for health ever since its awful tenure in the portfolio from 1999 to 2002. The then Sinn Féin Minister, Bairbre de Brún, became famous for setting up inquiries and review groups during her four years in office. Perhaps she was taking lessons from Deputy Micheál Martin, who was Minister for Health and Children at the time in this jurisdiction. In medical circles, her unwillingness to make any decisions was called "paralysis by analysis". It was even wondered whether she would reach the point at which she would have to order a review of the reviews because so many had been commissioned. Under Sinn Féin's watch in Northern Ireland, waiting lists hit a record high, with the longest treatment queues in the whole of the European Union. That is Sinn Féin's record on health.

The recently published Sinn Féin health policy, Better for Health, gives us an insight into its current plans. It is a strange combination of old ideas that were tried and failed elsewhere and good ideas that would require a level of investment that is just not realistic. Sinn Féin's

approach to policy is almost childlike. Its approach to finite resources is to want to have it all anyway, so it promises to put an extra €5 billion into health and billions of euro into education and housing. At the same time, it promises to abolish the property tax and water charges. I am not even sure it could fund everything if it raised taxes to the highest they have ever been in this country. Even if it robbed a bank, it would never pay for it all.

We know from experience that the winter period, and particularly the new year period, is a time of peak activity for emergency departments throughout the country. None the less, from mid-November up to this week, there have been improvements in the numbers of patients on trolleys. This week, trolley numbers are somewhat higher, given the increase in influenza, but an analysis of recent performance through a 30-day moving average shows a 10% improvement in the overall numbers on trolleys against the same period last year. There is some significant variation, with hospitals such as Letterkenny, Portlincula, Mullingar, St. James's, the Mater, Tallaght and Connolly showing significant improvements, while others have fared less well, and some have disimproved.

In the first couple of weeks of 2016, emergency departments are seeing a 7% increase in the number of patients attending, with some sites showing a 17% increase in attendances by comparison with the number for this time last year. Putting that in context, there are, on average, up to 3,000 patients presenting to emergency departments daily, with nearly 200 patients presenting at larger emergency departments each day.

In order to manage this particular peak period, the emergency department task force implementation group has been overseeing hospitals' winter resilience plans. My Department and key members of the implementation group hold a weekly meeting to monitor emergency department performance and patient waiting times on trolleys. When we examine the factors that contribute to overcrowding in emergency departments, it is clear that the response needs to be at a number of levels. All relevant parts of the health service - namely, acute hospitals, social care and primary care - have to work collaboratively and in a joined-up way, so the Government has been driving a response by all elements of the health service.

In December 2014, I convened the emergency department task force to provide focus and momentum in dealing with the challenges presented by emergency department overcrowding. The task force action plan, published in April 2015, contains 88 actions, which are solutions tailored specifically to address the key challenges and causes of overcrowding. I have attended all the emergency department task force implementation group meetings to oversee the implementation of actions arising from the plan, and I can see that the plan is being implemented. The 88 actions consist of a combination of immediate measures to target the pressure areas and long-term sustainable solutions to reduce emergency department overcrowding. During 2015 and into 2016, a number of initiatives have been implemented to ease emergency department overcrowding and impact on trolley numbers. These include initiatives to increase bed capacity in hospitals for the winter months; reduce delayed discharges from hospitals by improving access to nursing homes, convalescence and home care packages, with, for the first time, the latter being provided to patients awaiting discharge almost on an on-demand basis; recruit more medical and nursing staff into the health service; provide specific care pathways in emergency departments for older and frailer patients; ensure more efficient planning and management of patient discharge from hospitals, including early discharge planning from when the patient is admitted and weekend discharges in order that patients can leave as soon as they are medically fit; improve access to primary care services, particularly nurse-led community intervention teams, to reduce reliance on hospitals; make best use of all the non-emergency department

facilities available, such as medical assessment units, surgical assessment units, minor injury units and urgent care centres; and reduce the length of stay for patients who have been admitted by faster access to diagnostics, among other actions.

The Government is committed to reversing the budget cuts experienced by the health services due to the economic downturn that commenced in 2008. This is evident from the extent of funding provided to the health service in 2015 and 2016. In 2016, health will have funding of approximately €13.2 billion for current expenditure and €414 million for capital expenditure, which is an increase of €900 million and €36 million, respectively, on the 2015 budget. These increases do not take into account Supplementary Estimates. These figures constitute a 7% increase on the budget for 2015 and a 12% increase on the voted budget for 2014. In contrast, in the final three years of the previous Fianna Fáil-led Government, public health expenditure was cut from €14.59 billion in 2008 to €13.73 billion in 2011, a reduction of €860 million, as our population and its health needs grew and aged.

Of the gross 2016 health budget of approximately €15 billion, €5 billion has been designated in the HSE national service plan to services delivered by acute hospitals. As such, roughly one third of health funding is allocated to hospitals, with the remainder allocated to primary and social care, medicines, mental health, public health and disability.

In 2015, the Government made available €117 million to implement specific measures to reduce emergency department overcrowding. This included a sum of €74 million, which has enabled significant progress to be made on reducing delayed discharges, lowering the waiting time for fair deal funding and providing additional transitional care beds and home care packages. The number of delayed discharges peaked at 850 and has declined to below 500. On deeper investigation, the figure is even lower than this, as 80 of these 500 patients are not in acute hospitals and many more are not fit for discharge. The €117 million figure also included €18 million to support acute hospital services over the winter period by providing additional bed capacity and other initiatives to improve access to care. Of the 300 additional beds being funded, more than 200 have opened. The remaining €25 million has been provided for services that provide alternatives to acute hospitals, some of which I alluded to.

It is Government policy to support older people to live in dignity and independence in their own homes and communities for as long as possible. Despite continuing pressure on the public finances, the level of home and community-based services was significantly strengthened last year and this will be maintained in 2016. These services will not be cut back. What this means is that the Health Service Executive will provide approximately 10.4 million home help hours, more than 15,000 home care packages and in excess of 300 transitional care beds. In addition, some 130 intensive home care packages will be provided to support the discharge from acute hospital settings of people with more complex needs, many of whom are individuals who would not be accepted by nursing homes.

There will always be people who require quality long-term residential care. The nursing homes support scheme, known as the fair deal, is crucial to achieving this. It is worth highlighting that, this year, the budget for the scheme is €940 million, an increase of €35 million on last year's projected spend. This year, the scheme will deliver more than 1.2 million weeks of nursing home care to 23,450 clients per week. This is an increase of 649 clients per week on 2015. In addition, waiting times for applicants approved for funding should not exceed four weeks, as is currently the case. This scheme remains a key component of our supports for older people and involves a very significant financial commitment on the part of the State.

Providing additional bed capacity has also been a key initiative. In July 2015, I introduced the additional winter capacity and closed beds initiatives to ensure additional capacity would be in place in hospitals during the winter peak period. As I indicated, €18 million has been provided to open new beds and re-open beds that had been closed. The HSE and individual hospitals - the voluntary hospitals - have made considerable progress in opening and re-opening beds. As of Friday last, 209 new beds had opened, 112 previously closed beds had been re-opened and a further 127 beds will open or re-open in the first quarter of this year, subject to staffing. The new and re-opened beds have been a crucial resource for many hospitals in allowing them to manage to an extent they would not have otherwise been able to do.

Recruitment of medical practitioners and nurses into the health service has been a major priority throughout 2015 and this continues to be the case. No one can have failed to notice the major recruitment campaigns run by the HSE and hospitals to attract front-line staff. Anyone who used Dublin Airport over the Christmas period will have seen advertisements placed at the airport by Tallaght hospital, which has staffed and opened all of its beds.

Since this time last year, the number of nurses on the health service payroll has increased by almost 900, while the number of non-consultant hospital doctors, NCHDs, has increased by almost 400. Under this Government, the number of NCHDs has increased by more than 1,000, the highest figure ever recorded. The number of doctors registered in the State is also the highest ever recorded, having recently exceeded 20,000.

On consultants, Government policy is to move to a consultant-delivered service. The number of consultants has increased significantly in recent years to 2,700 full-time equivalent posts. Since March 2011, the month in which the Government took office, more than 300 additional consultants have been appointed, including 92 consultant appointments made between January and November 2015. Also, the number of emergency department consultants increased from 56 to 84 under the Government, which highlights our efforts to improve the quality of senior decision making in emergency departments.

Outside of the acute hospital setting, measures are also being implemented in primary care to strengthen existing alternatives to hospital. Community intervention teams involve nurses visiting patients in their homes or nursing homes to administer intravenous medications, monitor bloods, dress wounds, etc. These teams have been expanded, with the most recent new service opening in Waterford some weeks ago.

Other primary care initiatives which alleviate emergency department pressures include expanding general practitioner out-of-hours services; increasing GP access to diagnostic services, such as X-ray and ultrasound; developing minor surgery capacity in general practice; and increasing palliative care capacity in the community to ensure people can die with dignity by providing additional hospice beds, including 24 in Blanchardstown and six in Galway. A further 16 hospice beds have been funded under the service plan and will open in County Kerry later this year. I am disappointed Deputy Martin Ferris did not acknowledge this development.

In November 2015, with the HSE director general, I issued a national emergency department congestion escalation directive to hospitals on how best to deal with emergency department congestion. The framework is intended to ensure that appropriate escalation procedures are in place during high-demand periods in emergency departments. Under the directive, it is compulsory for each hospital to take specific steps to address overcrowding, such as extra ward rounds if trolley figures reach red status on the TrolleyGAR or if a patient has been waiting for

more than nine hours on a trolley since a decision was made to admit him or her.

The HSE informs me that the national escalation framework has been implemented in all hospitals and that the special delivery unit is undertaking an audit of the framework's implementation in ten hospitals to ensure it has been implemented. These audits will provide feedback on how effectively the escalation procedures are working in different hospitals and enable further improvements to be made. To respond briefly to Deputy Tóibín's remarks, the budget of the National Ambulance Service will be increased this year by €7 million, which is additional to the extra €5 million provided last year. Needless to say, these increases need to be sustained.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Minister is using 2014 as a baseline. The Government took office in 2011.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** While we are focusing on trolley numbers, we must not lose sight of the importance of effective management of waiting lists because, as we know, today's cancelled operations are potentially tomorrow's emergency department presentations. The health service must balance planned and emergency care needs to prevent delays in diagnosing or treating illness which could result in greater needs for emergency intervention next week, next month or next year.

In January 2015, I set maximum waiting times for inpatient and day case treatment and outpatient appointments of 18 months by 30 June and 15 months by the end of the year. The HSE was provided with additional funding in the region of €50 million to facilitate achievement of these maximum wait times. It was acknowledged throughout that this may not be possible in the case of some sub-specialties due to the non-availability of specialist staff in the public or private sector and that some patients would decide to wait for a particular consultant, rather than be sent for private treatment.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund waiting list data, published on Friday last week, show significant progress was made in 2015 in reducing the numbers of patients on waiting lists. The data show that the numbers are at their lowest point in more than one year. At the end of December 2015 the HSE achieved 95% compliance for the inpatient and day-case waiting lists and 93% compliance for the outpatient waiting lists against the 15 months maximum wait time threshold. It is particularly evident from the data that progress has been made in addressing the needs of those patients who are waiting longest. On the inpatient and day-case waiting lists, the number of patients waiting over 15 months reduced by 77% during December and the number of patients waiting over 18 months reduced by 70%.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** Minister, I am afraid your time has expired.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I will just be two minutes more, if that is okay. For the outpatient waiting list, the number of people waiting over 15 months fell by 54%. Of course we cannot compare outpatient waiting times with those of the last Government, as those involved chose not to count or include them in official figures, even though they account for three quarters of all those waiting.

Concerted efforts have been made to reduce the scoliosis waiting list as well. At the end of December, no active patients were waiting 15 months or more for spinal surgery at Crumlin hospital. In total, 50% more operations were carried out in 2015 versus 2014 with the assistance of hospitals in Cappagh, Temple Street, Blackrock and London. New theatre capacity will be provided in Crumlin as well.

Health will never be a good news story. In a Department and a system with over 104,000 staff, there will always be groups that have a grievance, often a legitimate one. With over 1,000 hospitals, primary care centres, health centres and community nursing units, there will always be a number in difficulty. With 6 million individual hospital attendances per year, there will always be individual cases that shame and embarrass us. Even 0.1% of 6 million amounts to 6,000 cases. Sadly, this means many of the improvements go unacknowledged or unrecognised, but progress is being made. In Ireland a patient is more likely to survive cancer than ever before. A patient is less likely to have a heart attack, but, if he or she does, he or she is more likely than ever to be at home within a few days. If a person has a stroke, he or she is more likely than ever to receive thrombolysis treatment and survive or avoid disability. If a patient has HIV, he or she will be treated and live a full and long life. If a patient has hepatitis C, he or she will probably be cured.

Nonetheless, we all agree the patients are still waiting too long and staff have to work in difficult conditions. It is unrealistic to believe that the situation can be transformed in weeks or months. Yet it is not intractable and health is not a black hole. With sustained effort, additional resources, clinical leadership and management focus, we can make improvements. It is important to remember that high-quality care is provided to many patients in our emergency departments throughout the country. The vast majority of patients who present at emergency departments - some 83% - receive timely care and are either discharged or admitted within nine hours. I can assure the House of my ongoing commitment and interest in this matter and that of the Government. My apologies for going over time.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** Seven and a half minutes remain. Deputy O'Reilly and Deputy Mulherin can share the remaining time.

**Deputy Joe O'Reilly:** It is important at the outset to establish what has been achieved to date and to acknowledge the proactive leadership role of the current Minister, Deputy Varadkar, and that of the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch. For 2016, health will have funding of €13.195 billion for current expenditure and €414 million for capital expenditure. This represents increases of €900 million and €36 million respectively. There has been a 10% improvement on the overall number on trolleys as against the same date last year. The nursing home support scheme has been augmented with an extra €35 million down to a three or four-week waiting list. Some 649 additional clients per week are dealt with. There is additional winter capacity and the closed beds initiative has been introduced. Some €18 million has been made available to support the opening of 321 beds, with a further 127 due to be opened in the coming weeks.

Under the HSE national service plan, an additional €20 million has been provided to maintain the 2015 outturns of 10,437 hours of home help. That is critical. A sum of €153 million has been provided for 15,450 home care packages and €6 million has been provided for 313 transitional care beds. This has delivered 109 places. An additional €200 million for refurbishment or replacement of older persons units has been provided and we have seen the extension of general practitioner care to under sixes and over 70s as well as 900 more nurses. That is the context of the debate.

I am very proud that the emergency department in Cavan General Hospital is 27 years open this year. It has an average of 80 patients per 24 hour period. Since 2011, the hospital's performance has steadily improved with patient volumes and waiting times reducing significantly. During the period from 1 October 2013 to 1 April 2014, Cavan General Hospital was one of

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the best performing emergency departments in the country and was rated green throughout this period on trolley ratings, with an average of approximately two patients waiting at 8 a.m. each morning. It is a great story for Cavan General Hospital, of which I am so proud. This is due in part to significant initiatives brought in by the Government since 2011. There has been an overall expansion of emergency departments. I wish to remind the Minister of the need for a new emergency department in Cavan and a new capital spend. There has been an expansion of the renal dialysis unit and we have seen the development of the paediatric assessment unit. These services have diverted patients from the emergency department, thus alleviating the pressure. There are new short-stay and stroke units and we have seen enhanced relocation of day ward services. There is a new cystic fibrosis suit with additional rooms for paediatrics and we have seen the establishment of a genitourinary medicine centre in Monaghan hospital. The story in Cavan is great and I am so proud of it. Monaghan hospital is augmenting that and doing an extraordinary job.

The issue of overcrowding in emergency departments cannot be resolved by emergency departments alone. A collaborative approach is necessary and must involve social care and primary care. I urge the Minister to be extraordinary, as he is in every Department, and to keep a major focus on this. I do not believe the potential of primary care has been fully exhausted yet. Apart from the number of primary care centres, I believe there is more potential within existing centres to have situations hived off. We need a collaborative, combined, holistic approach.

The emergency department task force was established to tackle the problem of overcrowding. A total of 88 actions were identified and these have to be worked through. Of course none of us is happy with the *status quo*. We want no one on trolleys. However, significant efforts have been made. I believe that should be acknowledged and the work needs to be kept going.

**Deputy Michelle Mulherin:** I compliment the management and staff of Mayo General Hospital. Trolley numbers are down from this time last year by 15% although, of course, trolley numbers continue to be far too high. I can vouch for this myself because I liaise closely with management and staff and I deal with patients. It is on account of mammoth efforts and a multifaceted approach on the part of management and staff that we have seen these results.

Notwithstanding this progress, Mayo General Hospital has experienced a continuous surge in demand in the accident and emergency department in recent months, dating back to August when traditionally the numbers in the accident and emergency department would be few. However, this year there were considerable numbers. It is really pressurised in the accident and emergency department.

A number of measures have been implemented, including a change in bed management practices, extending diagnostic services such as radiology and cardiac investigations and the introduction of an elderly frail care team under the winter initiative fund, for which the hospital received €250,000. The use of additional step-down beds at Ballina and Swinford district hospitals has helped and the provision of additional funding for the fair deal scheme has helped delayed discharges. These measures can only go so far. They are short-term measures and they show some benefit but in the longer term there is a serious capacity issue in the emergency department at Mayo General Hospital. There is also a deficit in medical beds.

The emergency department was designed to cope with 20,000 patients per annum. In reality, it receives 35,000 patients per annum. Without a doubt, it is operating far beyond its capacity. I know the hospital board has sent a business case to the Saolta health care group for

funding to increase the capacity of the emergency department. I fully support this and I call on the Minister, as part of the suite of measures and the multipronged approach he has described, to urge the Saolta health care group to prioritise Mayo General Hospital as it considers its priorities for infrastructural investment for 2016. I understand the immediate provision of an additional six clinical spaces and 15 medical beds would make a considerable difference to patient flow through the hospital. It would afford dignity and quality of experience to the patient and reduce trolley numbers and the waiting list for elective procedures.

*12 o'clock*

I understand that the possibility of modular building is being considered, but the reality is that we cannot get away from the capacity issue and the stress and pressure that people working in the emergency department are experiencing. I can vouch for that fact. I have been to the emergency department on a number of occasions in my official capacity and with some patients. It is a very small emergency department, and a very modest proposal could realise real benefits and an alleviation of the trolley problem in County Mayo and the wider area it serves.

Debate adjourned.

### **Leaders' Questions**

**Deputy Barry Coven:** Last month we asked the Tánaiste about the dramatic 30% increase in car insurance and the fact it was putting motorists under severe financial pressure. On top of the latest rise, Insurance Ireland is predicting a further 25% rise in 2016. People paying a premium of €450 can expect their bill to increase to €600. The Government responded at that time that there were many reasons for the rise in insurance costs, including rulings on the equalisation of charges for male and female drivers, the amalgamation of the insurance industry and increased payouts. Equalisation did not necessarily contribute to increased premia and is all but a red herring. While the other reasons given may have contributed to increased costs, they do not warrant a possible 55% increase in insurance premia over a two-year period.

The insurance industry seems to be getting out of control and no one, it appears, is representing the consumer. When the Motor Insurance Advisory Board, MIAB, was in place, the insurance industry only increased insurance rates by 40% over an 11-year period. It had a role in keeping costs down and protecting consumers. Today, the report of the rating agency Standard & Poor's slates the Central Bank over insurance failures. It asks whether the Central Bank has the ability to regulate the sector at all.

In December, the Government did not rule out the reinstatement of the MIAB. Given the rise in insurance premia in the motor industry and for homes in flooded areas that already have flood relief schemes in place, is the Tánaiste satisfied the insurance industry is being properly regulated? Does she believe an insurance advisory board should be established to rein in these costs and ensure all consumers and home and business owners at least have the opportunity to insure their cars and properties at reasonable prices?

**The Tánaiste:** As the Deputy is probably aware, earlier this week, the Taoiseach and other Ministers, including my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Kevin Humphreys, and I met representatives of the insurance industry in Ireland to discuss insurance for those who had been unfortunate enough to have been affected by the recent flooding. As part of the discussion, the

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insurance industry set out its financial issues as it saw them. There were some short contributions on the cost of other insurance in Ireland.

In a previous discussion on this matter, I expressed my concern about the fact that people were being threatened with significant increases in insurance costs. The insurance industry discussed the significant cost of claims in Ireland. Reference was made to something people will know from the media, namely, the very high level of whiplash-type claims. I understand they are a factor in the financial issues faced by the sector. Barely a week goes by without there being extensive reports on such cases throughout the country. That was a problem that affected Ireland in a particular way more than a decade ago. It seemed to have trailed off, but according to those who attended the meeting to which I referred, it is now a very significant problem for the industry.

The Deputy's main point concerned the better regulation of insurance in Ireland. As I said to him during a previous discussion, it is something on which I have an open mind. In the case of flooding, the discussions dealt with the fact the industry must address situations where significant State funding has been provided for the newer type of demountable flooding defences. However, this does not count for policyholders who seek reinsurance.

As I said to the Deputy during the previous debate, I have an open mind in respect of this. He is correct in saying that the Central Bank is now the overall regulator of the insurance industry, in particular from a financial point of view. That is necessary. I remind the House of an insurance company that was based in Malta. It offered extraordinarily cheap premia, in particular in Ireland. It then fell into financial difficulties and the motorists who had been insured with it, many of whom the Deputy will recall were young, had to seek other cover in an emergency. It is an issue to which we will have to return with the insurance industry.

We have established the dialogue of last Monday, during which the industry raised its problems with additional claims. One person said there is almost a cottage industry in whiplash claims in Ireland at the moment. As a society, we had dealt with that problem a decade ago, but it has come back to some extent. I anticipate that we will meet the insurance industry again within the next week. I will take up at that meeting some of the issues the Deputy has raised.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I thank the Tánaiste. I note her comment that she has an open mind on our suggestion. I hope and expect that she will exercise some action to elaborate on that open mind at Cabinet. The bottom line is that there are many criticisms of the regulation of the insurance industry, something on which the Government must act swiftly.

It is important that all political parties learn from the past in terms of the insurance sector. Insurance costs are out of control and the Government is merely meeting the industry to have frank discussions. There is no point telling us about the causes. People do not want to hear about the causes because they are well aware of them.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** People want action. Car insurance costs will increase by 55% this year if things are allowed to continue. That is not normal and it is most definitely not acceptable.

There is no point in relying on data emanating from the insurance industry because there is no transparency in the industry. We are expected to take its word, without questioning the

regulation of the industry. The days of relying on self-regulation of the industry are gone.

The response that the Tánaiste and the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, are reviewing the situation will not wash. The Tánaiste, as we have stated previously, has had ample time to consider our recommendation. An advisory board will address this issue, as the MIAB did in the past. Many Government backbenchers agree with this proposal. They want the Tánaiste to take ownership of this situation and show leadership as the Government comes to an end. Will the Tánaiste answer the call that is made on us as public representatives by those whom we have the privilege to represent and ensure there are no questions to be asked about those who have regulatory authority in this area? We cannot stand idly by when serious questions are being asked about regulation in the sector. It is time the board was put in place. The Tánaiste should not rely on the industry to give her the information, which means it can continue at pace to increase costs and insurance premiums in the manner in which it has been doing. All the good the Tánaiste claims to have exercised in the recent budget is wiped out at the stroke of a pen by the likes of this sector.

**The Tánaiste:** We have the examples of PMPA and Quinn Insurance, and the more recent example of the company registered in Malta. In all of these cases, ultimately because of a lack of proper financial regulation, people effectively offered policyholders an apparently better deal, which then boomeranged when the particular institutions failed key financial tests. In the Deputy's appropriate and proper concern for policyholders facing significant increases, he should not throw out the baby with the bath water.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Do not throw it out of a boat.

**The Tánaiste:** Do not suggest we go back to a situation-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Put the baby in the boat.

**The Tánaiste:** -----where in the run-up to an election-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Put the baby back in the boat.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** Paddle your own canoe.

**The Tánaiste:** -----we suggest that there is a cheap quick-fix solution to this, which will result in everybody's premiums being lowered-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The Tánaiste has ankle socks.

**The Tánaiste:** -----with subsequent financial failure. Nobody who is a policyholder and who pays for insurance wants to see any insurance company failing, because in this country when that happens, and under the EU model, we, the policyholders and people who pay for insurance in Ireland generally, will end up paying for it.

There is merit in what the Deputy has said. The Government has begun a very intense and detailed dialogue with the insurance industry on these matters. As the Deputy said, the Minister for Finance has written to the insurance industry. The protection of the broader interests of policyholders by the provision of insurance in Ireland is critical. Based on the conversations we have had to date, there are certain things we can do. For instance, we can look to address the surge in claims and the level of claims for whiplash because they are driving up prices for every motorist and every family that has a car. To suggest, rather disingenuously and dishonestly, that

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we should do this overnight simply for the purposes of electioneering-----

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** We raised it before. Acknowledge that. Be fair about it.

**The Tánaiste:** We must have proper prudential financial regulation of the sector. Remember in the cases of Quinn Insurance and PMPA, the general body of Irish insurance payers ended up paying very long-term levies for insurance policies. I am sure Fianna Fáil does not want to see a return to this. It happened three times on Fianna Fáil's watch.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** PMPA was on your watch.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Was the boat insured?

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** Paddle your own canoe.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Throughout the State, hundreds of thousands of parents struggle with the crisis in the child care system. Parents, and particularly mothers, are being blocked from returning to work. Working families are being financially crippled because of the lack of affordable and accessible child care. The National Women's Council of Ireland rightly argues this is one of the biggest obstacles to women's equal participation in society.

The average cost of child care throughout the State is €310 per week per child, and in Dublin it is even higher. One survey conducted last year found that having two children in child care in many parts of Dublin would cost a family €27,000 per year. Almost half the workforce earns less than this. How could any parent on the median income afford child care at these prices? How could any parent on social welfare seeking part-time work afford this? At these prices, child care workers, nurses, special needs assistants and retail workers could not afford child care. I could go on.

In its 2011 election manifesto, the Tánaiste's party promised to develop a comprehensive national preschool service if elected to government. It broke that promise, just like it broke its promise to protect child benefit and not to cut the one-parent family payment until the Tánaiste introduced what she called a Scandinavian-style child care system. Does the Tánaiste have something against parents? Why has she broken every single promise she made on the issue of child care since 2011? Why does she now, in banner headlines this morning, insult people with more promises that she will surely break?

**The Tánaiste:** I am very pleased as leader of the Labour Party-----

**Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil:** For the time being.

**The Tánaiste:** -----to have introduced a €5 increase in this year's budget for child benefit.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** The Tánaiste does not think much of what Deputy Eamon Gilmore did.

**The Tánaiste:** I am even more pleased that a significant number of increases have been targeted specifically at lone parents on transitional payments.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** That is an unsteady boat.

**The Tánaiste:** The means test and the assessment for family income supplement have been eased significantly. The incomes of lone parents and the parents described by the Deputy work-

ing part-time have been very significantly increased over the past year-----

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Tánaiste has been in government since 2011, not since last year.

**The Tánaiste:** -----and will be further increased this year through a significant expansion of the family income supplement to bring up the earnings of such a family significantly.

With regard to child care, we have had a very detailed examination over the past year, spear-headed by a number of our Deputies who have taken a particular interest in this subject, such as Deputies Arthur Spring and Ciara Conway, to address what is a very pressing issue for society of how we expand resources for families, specifically with regard to child care. I am happy to say that we have proposed over the life of the next Government to improve, as we have been doing over the life of this Government, in very difficult straitened financial circumstances in the first three years, to set out to improve incomes for families, tax reductions for families and, specifically, to improve the provision of child care.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** The Government has doubled child poverty.

**The Tánaiste:** Furthermore, for families on low incomes we have community-based child care, with which Deputy McDonald may not be familiar, but which is an extremely important facility-----

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Is the Tánaiste familiar with it?

**The Tánaiste:** -----for families on low incomes getting community-based child care throughout the country. Not only this, but we are improving regulation, standards and the qualification levels of the people who work in child care. All of this is designed to achieve a much improved provision of child care in this country.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is still inaccessible.

**The Tánaiste:** I am happy to say that next September we will have the introduction of the first child care paternity leave for men, introduced on a modest scale as resources allow for two weeks, and we hope over the life of the next Government to improve and expand this. We also hope, as I said in the course of the budget debate, to expand the further provision of paid parental care in the first year of the life of the child. On child care, notwithstanding that we inherited an extremely difficult financial situation, and notwithstanding that we now have the economy coming into recovery, we devoted in the budget resources not just to older people and pensioners, but we have specifically devoted additional resources to education and child care.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Less than the cuts that were made.

**The Tánaiste:** I am very proud that the Government of the Labour Party and Fine Gael has been able to achieve that.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Having doubled child poverty.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** With the greatest of respect to the Tánaiste, I must question her judgment if she is proud of the record of the Labour Party, whatever about Fine Gael, in the Government in respect of child care. We expected what we have got from Fine Gael. The Fine Gael Party is the Fine Gael Party. There are different expectations for the Labour Party,

however, and they have been shattered. I remind the Tánaiste that she cut child benefit.

**The Tánaiste:** And we restored it.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** She cut child benefit and thereby broke the promise her party made to voters.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Order, please. None of us can hear what is being said. I call on Deputy McDonald to continue.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Labour Party promised to develop a comprehensive preschool service. There is no sign of that.

**The Tánaiste:** We are doing it.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Tánaiste and her party promised repeatedly not to cut lone parent payments until a Scandinavian-style child care system was in place. They did not give a damn about that promise. In fact, the Labour Party in government has broken every single promise it made. The decisions and actions taken by the Labour Party and Fine Gael, of which the Tánaiste is so proud, have hurt families and children and continue to hurt them.

To add insult to injury, the Tánaiste this morning announced an uncosted back-of-the-envelope election gimmick in an attempt to curry favour with the very families her party has failed over the past five years. The Labour Party's banner-headline initiative is not properly costed. Will the Tánaiste tell us where the costings for the proposal are and their source? Is she prepared to put them on the record of the Dáil for scrutiny, not just by parliamentarians but by the public? In all fairness, how could anybody believe anything the Tánaiste has to say on pretty much any subject but, in particular, on the issue of child care when, time and again, she brazenly broke the promises her party made? Yet she stands up and says to the public she is proud of that record.

**The Tánaiste:** Will Deputy McDonald tell me why anybody would believe Sinn Féin when Gerry Adams does not even know whether he is the leader of the IRA but does know Slab Murphy is a good republican? Just tell me that, Deputy.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** What does that have to do with child care?

**The Tánaiste:** Let me tell you, Deputy, the moral integrity of people has a great deal to do with child care and the question of whose care our children should be put in. Gerry Adams is a man who cannot even fess up in regard to what happened with certain murders, but Deputy McDonald is asking us to trust her party. The answer is, "No, we do not."

However, let us come back to the issue at hand. The provision of additional child care support for families in Ireland is a crucial political issue and one that will be addressed, I expect, in the forthcoming election by all political parties. The Labour Party has had an extensive period of consultation on the matter, with meetings throughout the country over the past year. Deputies opposite might not have attended them; their party has rallies, as we know. We have had detailed and very well attended meetings right around the country to discuss our child care proposals. We met different sections of the public, people who work in child care and people who are experts in the area. We have also talked extensively to parents.

What parents want, and it will take a considerable period of time to do it, is to have a child care system that is well regulated. The Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O’Sullivan, has focused on that over the past two years because the big concern for parents is the quality of regulation. In addition, I have provided for a second successive increase in child benefit. Deputies opposite can sneer at that, but their Minister in the North presides over a weekly child benefit rate of €20.70. In fact, for families in Northern Ireland who earn over a certain level, there is no child benefit at all. That is what Sinn Féin has achieved after ten years in government in the North.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Order, please. The Tánaiste has the floor.

**The Tánaiste:** This year, my party in government has employed an extra 1,400 teachers at primary, secondary and SNA level.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Where are the costings for the proposals announced by the Tánaiste’s party today?

**The Tánaiste:** We have also extended SNA preschool support, as asked for by parents, to children with special needs. That is a real breakthrough in terms of preschool policy development in Ireland. Deputy McDonald should be gracious enough to acknowledge it.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Tánaiste should be gracious enough to answer my question and provide costings.

**The Tánaiste:** The Sinn Féin Minister in the North, Mr. John O’Dowd, said recently that those wanting to enter the teaching profession should give “very, very careful consideration” to their choice. Prospective teachers should be aware, he said, that they “may not be able to achieve a post within teaching in this society”. The society he refers to is Northern Ireland. This year, we are hiring 2,400 teachers and SNAs and providing for additional child care resources through child benefit. Sinn Féin in the North is like an empty vessel, with people being advised not even to enter the profession.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Order, please. It is not fair to the Technical Group for other Deputies to use up its allocated time. I have called Deputy Stephen Donnelly.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I asked the Tánaiste a question in respect of costings and the source of those costings in respect of her announcement today. I can only surmise that there are no costings and no credible source for any costing.

**The Tánaiste:** I will answer that.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are over time but I will allow the Tánaiste to respond briefly.

**The Tánaiste:** All our costings will be published with our manifesto whenever the election is announced.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** Where did you get the costings from?

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**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** There are no costings.

**The Tánaiste:** They will be published in detail and will be available for any level of scrutiny. We will publish a full, costed manifesto, unlike the fantasy manifestos of some I could name and that we have seen in the past. Our proposals will be available for experts to examine as they wish.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I wish to state for the record that the Labour Party's initiative is not costed. That should be recorded.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I have called Deputy Donnelly. Deputies should maintain order and allow him to speak.

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** In today's *Irish Examiner*, Daniel McConnell reports on a new EU study showing that this Government is putting the recovery at risk by political budgeting. The report states that recent fiscal policy decisions are influenced by the current political context, which is the upcoming election and the disgraceful auction politics we are seeing from the Government. The report points out that while the Government erodes the tax base, State investment will remain well below the euro area average and, in fact, is being revised down by the Government. This means that investment in infrastructure needed to support business will not happen. Investment in public services such as health care and education will not happen.

The report is a damning indictment of the Government's pre-election politics, which is straight out of the Fianna Fáil playbook. What is worse is that the Government parties are only warming up. The Fine Gael-Labour Party election promise to eliminate USC will cut the revenue base annually by €4 billion to €5 billion. This, of course, is to be paid for by what the report describes as "strong but generally volatile corporate taxes". This is just like Fianna Fáil's tax-cutting measures, which were based on unexpected stamp duty revenues, but what the Government is proposing is even worse than that. When the recession hit in 2008, households - or most of them, anyway - were able to cut back. Businesses and voluntary groups were able to cut back and the State was able to borrow. None of those conditions holds today. The report states:

External risks are increasingly tilted to the downside as the slowdown in China and other emerging markets could affect global trade more widely. The high levels of private and public debt continue to make Ireland vulnerable to potential increases in interest rates and other shocks.

Given that the Government is eroding the tax base and the safety nets have all been used up, when the next economic shock hits from China or elsewhere as it will at some point we will be much more vulnerable than we were in 2008.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** That is not true.

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** The economy may be growing, but all of that is being put at risk by this Government's carry-on. One cannot use unexpected revenues to lock in permanent tax cuts and one cannot properly invest in enterprise, public services and infrastructure if one wipes billions of euro off the revenue base, but that is exactly what the Government is telling the Irish people it wants to do in the next Dáil. How can the Tánaiste be so irresponsible with Ireland's finances and Ireland's future? How can she so blindly repeat Fianna Fáil's mistakes, which she decried and which led to the crash in 2008?

**The Tánaiste:** A number of comments in the executive summary may have escaped the Deputy's notice, so I would like to draw them to the attention of the House.

Ireland's economic rebound is remarkably strong, underpinned by an ongoing successful macroeconomic adjustment and the supportive external environment. Economic growth is projected to moderate towards more sustainable rates in the medium term and Ireland is on track to correct its excessive deficit.

All such reports have issues to raise and want to look forward to risks in the future, which is reasonable and prudential. I have no issue with that and we have those conversations with the review group on an ongoing basis. There is no problem with that. However, these comments in the executive summary recognise that Ireland has achieved a remarkable turnaround and it is the job of the Government to ensure the recovery that has been made to date is not only sustained but grown and that it extends to every single part of the country so that every family and individual benefits.

Deputy Donnelly is an economist and a consultant; he knows the story on this. We exceeded every single target set for 2015. Is there something wrong with that or can he not recognise success when he sees it? Yesterday I launched the next phase of the Pathways to Work programme, which has overseen a fall in unemployment in Ireland from 15.2% at the height of the crisis to 8.8% now.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Hear, hear.

**The Tánaiste:** Yesterday, we set out our plan regarding how to bring our country and our people forward so that everybody who wants a job can get a job-----

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** Tell that to the young people.

**The Tánaiste:** -----and we as a society can move to full employment.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** Some 17.5% of people born here live abroad.

**The Tánaiste:** What in God's heaven or Earth is wrong or irresponsible about bringing unemployment down from 15.2% to 8.8%?

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** That is the highest percentage in the world.

**The Tánaiste:** That is why the Commission, in its executive report, rightly acknowledges the gains and successes of Ireland. They are not total. We know that.

**Deputy Ray Butler:** They are gone very quiet over there.

**The Tánaiste:** I oversee the Intreo and social welfare offices, so every day of my working life I meet young people who have not yet got back to work. It is my-----

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** Some 17.5% of people born in Ireland live abroad.

**The Tánaiste:** -----passion and my mission to get them back to work. We have had remarkable success. That is our objective.

The Deputy worked in a previous life with the IMF or the World Bank on debt. When we came into office, the debt level of this country was 123% of GDP.

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**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Hear, hear.

**The Tánaiste:** It is now, at the end of 2015, 97%.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** Total debt was 550%, including household debt and non-financial-----

**The Tánaiste:** The projected debt level for the end of this year-----

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** Selective debt.

**The Tánaiste:** -----is 92% or 93%.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** That is only national debt. What about household debt?

**Deputy Ray Butler:** You are watching too much “Star Wars”.

**The Tánaiste:** I know the Deputy is a policy wonk in this area, so let me say that they are the gross debt levels. They do not take into account the cash balances we have as a country and the interest the State has in the banks, which have already begun to realise cash to the Exchequer and will do so again in the future.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** Is the Government going to sell them off then?

**The Tánaiste:** If we were to do the calculation in that way, our net debt level is heading below 80%. What is wrong with that? Can the Deputy not celebrate the fact that people and businesses are going back to work, that USC is coming down for people on incomes of between €25,000 and €70,000 and it is capped at that level? What is irresponsible about that?

**Deputy Michelle Mulherin:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Ray Butler:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** It is two quotas, Tom.

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** I remember watching politicians on television back in 2005 and 2006.

**Deputy Kevin Humphreys:** You are one yourself.

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** A small number of people were telling the Government at that time that it was eroding the tax base, destabilising the country and setting us up for a fall. At that time, the Government asked what was not to celebrate, given the remarkable employment level and growing economy. At that time, the debt-to-GDP level was below 25%. Exactly that kind of discourse is going on here: “Do not worry about it”. Then, as now, international organisations wrote reports like this and stated clearly to the State and the Government that the latter needed to be careful about what it was doing.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** What is the Deputy suggesting?

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** Then, as now, the Government was saying there was no problem, as unemployment was going well and the economy was growing.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** The economy is balanced.

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** However, it continued to erode the tax base and it stopped investing. The time it did it most was just before an election. All those things are happening right now. The difference is that there is no safety net. When Fianna Fáil did it, there were safety nets in place. We could borrow, people could cut back and businesses could cut back.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Did they work?

**Deputy Ray Butler:** What safety net?

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** None of that is in existence right now.

**Deputy Ray Butler:** There must have been a big hole in the net.

**Deputy Emmet Stagg:** I think the Deputy's minute is up.

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** As the Tánaiste seems keen to quote the report, let me quote what it says about these unexpected corporate tax bonuses:

This surge is mostly explained by some multinationals re-domiciling patents to Ireland. Investment is driven by aircraft-leasing and cross-border transfers of intellectual property by a few multinationals.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** Cooking the books.

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** That is the kind of stuff the Government is using to knock billions out of the Revenue base. The Tánaiste rightly said this is about people. On Monday night in Wicklow I met a mother with a young son who has a range of special needs. He is nine years of age and he has a handful of words. That kid could achieve a lot in his life. The last time he was given access to a speech therapist was two years ago. The last time he had access to an occupational therapist was five years ago.

**Deputy Emmet Stagg:** I think the minute is up.

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** Does the Tánaiste want to cut USC for absolutely no benefit whatsoever in terms of job creation or economic growth or does she want a country that offers opportunity and dignity and where mothers and fathers do not have to deal with that?

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** You can give it but you cannot take it.

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** Do we want a country where businesses can be invested in, where broadband can be invested in properly, and where the infrastructure required to drive growth and jobs for young people can happen? The Tánaiste is not doing that. She is ignoring the reports, just like the last Government. She is pointing to the good news, which is welcome, and ignoring the risks. She should not be eroding the tax base in a high-growth economy. Just like in 2006-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Sorry, Deputy, I have to call on the Tánaiste.

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**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** The same organisations are saying the Government needs to be careful because it is destabilising the recovery.

**The Tánaiste:** I am not sure the Deputy really understands what the Government is doing.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Nobody does.

**The Tánaiste:** The core reason-----

*(Interruptions).*

**The Tánaiste:** The executive summary of the report acknowledges the core reason, namely, that we had more than 15% of people unemployed in this country as a result of a property bubble which I warned against on numerous occasions - Deputy Donnelly is right in that respect - and which I would warn against if it were to happen again. It was a property bubble as opposed to the recovery here, which is a jobs-led recovery in which unemployment has fallen from 15.2% to 8.8% this month.

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** Due mainly to our trade.

**Deputy Emmet Stagg:** Shut up and listen.

**The Tánaiste:** The consequence is that tax revenues, PRSI and USC have grown very significantly. In a balanced budget there has to be scope for some tax reductions. Deputy Donnelly stated earlier that there should have been no reduction in USC. We gave a reduction in USC to benefit the lowest paid at work in Irish society-----

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** No, they did not.

**Deputy Emmet Stagg:** Deputy Shortall wants to keep it.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** And that is why they emigrated.

**Deputy Emmet Stagg:** Deputy Shortall wants to increase it.

**The Tánaiste:** -----so as to ensure that work always pays and we then provided further relief, in terms of reducing the USC rate of 7% to 5.5% for individuals earning between €25,000 and €70,000, and it was capped at that point so that very high earners only got the same benefit as an earner on €70,000.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** There was no justification for that.

**The Tánaiste:** Let me tell the Deputy about Ireland's current capacity to borrow. Ireland ended up inviting the men in suits from the Merrion Hotel across the road here to take control of the country's finances-----

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** It was the same for everybody.

**The Tánaiste:** -----because nobody would lend to us.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** It is the same for everybody internationally.

**The Tánaiste:** Nobody would lend to us.

**Deputy Emmet Stagg:** People like Deputy Mathews-----

**The Tánaiste:** Last week - Deputy Donnelly follows these matters and I am sure he has read it - the NTMA sold €3 billion of Irish bonds at a rate very slightly above 0.1%-----

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** There are negative deposit rates.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Look at that.

**The Tánaiste:** -----just above the German rate. We could have sold bonds-----

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** In Switzerland, one must pay to deposit.

**The Tánaiste:** -----at three times that value such was the demand.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** It is no big deal. International quantitative easing, QE.

**The Tánaiste:** That is the difference between now and when the country lost its economic sovereignty. Of course, there are matters we must fix. I have just stated we have an ambitious target to reduce the debt even further this year.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Tánaiste.

**The Tánaiste:** By the way,-----

**Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly:** It is not being reduced.

**The Tánaiste:** -----if Deputy Donnelly read the executive summary,-----

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** I would say the Tánaiste's two minutes are nearly up.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** Five years ago.

**The Tánaiste:** -----he would know that what they have recommended, which recipe Deputy Donnelly seems to be following, is actually to use all additional funds to pay down debt, to give no relief to workers-----

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** What of public services?

**The Tánaiste:** -----and to put no extra funding into services.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Would the Tánaiste open her eyes to the problems in public services?

**The Tánaiste:** We have a balanced budget which is aimed at reducing the debt and the cost of servicing the debt.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** They doubled the rate of child poverty.

**The Tánaiste:** We have a balanced budget that is aiming at getting people back to work. We have a balanced budget that is aiming at getting more businesses back on their feet employing more people and we have a balanced budget which has an ambitious programme in my view, not yet big enough, of capital investment and significant additional investment-----

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**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** And the crisis in health and crisis in housing.

**The Tánaiste:** -----in health, education, agriculture and social services generally.

**Deputy Emmet Stagg:** When Deputy Shortall was Minister of State, she did not do much about it.

### **Order of Business**

**The Tánaiste:** It is proposed to take No. 218, motion re hospital emergency departments (resumed); and No. 40, statements on reports of the Convention on the Constitution. It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the proceedings in relation to No. 40 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 4.42 p.m. today and the following arrangements shall apply: (i) the statements of a Minister or Minister of State and of the main spokespersons for Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Technical Group, who shall be called upon in that order, shall not exceed 15 minutes in each case and such Members may share their time; and (ii) the statement of each other Member called upon shall not exceed ten minutes in each case, and such Members may share their time.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There is one proposal to put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with No. 40, statements on the reports of the Convention on the Constitution, agreed to? Agreed. On the Order of Business, I call Deputy Cowen.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** In the context of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government Bill, will the Tánaiste give consideration to allocating time to discuss proposed legislation on foot of the Private Members' Bill by Deputy Troy and by Sinn Féin on one authority for the Shannon region and jurisdiction over its maintenance, and also a Bill produced by Deputy Michael McGrath seeking mandatory insurance for those whom reside where flood defences have been put in place? The Minister of State, Deputy Harris, has stated that the Government has not ruled out the possibility of one authority. If there were heads of Bills produced, maybe it could be debated and there could be agreement amongst all parties on an authority that would receive the full support of the House. Those three issues are intertwined, as the Tánaiste will be well aware. In light of the time that remains, would the Tánaiste make an effort to single out specific time for elaboration on those areas in order for a more informed decision to be made ultimately by Government that would benefit all concerned?

**The Tánaiste:** The Taoiseach addressed this yesterday. I am perfectly happy to see more time allocated to these important intertwined issues in relation to a single authority for the Shannon. A Bill on that was published by my colleague, Deputy Penrose, some time ago and some of the current work relies fairly heavily on Deputy Penrose's work, and I acknowledge that work here.

On Deputy Michael McGrath's proposal in relation to householders being covered by the insurance sector where flood defences have been installed, I stated earlier there is an issue around demountable flood defences, which have been put in in various areas and where the rate of insurance coverage is much lower than in relation to more traditional flood defences. That is a topic we will return to. The Taoiseach and I will also meet the representatives of the insurance sector again by the end of next week. I am perfectly happy to see time allocated but I suggest the detail might be left for discussion by the Whips.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** My party did not object to the Order of Business today but it is extremely disappointing that such a limited amount of time is being allocated for the discussion of the reports from the Constitutional Convention. We have waited and waited and now, at the 11th hour, we have what is a minimalist debate. We did not object or look for a vote on the Order of Business simply because at least now there is some form of debate on reports that have been long outstanding.

The second issue I raise is the issue of Moore Street. A number of Deputies have submitted Topical Issues. I understand that my party's Topical Issue has been accepted.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Were they read out earlier?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** No.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I will get the list.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Leas-Cheann Comhairle might check that for me. In any event, we need a deeper discussion on this issue than a Topical Issue affords us. The Tánaiste will be aware that there has been a campaign for the best part of two decades to force the State and whatever Government to treat Moore Street, the entire terrace and the vicinity around the GPO up as far as Parnell Square, in a fitting and appropriate manner. People would be rightly horrified at the idea if anybody suggested today that one might bulldoze Kilmainham Gaol and put up a shopping mall but I remind the Tánaiste that Kilmainham Gaol is only now what it is because of the activism and insistence of people on the ground. The State let that place too go to rack and ruin with absolutely no regard for its historical import.

We are at a crossroads and we need a full debate here in the Oireachtas. The stall needs to be set out. I plead with Deputy Burton, as the outgoing Tánaiste and as a person in leadership in government in the centenary year, to do right in respect of Moore Street. The State's response has been minimalist, almost to the point of being insulting to the memory of the men and women who, 100 years ago, struck a blow for the Republic. There is major economic potential for the inner city of Dublin and beyond in creating what would be a tourist mecca and a massive economic hub in the north inner city.

For those reasons, I appeal to the Tánaiste to make time for us to debate these issues. I hope every Member of the Oireachtas, irrespective of political stripe, finds it within himself or herself to support what is blindingly obvious, namely, the necessity for the full preservation and appropriate development of the Moore Street terrace in its entirety and the entire revolutionary quarter.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There will be a Topical Issue debate, raised by six Deputies, including Deputy McDonald, on the restoration works on the national monument, Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street.

**The Tánaiste:** I have had a very long-standing interest in Moore Street and have had the privilege of being in Nos. 14, 15, 16 and 17 Moore Street. I have also had the opportunity to look very closely at the plans proposed by the various historical experts and public bodies which will undertake the work. While not everybody agrees with this, the proposals rank alongside what I have seen done in similar situations. It is a very high-quality proposal which fits in with maintaining the fabric of a street on which I partly grew up. I know every corner of the street. I shopped on the street with my mother from when I was a very small child. I know

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all the lanes and I know where everybody came out, where nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell came and where The O'Rahilly was shot. It is part of all our history. What has been proposed deserves very careful consideration by everybody.

There have been a number of throwaway comments about shops being in the vicinity. The Deputy represents the north inner city now. The essence of the north inner city is that it is a very large retail shopping area. The whole of the wider O'Connell Street area almost as far as the canal is part of the 1916 Rising battlefield. It is similar on the south side. The question must be faced by all big cities that have a vast amount of fascinating history which, as the Deputy rightly said, is a very big draw for citizens of the Irish Republic which was created 100 years ago. We are the proud inheritors of it.

We must face the question of how we have the city function as a city centre. Other countries have done this very well. If the Deputy examines many of the books and photographs of the time, she will see that the proposal is very true to what the street looked like at the time. I have a particular interest in this and have examined them over many years. I hope the people from Éirígí who went into Nos. 14 to 17 recently did not do any damage to what are extraordinarily fragile buildings. I ask the Deputy to use her good offices as a political leader to ensure no further damage is done to the fabric. What is proposed is a modern conservation in which a limited number of people-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is a shopping mall.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** There will be a Topical Issue debate on it.

**The Tánaiste:** There is nothing wrong with people in the north side of Dublin wanting to shop in the vicinity of the GPO. I have done it all my life, and it is one of the great pleasures of being around the GPO and being in Henry Street and the surrounding area.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** In a shopping mall.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** This is the Order of Business.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We will not have a debate on it now.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** This is a lecture.

**The Tánaiste:** We need a plan which will reinstate the fabric, give the experience to people who visit and make us all proud. It means the strictest planning guidelines must be adopted on the whole area, which includes much of the city centre between the canals. Dublin City Council has an extraordinarily serious responsibility in this. I hope all the bodies can agree, and we should not take cheap shots at shopping malls. It ill becomes the Deputy.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Can we have the debate?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I ask Deputies to be brief in their questions.

**The Tánaiste:** Everybody has shopped there for decades and generations.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Tánaiste is missing the point.

**Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail:** Will the Leas-Cheann Comhairle ask the Tánaiste to be brief?

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** The change to the National Minimum Wage Act to introduce the new national minimum wage of €9.15 is very welcome for employees, particularly employees of community employment, CE, schemes and Pobal, which are funded by the Tánaiste's Department. There is concern across the country that the grants have not been increased in order that they can pay the new national minimum wage of €9.15. While it is very welcome for employees and must be supported, the CEs must also be supported with additional funds to pay it. Otherwise they will be under severe financial pressure, as the Tánaiste will know from parliamentary questions I and others have asked. Many schemes seek reassurance and an answer from the Tánaiste. Will she inform them whether she will, through the Department of Social Protection, provide them with the funding to pay the national minimum wage which she has increased?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It is a matter for a parliamentary question.

**The Tánaiste:** My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Kevin Humphreys, dealt with the matter yesterday during Question Time. The Deputy might care to examine the very detailed responses. There are just under 400 community services programme, CSP, sponsored and supported companies throughout the country and more than 60% of them pay more than the minimum wage. Yesterday, the Minister of State, Deputy Kevin Humphreys, said the rate of pay was approximately €11 per hour, which is significantly above the minimum wage.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Relativity will kick in.

**The Tánaiste:** He also said we will deal case by case over the coming weeks with CSPs which are affected. Many of the organisations raise funds through various services they provide and receive income streams from other Departments and users of the services. We will deal with it case by case over the next few weeks. I am very confident that what is a very progressive move to increase the minimum wage by 50 cent per hour will be addressed in a productive way by the CSP organisations.

**Deputy Frank Feighan:** There are Government guidelines for universities to comply with remuneration, allowances, pensions and staffing. When will the universities (amendment) Bill come before the House?

**The Tánaiste:** It is listed for publication in the next few weeks.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Is a particular sequence proposed for prioritising the promised legislation which might receive the most urgent consideration? There are 15 items on the short list of legislative proposals. Is this the exclusive list or will other required legislation be introduced during the period ahead?

**The Tánaiste:** Two subjects that are not on the list will definitely arise before the end of the Dáil term. One is the proposal to choose the Ceann Comhairle by way of a secret election, for which room must be provided.

*1 o'clock*

Second, following on from the discussions on flooding we have had since the Dáil came back, certain matters relating to insurance and the regulatory framework for the broad River Shannon might need to be addressed. They are a couple of subjects which come to mind. Otherwise, a number of matters have already been dealt with. I refer, for example, to the adoption

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(amendment) Bill. Three Bills were taken for publication this week. I know that a great deal of work is ongoing in relation to the others.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** I would like to raise three matters with the Tánaiste. Where does the Horse Racing Ireland Bill 2015 stand at the moment?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Does the Deputy want to put the three matters to the Tánaiste together?

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** It is easier for the Tánaiste to answer them one by one.

**The Tánaiste:** I understand the Horse Racing Ireland Bill 2015 will be debated on Report Stage next week.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** Grand. Second, I would like to ask the Tánaiste about Ibrahim Halawa, about whom I asked the Taoiseach yesterday. As Deputies will be aware, the European Parliament passed a motion by over 500 votes to a negligible 11 votes stating that the transgression of human rights in this case is glaring. The Tánaiste and the Taoiseach should initiate a programme to put pressure on the relevant authorities, for example, by withholding visas from the Egyptian diplomatic office. It is just wrong that this is happening. As I said to the Taoiseach yesterday, he has a son of exactly the same age and what is happening to Ibrahim Halawa would not happen if it was his son who was involved.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** That is disgraceful.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** That remark is not worthy of Deputy Mathews.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is just a comparison.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** It is not.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I think it is fair.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** My final question concerns the gambling control Bill. The advertisements for betting and all that sort of stuff that are being broadcast at the moment and were broadcast over Christmas on the radio and on television are hugely manipulative and persuasive. It is just wrong that free bets are being offered to people to entice them into this harmful and addictive activity. This issue has been on the agenda for the past two years.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** To which Bill does the Deputy refer?

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** I am speaking about the gambling control Bill. The Government is doing nothing while people are losing their houses and families are being destroyed. It is wrong that the Government has put this on the long finger for the past two years. I invite the Tánaiste to listen to the advertisements. Does she listen to the radio? Does she watch television? They are shocking.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy has asked his question.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** This is the most addictive form of destruction.

**Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail:** Hear, hear.

**The Tánaiste:** Everybody in the House is deeply concerned about the safety of Ibrahim

Halawa, who is a young man.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** The Government should do something.

**The Tánaiste:** The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan, met the Egyptian ambassador to Ireland yesterday. Obviously, the key problem here is that the trial and the legal processes keep being postponed.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** The Government needs to get tough.

**The Tánaiste:** Unfortunately, they have been put back again. The Government is certainly exerting all of the pressure it can with contacts at a high intergovernmental level-----

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** It is ineffective and hopeless.

**The Tánaiste:** -----to press the Egyptian authorities to provide for the safe return of this young man to his family and to his home in Ireland.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** American and Australian people have been released.

**The Tánaiste:** The Deputy also asked about the gambling Bill. Like many people in Ireland, I enjoy racing. I agree that there are numbers of people with gambling problems and that there are serious newer forms of social media-based gambling. However, the gambling legislation referred to by the Deputy is unlikely to come before the House in the near or short term.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I wish to ask the Tánaiste about the long-promised wind energy guidelines. They were promised over two years ago. Permission continues to be granted for wind farms with giant turbines. There is serious concern in Laois, south Kildare and Offaly about such turbines. According to one of the Tánaiste's colleagues, the Ministers who are responsible for this area, Deputies Kelly and White, are squabbling. I understand that the Minister, Deputy Kelly, has publicly told the Minister, Deputy White, to keep his nose out of this matter because he does not know what he is doing and does not know anything about it. I do not know what is going on. Perhaps the Tánaiste can shed some light on it. I say sincerely to her today that there are significant concerns about the wind energy guidelines. We agree with the Tánaiste that the deregulation and the lack of regulation in construction causes very significant problems. We can all agree that we are still mopping up after the grief that has been caused. I put it directly to the Tánaiste that if we do not do something about the whole issue of regulations and guidelines for the wind energy industry, we will have another mess on our hands in a few years. I realise that the Government has a short period of time left in office. I ask the Tánaiste sincerely to try to have this problem sorted out in the short amount of time that is left, perhaps by bringing forward guidelines that can deal with the types of giant turbines we are talking about. They are 170 m or 180 m in height.

**The Tánaiste:** I was in the Deputy's part of County Laois recently with my colleague, Senator Whelan. I know that many people have concerns about wind energy issues. Officials in the Departments of the Environment, Community and Local Government and Communications, Energy and Natural Resources are working with great dedication on the development of appropriate guidelines.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** This is the same answer I was given one and a half years ago.

**The Tánaiste:** As the Deputy knows, we have also had discussions on the potential for us-

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ing currently unused boglands and, on a modest scale and in accordance with good planning advice and guidelines, using upland areas where Coillte may have forestry. We want to see wind providing a significant amount of carbon-free or carbon-reduced energy to Ireland. I think Sinn Féin shares that objective. Practically all the countries on the planet recently held very detailed discussions in Paris. We need to get the energy guidelines for Ireland right. I agree with Deputy Stanley that we have to take community interests into account. At the same time, we have to reduce our carbon footprint. This work is ongoing. I do not yet have a date for its completion. This is a very important issue for everybody on this island. Obviously, it is of particular concern to people who may be near such installations.

### **North-South Interconnector Bill 2016: First Stage**

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to regulate the North-South interconnector providing regulations for erection adjacent to dwellings and public places, rerouting of disputed interconnector parts underground following opposition during public consultations and related matters.

I am proposing the North-South Interconnector Bill 2016 in conjunction with my colleagues, Deputies Ó Caoláin and Colreavy. The purpose of the Bill is to ensure the North-South interconnector, which is a necessary piece of infrastructure, is developed. It is being held up at the moment by the Government's pig-headed attitude that it needs to be built overhead. If it continues to pursue this approach, it is not likely that the interconnector will ever be built. I suggest that it should be put underground.

I will give a bit of context. For approximately a decade, the decent and ordinary people of County Meath have been campaigning day and night - week in, week out - to try to ensure their families are kept safe, their businesses can continue to thrive and their properties do not collapse in value. EirGrid plans to build hundreds of 45 m pylons throughout the county, up through counties Cavan and Monaghan and into County Tyrone on the northern side of the Border. This has created great fear and anguish among the people of County Meath. People are worried about health, for example. There is a strong body of opinion, not least among the members of the European Commission's scientific committee, that the previous conclusion that extremely low frequency electromagnetic fields are a possible carcinogen, which was chiefly based on childhood leukaemia results, is still valid. This very strong statement puts the wind up most families that are threatened with this form of infrastructure. This Bill addresses that fear and asks the Government to carry out an independent investigation to make sure knowledge and proper research are brought to the people's attention and are in the people's hands before decisions are made. Another problem that arises when people are trapped in the curtilage of these pylons is that house prices immediately collapse. They will not be able to move out of an area should they want to do so, because there is no value in their homes. Where that fear exists, this legislation allows for independent research to be carried out and to be provided to the host community who live along the length of the North-South interconnector.

There are also fears on the part of businesses in the local area. People in the businesses of tourism, heritage, agriculture and bloodstock fear that these pylons will pose an enormous threat to their livelihoods. This legislation simply tasks the Government with producing independent research to identify what exactly the threat is to the business community, the agricul-

tural community, the bloodstock community, etc., and to put that information into the hands of the citizen.

We were told that it was an impossibility to put this underground as it would be too expensive. First, we were told it could not happen - it was just not feasible. Then we saw the rush to Batterstown and the east-west interconnector put paid to that mistruth. In 2007, EirGrid stated it would be 25 times the cost of putting it underground but in 2009 it said it would be seven times the cost to put it underground. Deputy Pat Rabbitte, the previous Minister, stated it would be three and a half times the cost to put it underground. In the nine years of this particular plan, the cost of putting it underground, even as arrived at by the proponents of putting it overground, is collapsing. We have spoken to experts who firmly believe the cost is far less, at perhaps some one and a half times. I tabled a parliamentary question to the Minister asking what the cost would be to customers of electricity in the State if it was put underground and the Minister replied that he could not say.

We want to make sure we put democracy back into the planning process. The Fianna Fáil-Green Party Government created the Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure) Act which took democratic influence out of the planning process. In other words, the normal planning process in the county council would no longer apply. That forces potentially dangerous pieces of infrastructure onto communities and that should not be done in a democracy. This Bill seeks to put democracy back into the picture. If a number of people in the host community alongside the North-South interconnector feel that this is a threat to their livelihoods or their lives, they have an opportunity to organise a meeting chaired by An Bord Pleanála. If, after collecting all the independent evidence and deliberating over it, the people are against the putting overground of these 400 kV lines in their area, they have the right to vote on it. If over 50% vote against overheading, then the chairperson of An Bord Pleanála sends a letter to the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government and the Minister is obliged to proceed with putting it underground.

There has been a lot of political debate on this over the past nine or ten years and I see that a Fine Gael Deputy for Meath is present today. The campaign feels betrayed and aggrieved about the actions of this Government when it comes to implementing its wishes. I appeal to Deputies to stand up for the citizens they represent and make sure this legislation is implemented before the Dáil closes.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the Bill being opposed?

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** For all the very real concerns the Deputy has outlined, it is a real mystery why Sinn Féin is putting the North part of this project, in Northern Ireland, overground.

**Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** That is totally untrue. The Deputy should make honest interventions or she should not make any at all.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I cannot allow further discussion. The Bill is not opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** As this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time. The Deputy should move that Second Stage be taken in Private Members' time.

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**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.

### **Hospital Emergency Departments: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin on Thursday, 14 January 2016:

That Dáil Éireann:

— considers the ongoing crisis in hospital emergency departments a denial of the right of timely access to health care with dignity and a betrayal of the Republic envisioned in 1916;

— remembers inspirational figures such as Dr. Kathleen Lynn, a 1916 veteran and founder of St. Ultan’s Hospital for the Children of the Poor, who pioneered public health initiatives in the most difficult and conservative of times, and recommits to the principle enshrined in the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil Éireann that “it shall be the duty of the Republic to take such measures as will safeguard the health of the people”;

— condemns the decision of the Government to not invest adequately in the defence of the nation’s health, which saw an entirely predictable worsening of the trolley crisis in the opening weeks of the centenary year; and

— concurs with the view of Dr. James Gray and other health care professionals who have described as a “national scandal” the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation figures that show the numbers on trolleys close to 500; and

calls on the Government to:

— increase the number of hospital beds in the system and reverse the flow of nurses and doctors out of our public health system by committing to ambitious multi-annual recruitment targets and allocating the additional €412 million necessary to increase nursing numbers by 2,500 and consultant numbers by 800 over five years;

— commit to incrementally increasing annual funding for the fair deal scheme by an additional €125 million in order to increase nursing home bed numbers by 900 additional beds in year one, 800 additional beds in year two and 700 additional beds in years three, four and five;

— commit to increase home help hours and home care packages in year one by 10% at an estimated cost of €31 million and by a further 10% on the baseline year in years two and three with a resulting rise in spending of €93 million; and

— establish an emergency department task force on a permanent basis.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“acknowledges:

— that timely access by patients to emergency care and improving waiting times in emergency departments, EDs, continues to be a primary focus of Government policy;

— that the demand for emergency services is growing in line with overall population growth, 1% per year, a projected increase of over 19,000 in the number of people over 65 years; a growing number of people in the old and frail elderly category - nearly 3,000 aged 85 years and over - and the increasing burden of chronic illness in the population;

— that this Government made additional ongoing funding available in 2015 to address ED overcrowding and that a wide-ranging set of actions are being implemented by the Health Service Executive, HSE, and hospitals to achieve improvements in the delivery of care in EDs;

— the difficulties which ED overcrowding cause for patients, their families and hospital staff who are doing their utmost to provide safe, quality care in very challenging circumstances;

— that it is Government policy to support older people in their own homes and communities for as long as possible, that provision for such home and community-based services was significantly strengthened during 2015, and that these levels will be maintained in 2016;

— that nursing homes placements are required by those patients who can no longer live independently or return home even with appropriate supports, and that waiting times for the nursing home support scheme funding have reduced from 11 weeks at the beginning of the year to three to four weeks; and

— that optimum patient care, improving patient safety and overall population health at all times remain a Government priority;

notes in particular that:

— the Government has prioritised a number of initiatives during 2015 which have had a positive impact on trolley numbers:

— the additional winter capacity and closed beds initiatives were established in July 2015 to fund and support additional bed capacity during the winter peak period; as of Friday, 8 January 2016, some 321 beds have opened or reopened with a further 127 beds to open or reopen during quarter one of 2016;

— delayed discharges have reduced steadily from 830 in December 2014 to 533 on 11 January 2016, which has freed up almost 300 beds to be used by acutely ill patients every day;

— an additional €35 million over projected 2015 expenditure of ongoing funding has been provided for the nursing home support scheme during 2016, which will deliver 1,222,750 total weeks of care, supporting an average of 23,450 clients per week for 2016; this is an increase of 649 clients per week on the 2015

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position and an increase of 33,825 care weeks above the 2015 position;

— transitional care funding has supported over 3,800 approvals, which is significantly above the original target of 500;

— over 1,200 additional home care packages were provided by end 2015;

— 173 additional short-stay nursing home beds were open by the end of 2015, 149 of these in public facilities; and

— in addition, 65 short-stay beds opened in Mount Carmel Community Hospital in September;

— for 2016, the Department of Health will have total funding of approximately €13.6 billion, a 7% increase on the 2015 budget, demonstrating the Government's commitment to addressing the reductions experienced by the health sector consequent on the economic downturn which commenced in 2008;

— a series of focussed campaigns are ongoing to attract front-line staff in order to meet patient care requirements:

— in the past 12 months there are almost 900 more nurses working in the health service;

— since March 2011, over 300 additional consultants have been appointed to acute hospitals around the country, including 92 consultant appointments between January and November 2015;

— the number of non-consultant hospital doctors employed in the health service has increased by over 390 in the past 12 months and by over 1,000 since March 2011; and

— ED consultants have increased from 56 to 84 under this Government;

— on 11 January 2016, revised proposals of the Workplace Relations Commission were accepted by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation national executive in relation to the HSE national escalation policy, which will enhance patient safety and care in EDs; and

— the emergency department task force implementation group, convened by the Minister for Health, continues to ensure that a system-wide focus is maintained on addressing ED overcrowding challenges by hospital groups, working with the relevant community health care organisations; the emergency department task force implementation group has also been overseeing hospital groups' winter preparedness and during this peak winter period, the Department of Health is engaging in weekly meetings with the HSE; and

supports the Minister for Health in his continued determination to bring about improvements in urgent and emergency care services.”

-(Minister for Health.)

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There is one hour and 45 minutes remaining. Is Deputy

Kelleher in possession?

**Deputy Billy Kelleher:** No, but I will take possession if the Leas-Cheann Comhairle so wishes. When the Minister came to the House it was quite obvious he bypassed the Department of Health and went straight to the Fine Gael press office. He more or less read a Fine Gael press release into the record of the House. Time and time again health services and emergency department overcrowding have been debated in this House. There has been, unfortunately, very little response from the Government to the ongoing crisis in the Department of Health, in the health services and with the delivery of care. It is happening day in and day out but the Minister comes in and effectively dismisses the legitimate claims of Deputies opposite that health services are under-resourced, with undercapacity, increasing delays in access to outpatient and inpatient services and overcrowding in emergency departments. Many Deputies on all sides of the House say that consistently in this House. The motion has validity in the sense that it raises the genuine concerns and experiences of individuals over a long period of time who have been languishing on trolleys for inordinate periods.

Emergency medicine consultants say on a daily basis that health and the lives of patients are being compromised. An actuarial or statistical analysis would tell us that people are dying because of overcrowding in emergency services and there is a detrimental impact on health outcomes for people who languish for inordinate periods on trolleys.

I found one paragraph in the Fine Gael press release quite fascinating, which the Minister actually failed to read. I do not know if it is in his script but it is in the one presented to me. After some historical lecturing, we have, “In contrast the Government has developed plans recognising the range of difficulties confronting our health services and the reality that it will take a number of years, resources, commitment and long-term thinking to achieve fundamental improvement.” That is the kernel of the issue because the Government does not have a plan. The bottom line is that the Minister of Health would not be the Minister if the policies being pursued by this Government were successful. The last Minister for Health was sacked and it was not the Opposition who sacked him but the Taoiseach of this country, because of the ineptitude, the inability to manage the health services and its budget and the inability to put in place proper measures to ensure that the basics of the commitments made by the Government would at least be honoured.

The Minister was also brought in to euthanase universal health insurance with a smile, to let a key, central plank of Government policy fade into the ether. We are not being alarmist in highlighting the lack of any strategy or coherent plan from the Government. By its own admission, the previous Minister, Deputy James Reilly, the deputy leader of Fine Gael, was sacked. It was very evident early on that the model being proposed for universal health insurance, the Dutch single-tier universal access model which was fed into the programme for Government, was going nowhere but the previous Minister could not admit the failure so it was handed to the current Minister to let it fade away gently into a distant memory. Unfortunately, the difficulty is that there is now no plan from the Government. The Minister talks about long-term thinking to achieve fundamental improvements and acknowledges all the things the Government is doing to address the problems, but all those things are addressing the problems it previously created. When he took office in 2014, one of the first briefings the Minister received was on the lack of stepdown and home care packages and the cut in home help hours feeding into the difficulties with delayed discharges and the inability to get people through the hospital system and through the other side with stepdown, community care and nursing home support schemes. It effectively took the scandal of people having to wait for 20 weeks to be approved for fair deal before the

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Minister acknowledged that this was a problem. The Government consistently only acknowledges problems when there are crises in certain areas. This month, January, is no different from any other month in recent years in terms of overcrowding in emergency departments. There has been a litany of horrific individual cases with regard to the amount of time people have had to spend on trolleys in emergency departments throughout the country. The Taoiseach has previously expressed shame and anger in the Dáil about what was happening, only to find that it happened again the following day and the day after. This is particularly the case with elderly people. Over Christmas, I was asked by a family to make a telephone call to the HSE and to a hospital. Their 91 year old father who had pneumonia was on a hospital trolley and was facing a second night parked in a corridor in the emergency department. The man was subsequently put into the hospital system, was successfully treated and was later discharged. However, for the first 40 hours he was on a trolley, with the nurses and doctors trying to deliver the best care they could under those circumstances.

The Minister has conducted whistlestop tours of emergency departments; he claims he has done them two or three times. If he continues to do them so frequently, he will meet some of the same patients again. They will still be in the emergency departments as they will be waiting so long. The difficulty is that nothing is happening to address the underlying problems. The Minister has read the policy documents of the Opposition parties, and we thank him for that. We would also appreciate if there was a little more engagement in general and intense debate over the next number of weeks about what we expect from our health services, what we demand of them and how we intend to fund them.

The Minister cannot say he is committed to addressing all of the underlying problems in health while the Taoiseach is travelling around the country saying that the taxation base will be cut to the point where it will be unable to sustain public services in general. There will be a plethora of promises. The Taoiseach is effectively like an auctioneer at this stage. Wherever he sees something he will throw out the best bid possible. In the past number of weeks there have been consistent briefings on the increased intent to buy the electorate through tax cuts. At the same time, the Government will be promising increased numbers of consultants, nurses, teachers, gardaí and better public services. If the Government fulfils that, it will require a taxation base, but it is effectively eroding that base. Commitments to public service require that there is at least an honest debate about how it is intended to fund them. The Government's policy in its tax cut proposals is an American style taxation model where, effectively, it is a case of winner takes all. The more one earns, the less one pays.

We must be honest with ourselves. If we wish to sustain public services, there must be some concept of a commitment to a progressive taxation model that funds them. In all of the Government's budgets since it took office, the Labour Party was there to pretend its purpose was to keep an eye on the Fine Gael Tory policies, but that did not happen. There have been five regressive budgets in which those who are suffering most and in financial hardship are expected to pay proportionately more. Property tax and water charges are arbitrary. There is no ability to pay clause. Pensioners have had the €2.50 prescription charge foisted on them despite another key commitment made by the Government. The problem is that all of the Government's policies were based on focus groups. There was not a person in this country prior to the last election who was not sitting around a table somewhere being paid a few euro to say what commitment they thought a political party should make. The country was focus grouped out of it. The parties in Government had all of that data and information, and then published policies to appease the various sectors of the electorate. The difficulty is that they were not able to follow through

on those promises. The universal health insurance model is a key component of that.

One can drill down from the national policies to the policies in local areas. The Government parties promised the maintenance of hospitals, to enhance the services in hospitals and to build new hospitals. A new hospital was to be built in the north east, for example.

**Deputy Liam Twomey:** Fianna Fáil promised that.

**Deputy Billy Kelleher:** All of these commitments were made by Fine Gael-----

**Deputy Liam Twomey:** It was former Deputy Dermot Ahern.

**Deputy Billy Kelleher:** -----but nothing has happened. We must accept that our health services are in crisis. There is a deficiency of funding and a lack of capacity. We must increase the number of front-line staff. That will require additional resources and funding.

There are also the other failures in dealing with the problems that manifest themselves in the emergency departments. There are simply not enough community care services in place. The public health nurse system is under significant pressure. There are no community care geriatric services. For example, when people in nursing homes get sick or require medical attention, the nursing homes are often dependent on out-of-hour GP services. It is not good enough in this day and age that out-of-hour GP services are often servicing nursing homes. There must be proper specialist services in geriatrics at community level. What happens, as the Minister sees on his visits to emergency departments, is that elderly frail people are parked on trolleys. They should not be there. They are languishing for an inordinate length of time, which creates greater risks to their health and well-being. The facilities are not available in the community so everything is channelled back into the emergency departments.

The Minister, Deputy Varadkar, and Deputy Twomey, two medical practitioners, are sitting side by side in the Chamber. They should at least acknowledge that our GP services are in crisis. The renegotiation of the GP contract is a critical component in ensuring that chronic illness and disease are dealt with in the GP practices and in the home care and community settings. No efforts have been made to enhance the capacity of our GP services. GPs will tell the Minister in the context of children under six, and he is probably well aware of this, that without enhancing capacity some other group is suffering. GPs are saying openly that their surgeries are overwhelmed with attendances and they cannot give the time required not only to elderly patients, but also to other people with chronic diseases and illnesses. Again, they are being referred back into the acute hospital system.

Many of the policies the Government has pursued in recent years in terms of cutbacks to home care packages, the under-funding of the fair deal nursing home scheme and cuts to home help services - a key decision made by the Government - had a profound impact on people's quality of life and their ability to stay at home with some assistance to help them live as independently as possible. These were policy decisions of the Government. The nastiest one of them all, and one that shows the Government is bankrupt when it comes to basic decency in how it looks after people, was the issue with the discretionary medical card. For over two years the Taoiseach, the Minister for Health and the Minister of State at the Department of Health told us every day that there was no policy change in the area of assessment for discretionary medical cards and the guidelines that underpin it. However, the Minister for Finance, in advance of the local elections in 2014, decided to let the cat out of the bag or the rabbit out of the hat. He said, effectively, that the Government would change the policies but it would wait until after the elec-

tion as it did not wish it to be seen as an election stunt. There has been dishonesty at the heart of the Government in terms of health care, health funding and the policies underpinning them.

I commend the motion. Sinn Féin has a right to table it. I also have a right to table motions on health and to speak on them on a continual basis. It is not about electioneering, because we have been doing this since the last election, but about holding the Minister and the Government to account. More importantly, it is about ensuring there are clear alternatives in finding pathways to ensure we have health services that provide access to people when they need them and in a timely fashion. That should be underpinned by proper working conditions for our medical staff who are working under enormous pressure and stress every day in overcrowded, underfunded emergency departments throughout the country. Most of this is the direct result of the Minister's failings and those of his predecessor and the Government's lack of commitment to public health.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Tom Fleming who is sharing time with Deputies Paul Murphy, Thomas Pringle, Clare Daly, Mick Wallace and Joan Collins.

**Deputy Tom Fleming:** In 2015, the number of public patients waiting nine months or more for surgery increased by 5,600 following the cancellation of thousands of operations due to overcrowding in emergency departments. As overstretched units teemed with people on trolleys, hospitals had to free up beds, which left a growing number of people waiting in the queue who had otherwise planned for admission. Patients from emergency departments who were already enduring long hours on trolleys had to fill many of the beds instead. Overall, 60,000 people are currently on the surgery waiting lists. These include people who have been referred as well as those who have been waiting for longer periods. We are seeing the cumulative impact of increasing workloads and reducing resources on the quality of care and support individual patients receive. This has been taking place over the past decade and is clearly having a detrimental effect on services. Other less profiled but perhaps even more important areas include the lack of community services for people with disabilities and those enduring mental health conditions and chronic conditions. Often, these are among the youngest, oldest and most at risk in society.

The home help service for vulnerable and elderly people is probably the best and most effective means of delivery of care to ensure people can remain living in their communities at a very low cost. This is the environment in which people are happiest. There is a policy of upgrading and developing the delivery of community care in general, but what is happening on the ground is contrary to it. There is certainly a deficiency and we need to rectify it as a matter of urgency. The regressive measures and cutting of home help hours are compounding the problems in an already diminishing service. The service for many elderly and infirm people is cut down to the minimum. The cost of home care provision is significantly lower than the cost of nursing home provision, but there is a current emphasis on forcing those in receipt of the former into private nursing homes as an alternative means of care. I ask that this be addressed immediately and provision made in the current budget for 2016.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** We all know the Government pitch for its own re-election. We know that the choice we apparently face is between stability and chaos. It must be a slogan that sounds very nice and clever in the minds of the Tory strategists for Fine Gael. The problem the Government has is that out in the real world, in particular our health service, there is no stability. There is instability and chaos. There is chaos in the health service. Last year, almost 100,000 people - 93,000 people - waited on a trolley for an inpatient bed. That is up

from 77,000 in 2014. Those people and their families on waiting lists have no stability. More than 500 people are today sitting on trolleys waiting for a bed in an accident and emergency department. For them, there is absolute chaos. It also undermines the claim of the Minister for Health that the numbers on trolleys are going down. What about the 91 year old patient who, in November of last year, spent 29 hours in accident and emergency in Tallaght where, according to a doctor there, he was, in effect, subject to torture? There is no stability for him.

Why is this chaos unfolding in our health service? Is it a natural disaster to which we are all passive bystanders, wringing our hands, saying how bad it is and wishing we could do something about it, but about which none of us can do anything, regardless of whether one is the Minister, Taoiseach or other member of the Government? It is not. It is a man-made disaster. In fact, it is an austerity-made disaster. In 2016, the Government has budgeted to spend approximately €14 billion on both health and children. In 2009, it spent €16 billion on those areas. It is a result of that austerity. The Government will talk about doing more with less. There is only so much more a limited number of staff can do when they are already massively overworked and overstressed. The cuts must be reversed. There is a policy deliberately to push people into private health insurance, undermining the public health service in order to push people into the arms of the profiteers in the private health insurance companies. What we need is an end to and a reversal of the cuts and a national health service with proper, decent health care for all regardless of income.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I support the motion fully. Just as the housing crisis was manufactured by the Government and just as the mortgage crisis was manufactured, the crisis in the accident and emergency departments in our hospitals throughout the State is a manufactured one. What is stark in all these crises is that the Minister and his Government are unwilling to do anything about it. Health services have never recovered from the crisis initiated in the 1980s with the “Mac the Knife” cuts when more than 3,000 beds were taken out of our hospitals. By the time 2008 and 2009 came, those beds had not been replaced. The Government has now taken a further 2,500 beds out of hospitals throughout the country through the cuts it has implemented. The EU average is five beds per 1,000 of population. In Germany, the average is eight beds per 1,000 of population. In Ireland, we have 2.5 beds per 1,000 of population. That is the crisis in our health service and the crisis over which the Minister and his colleagues in government have presided. Indeed, Fianna Fáil presided over it in its time.

The only solution to the crisis is investment. The solution is to invest in our health services and build a service that can cater to everyone’s needs. We have a growing elderly population. In the next ten years, our population of over 65s will double. We need to be building extra beds, not merely restoring the 5,500 beds which have been taken out in the past 20 years, to cater for the extra demographic demand coming down the line. In its hope of buying the election, the Government is promising all sorts of tax cuts and promising to build proper services nationally. The two are not compatible. The Government is trying to sell the people a pup in trying to sell that proposition. We need investment. To provide that, we must improve and maintain the revenue we have in a booming society. We must build the services which can meet the needs of our population nationally.

**Deputy Clare Daly:** It is a fact that there have been more people on hospital trolleys during the watch of this Government and the so-called days of recovery than under the darkest hours of its predecessor. The counter-motion put forward by the Government today tries, in essence, to blame citizens for getting older and causing the crisis. It is utterly ludicrous. There are people on trolleys because they cannot get beds. It does not take a genius to work that one out. One

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reason they cannot get beds is that there are not enough of them, but a further critically important factor is that there is nowhere for people to go when their hospital treatment is finished.

There are two reasons for this. First is the essential privatisation of care of the elderly and nursing home provision in the State. It is now big business to be profited from and the care of the elderly is a secondary factor. The other reason is the vicious cut in home help hours and the failure to provide adequate care to allow people to remain in their homes. What is the consequence of that? Every day there are crisis meetings in all of our major hospitals to see who they can get out. It is not dictated by medical needs of patients but by who can be got out to free up beds for people later on. That means staff are under pressure to send people home without adequate care. I know of cases where there was pressure to send home people who were on oxygen without the apparatus being there to administer and support their needs. We all know the situation from our own areas. We have all received representations from people whose parents have been sent to nursing homes far outside their areas. If they do not have cars, they might not be able to visit. Private nursing homes can dictate what goes. They are there to make money, not to be concerned about the needs of those in their care.

Deputy Joan Collins will not be coming, so Deputy Wallace and I will share the remaining time, if that is okay.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Did you tell your colleagues?

**Deputy Clare Daly:** Yes.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** We are happy enough.

**Deputy Clare Daly:** We all got texts. I saw the Ceann Comhairle getting agitated, so I thought I should tell him just in case.

The important point is the Government's assertion that competition will create more places. There has been an increase, but where organisations are running nursing home care to generate a profit, it is a problem. A lady in my area was approaching her 95th birthday and was ready to go to a new state-of-the-art nursing home beside Dublin Airport. It was near to her family and so on. Due to the HSE's inability to strike a deal with the private provider, however, that 90-bed facility is essentially lying idle. It has one full-time resident, which has been the case for almost a year. Former hotels in Finglas that are in the ownership of NAMA have been converted into nursing homes to generate profit for their owners. Articles in the business sections of our newspapers laud the business opportunities presented by nursing home care. Why did NAMA not provide this facility to the HSE so that the latter might run the services directly? With hospital staff holding emergency meetings every day about where to send the people occupying hospital beds, a decision could be made in patient's interests to release them to their families instead of on the basis of the diktats of private gain from nursing home care.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** Most people agree that there are problems with our health service. Indeed, it would be a surprise if there were none. The Taoiseach came to power with a revolutionary plan for changing the health service. Fine Gael's big idea was for universal health insurance, free general practitioner, GP, care for all, the slashing of hospital waiting lists, the abolition of the HSE and the establishment of hospital trusts. In reality, the health service caters to the interests of those who can afford health care, insurance companies and pharmaceutical companies more than it does to the needs of the general public.

The Government, continuing the work of its predecessor, has implemented a savage programme of resource cuts. Between 2009 and 2015, health spending was cut by 27%. Since 2007, staff numbers have decreased by 10%. At the same time, the population has increased by approximately 8%, the number of people aged over 65 years has increased by 14% and more people than ever have medical cards due to unemployment and lower incomes.

The Government's decisions have worked in direct opposition to the needs of many. Through its implementation of the neoliberal austerity programme, it is pushing inequality to levels not seen in Ireland in our lifetimes. The Think-tank for Action on Social Change, TASC, conducted groundbreaking research last year that showed that Ireland had the highest level of pre-tax income inequality in the OECD, a situation that has led directly to poverty and social inclusion among those whom neoliberalism does not serve.

While the Government's economic policy drove people into becoming more likely to be dependent on the health service, the Government systematically dismantled its capacity to care for them. To cite Dr. Julien Mercille, it is not recessions *per se* that "pose the greatest risk to public health, but slashing social safety nets," which can make economic shocks like losing a job or a home turn into a health crisis. The measure of a government is how it treats its poor and those who most need its help, namely, the elderly and minorities. Sadly, one can argue that the Government has taken better care of those who least need its help. This is not the mark of a good government, but it will be this Government's legacy. Inarguably, inequality has increased in the Minister's time in government, which is a damning indictment of the Government's time in office.

I am not stupid. The Minister's job of trying to run the Department of Health is the most difficult in government. Regardless of whether he remains in position over the next five years or someone else becomes Minister, addressing every problem in the health service will be difficult. The HSE is like a monster that is out of control. I wish the Minister well with it, but people want a better health service, and that must happen.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputies Tom Barry, Regina Doherty, Jerry Buttimer, Catherine Byrne, Paul Connaughton and Liam Twomey have five minutes each. As Deputy Barry is not present, Deputy Regina Doherty will begin.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** Undoubtedly, the Fianna Fáil spokesperson can speak eloquently and has a particular turn of phrase, but his criticisms of the current state of affairs and the money that has been removed from health in the four years prior to this one are ironic, given that there was no recognition of the fact that there was no money in the first place because of Fianna Fáil's management while in government over the preceding ten or 14 years. This irony is not lost on anyone else. We have listed health Ministers in Fianna-Fáil-led Governments, including Brian Cowen, Micheál Martin and Mary Harney. After nearly five years in opposition, we still do not have a Fianna Fáil health policy.

**Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** That is true.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** These facts speak for themselves. Fianna Fáil had nothing to discuss at the launch of its advertising campaign yesterday but Fine Gael.

Instead of taking the opportunity of this motion to debate the virtue of the health policy that it announced a couple of weeks ago, Sinn Féin has discussed the suffering of patients and families purely for the purpose of political point scoring and making itself look good. Nor has

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it explained where it will get the extra €3 billion that would be needed to fund the new and improved health service that it claims it will deliver. All it has said is that the €3 billion will come from the rich. Seeing as how it believes people are rich when they earn €30,000, everyone in the country will pay for that extra €3 billion.

To claim that we do not have a plan is not true, but to say that the health service faces challenges is. It always has done and always will. One reason for this has been the increasing number of people presenting at emergency departments year on year in recent times. People are living longer and getting sicker. Coupled with this is the removal of resources and services from the system because of the economic climate of the past five years. Thankfully, however, the situation is starting to change. The increased funding over 2015 has allowed us to implement 88 steps in a programme that arose from last year's analysis by the Minister, the emergency task force and other elements of the health services. One of the key changes made in the past six to 12 months is the extra funding for the fair deal scheme. We recognised that a waiting time of more than 20 weeks for a bed in a nursing home was not acceptable. The necessary extra money was sought and acquired by the Minister and there is now a waiting period of less than three weeks to move people from acute hospital beds to where they should be and where they can get more appropriate care - that is, nursing home beds.

Of more importance is the need to reopen the beds that were closed in the 1980s and recent years. This process was started last year when the Minister opened more than 300 step-down beds around the country, which was welcome. There is a commitment to introduce a further 127 step-down beds in the first quarter of this year.

Recruiting nurses poses an issue, but one would have to be blind not to recognise that the HSE and individual hospital groups are doing everything they can to encourage nurses who are working outside the country, including those who left Ireland in recent years, to return to our health service. We will start to see that bear fruit.

There has been a noteworthy increase in the number of people presenting in emergency departments with respiratory problems and flu-like symptoms. Some of the key initiatives to address this include the rolling out of the winter resilience plans. Those concerned are working alongside the community and primary care service providers. The initiative will work, and its purpose is to prevent unnecessary admissions to hospital.

The simple response to the emergency department problem is that it is up to the departments to solve it. It clearly is not; it is up to the entire service to solve the problems. The answer must involve the acute systems and the emergency departments themselves, but also general practitioners, primary care services, home care services and public health nurses. We must ensure there are organisations to keep people well at home and provide the relevant services.

We must bear in mind the increase in funding for home care packages and public health services, in addition to the provision of general practitioner access cards to children under six and those over 70. All these initiatives are working. The improvements with regard to delivery teams in our primary care services are very welcome. While there are challenges, they are absolutely being addressed. We will continue to address them.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and thank Deputy Ó Caoláin for tabling it. This motion should not be used as a political football. It is about the people, including the people Deputy Crowe spoke about this morning and hospital

patients such as my father, and it also concerns the staff who work in hospitals. Those who use the word “crisis” should think about what they are actually saying and what they are doing about the health service. The health service is not just about our emergency departments or acute hospitals.

It behoves all of us at the beginning to congratulate and pay tribute to the men and women who work at the front line in primary care and hospital settings. There is no magic wand that can bring about gargantuan change of the kind some Members on the benches opposite speak about. To be fair to Deputy Ó Caoláin, he never said there was, unlike others in his party.

We are talking about having health services that are demand led and about people and how we treat and care for people. If it were a matter of investment alone, there would have been no problems in the time of the boom. We would have had hospitals in every corner and there would have been no need for any realignment of services. There would have been no need to worry about anything, but we just proved that is not the case. This morning, the Minister highlighted the “fantastic” legacy of Sinn Féin’s Minister in the north of our country. That just proves that Sinn Féin did not have the answers in the north of our country either.

Let us, therefore, examine the context to our objective. If any of us is ill or has a family member who is ill, our first port of call is the emergency department. It should not be. Primary care is critical to how we change the delivery of health services to all citizens. This requires collective and national buy-in. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, Deputy Regina Doherty and I were members of the Constitutional Convention. Although the State is spending over €13 billion per annum on the health service, there are still issues affecting it, about which we are speaking in the Chamber today. Is it not time we stood back and had a Constitutional Convention-type approach to having a better model of delivery?

I work with Deputy Ó Caoláin on the health committee. He has produced his document, and the Minister has his document. I am sure Deputy Billy Kelleher will have some type of document also, although the Minister is correct in stating Fianna Fáil ran from the health service for ten years and left poor Mary Harney languishing there. I would not hold my breath in Fianna Fáil’s case. Why do we not have a national conversation, involving us all, in regard to how we change our health system? That demands that some with vested interests change their mindset regarding the health area.

Undoubtedly, we have policy initiatives and there has been an increase in funding. The Minister spoke this morning about the four-pronged approach. I agree with him completely that it is a question of capacity, moving people out of hospital into different settings, ensuring there is funding, and changes to work practices. All of this is happening.

Reference was made to recruitment. In the city of Cork, which I represent, Mr. Michael O’Flynn and his advocacy group have a proposal in regard to a new hospital. This is important because it is about the creation, in this case, of an elective hospital that would take the pressure off Cork University Hospital to ensure better delivery of health services.

It is important that community services operate in tandem with acute services. In Cork, there is a very strong community service and community intervention. The initiatives have worked. I commend the staff working in Cork because it is a question of ensuring people have access to health services in a timely and dignified manner.

**Deputy Catherine Byrne:** Today’s motion is about a serious issue of which we are all

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acutely aware. Words are cheap but it is fair to say our health service is in difficulty. However, this Government is working hard to address the problems that exist in our hospitals. We all want a better service. No one wants to see patients, particularly the elderly, on trollies, and no one wants staff working under huge pressure, as at present.

For 2016, the health service will have funding of €13 billion for current expenditure. This represents a €900 million increase over the funding for 2015. However, it is not a question of achieving a quick fix with funding alone, and one size does not fit all. The emergency department task force is committed to tackling the overcrowding problem, and hospitals have plans in place to deal with the additional challenges that appear during the winter months. By comparison with last year, the number of patients on trollies has decreased. However, this time of year results in ever-growing concerns about emergency departments, which are stretched to their limit. There is an increase in the number falling ill, especially with respiratory problems and also influenza and other symptoms. This is particularly the case among the elderly and children. The winter vomiting bug is a virus that has hit homes strongly, and some end up having to go to hospital for a short stay as a consequence. This has put considerable pressure on hospitals, particularly on beds.

During 2015, additional funding of €117 million was provided to the HSE to relieve emergency department overcrowding pressures. There is a renewed focus on interventions in community and primary care to try, where possible, to prevent unnecessary visits to emergency departments.

The Minister recognises the need for more beds at this time of year, and funding of €18 million has been made available to support the opening of new ones. Beds that have been closed are to be reopened.

Other issues concern staff and the shortage of nurses and doctors with specialist training. Unfortunately for the HSE, it has been difficult to recruit staff, particularly nurses and doctors, because some have already entered the private health service and are reluctant to come out of it. We need to attract health care professionals to work in our health service by providing acceptable working conditions where staff are not overwhelmed. Their being overwhelmed can undermine patient safety.

It is important to acknowledge that one of the most vulnerable groups at this time of year comprises the elderly, particularly those with respiratory problems, who always need to be hospitalised, unfortunately. Owing to the increased number of people at work, it is harder to mind older and sicker people at home. It is not the fault of the families concerned.

It is Government policy to support older people in their own homes and communities for as long as possible. As others have said, this is the key to providing a service in a community where people can be looked after by health care providers and served well.

*2 o'clock*

I commend home helps who provide an important service that needs to be further supported and strengthened in the community. Without the many people who call daily to the homes of elderly people and others to provide assistance, the health service would experience even greater difficulty.

Home care packages are another vital resource to support older people in their homes.

More than 1,200 additional home care packages were provided by the end of 2015. Many of my constituents and, I am sure, those of other Deputies, have seen how home care packages improve people's lives by enabling them to remain at home. Family members also have time to spend with their loved ones and do not constantly have to visit them in hospital.

The fair deal scheme is working well and the waiting time for processing applications has declined significantly from 11 to four weeks. However, the waiting time to access beds in nursing homes is a problem in some areas. I speak specifically of Cherry Orchard Hospital in my constituency where there is significant demand for more beds and the new Hollybrook nursing home in Inchicore. Staff in these facilities do wonderful work. I commend, in particular, the staff of Cherry Orchard Hospital. People do not always appreciate the effort being made to provide services for older people.

Primary care is the key to reducing pressure on hospitals. I fully support the extension of local services, for example, out-of-hours and X-ray services and minor surgery.

I commend Sinn Féin, especially Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, on tabling the motion, although I will not support it. The Government is on the right track.

**Deputy Paul J. Connaughton:** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the motion. I agree with Deputy Buttimer that it is easy to claim the health service is in crisis. While it is generally accepted that there are problems in emergency departments, it is a little over the top to argue that every part of the health service is in crisis. Given that many parts of the health services, including all hospitals, are working well, it is unfair to hospital staff and general practitioners to describe the entire health service as a disgrace. Staff become disheartened when this type of language is used.

There is a problem in emergency departments. The issue of investment is repeatedly raised in this regard, although greater investment is not the only solution. It would be remiss of me not to mention Galway University Hospital's emergency department because, as the Taoiseach has admitted, it is not fit for purpose. Investment in the hospital's emergency department should be prioritised, especially as the hospital is probably the largest in the west. The Minister has visited the hospital on a number of occasions. It is unacceptable to witness carnage every time one enters the emergency department. The hospital desperately needs a new facility. While I am aware that plans for a new emergency department are in place, action should be taken to accelerate the process.

Deputy Buttimer also pointed out that people tend to end up in accident and emergency departments, regardless of the problem they are experiencing. For example, a constituent of mine contacted me some weeks ago about a problem he was experiencing with his teeth. While his case is not an emergency, he is in severe pain. Two weeks ago, he received a text message from Galway University Hospital informing him he was about to be given an appointment. An hour later, he received another text message informing him that the appointment was not for him and a mistake had been made. After months waiting for an appointment, he had his hopes raised and subsequently dashed. When he telephoned the hospital to seek an explanation, it was explained to him that a genuine mistake had occurred. He asked whether he would be seen more quickly if he presented at the emergency department. The person to whom he spoke agreed that it would be quicker to do this but the hospital would not advocate such a course of action. What business does this person have in the emergency department? He did not present at the emergency department because he would still have to wait for eight or nine hours to be seen.

This type of case is much too common and means people with minor and major problems end up in the emergency department, many unnecessarily.

Deputy Catherine Byrne raised the issue of primary care services. I do not understand the reason the primary care system operates differently in different areas. It may be the result of a lack of leadership or management in the Health Service Executive. Some hospitals have systems that work well but have not been extended to other areas. This causes much frustration among patients. This phenomenon does not occur in Britain or other parts of Europe. A case in point is an arrangement in place in St. Luke's Hospital, Kilkenny, which I learned about on a visit to the hospital. In Kilkenny, when people cannot be cared for in general practice, they are referred to the emergency department in St. Luke's Hospital. This process commences at this point and hospital staff know the patient will soon attend the emergency department. This practice has not been rolled out to other areas.

The Minister has indicated that he would like to remain as Minister for Health if Fine Gael was to form the next Government, provided more funding was provided for the health service and he had the power to make more decisions. The issue is not simply one of finance but one of management across the board. It is too easy to blame one area for all problems. As Deputy Buttimer stated, we need to have a conversation and someone will have to make difficult decisions. We have not had such a conversation for years. Instead, we hear two slogans, namely, that the health service is in crisis and that more money is needed. More money will not solve the problem. A similar issue arises with regard to the flooding crisis, which is also topical, in that the number of people in emergency departments will decline as the year proceeds but we will end up discussing this problem again at some future point. We must ensure the political focus remains on working towards the solutions that are required. People are frustrated because everyone seems to have the solution but no one is able to pinpoint how to achieve the right outcome. Until we do this, we will not have any success in this area.

**Deputy Liam Twomey:** We should view the health service in the same way that doctors view it, in other words, through the lens of acute and chronic issues. The former include the issues Deputies have raised today, such as the way in which emergency departments operate and the need to have people seen and treated quickly in emergency departments. Deputies like to use the figures provided by trolley watch because they are comparative, simple and may be used to have a go at the Government. There are 344 people on trolleys today, which is fewer than were on trolleys on this day five years ago. People waiting on trolleys will be an annual problem for the foreseeable future because it is caused by the way in which the health service is organised, as the Deputies opposite are well aware.

It is great that funding for the health service increased this year, following a series of cuts in budgets in recent years. It is not beyond the comprehension of Opposition Deputies that these cuts were necessary given the economic crisis the country experienced, including the significant decline in Government income during the recession. As someone who has been intimately involved in the health service for more than 30 years, I can attest that the cutbacks of the past five years could have been much worse. Health service staff acted commendably in exercising their responsibilities and ensuring that access to services for the acutely ill was maintained throughout the crisis. It does not suit the Deputies opposite to hear this sort of thing but staff in acute hospital services, including accident and emergency services, and primary care rose to the challenge.

Reading through Sinn Féin's health policy document, I note that the party fails to understand

what problems the health service will experience in the years ahead. These include obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and low levels of activity among large sections of society. The first five pages of Sinn Féin's policy document feature only three lines on the future crises in the health service. If we do not tackle the issues to which I referred, the health service will need more than an additional €1 billion per annum just to stand still. The population is not only getting older but is also less healthy than it should be because of the problems I have identified.

I have been a doctor for 20 years. When I started in medicine, I did not expect to diagnose men in their 40s with diabetes, nor did I ever consider that I would have to check the fasting glucose of a 40 year old. I would have expected to make such a diagnosis or carry out such a check on people in their 60s or older. Nowadays, people in their 40s are being diagnosed with diabetes, with all the complications the condition entails. These include blindness, heart disease and amputations because of peripheral vascular disease. These problems correspond to vast costs and a major burden on health services now and in future. We may believe that hundreds of people on trolleys throughout the country is a national crisis, but I envisage an obesity crisis and all the problems that it brings. The numbers run into the hundreds in my small corner of County Wexford. If we expand that to the rest of the country, it runs to hundreds of thousands and a crisis, an epidemic, waiting to explode in our health services. By the time I retire, that figure will be in the millions. We are not having the appropriate discussions in this House on that problem. We are going for the short-term political hit instead. Opposition Members have taken the view that they will try to hammer the Government on 300 or 400 people on trolleys overnight when there is a crisis coming down the road towards us.

I was listening to the Fianna Fáil health spokesperson earlier. He was completely oblivious to the fact there might be any problems in the health service in the coming decade. That is not surprising because in the 15 years those in Fianna Fáil were in power they made no policy changes whatsoever to allow for this crisis coming down the road.

We should give the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, credit. He is not only changing policy in the Department of Health, he is doing something more. He is funding the change to policies to allow this to happen. We are funding diabetic care management programmes and asthma programmes in primary care. We are genuinely making an attempt to deal with this for what it is, that is to say, a crisis that is about to explode. There is a need for everyone in the House to recognise this, especially those in Sinn Féin, if they see themselves as a serious all-Ireland party. However, one must read up to page 42 of the Sinn Féin health policy document before there is any mention of what this crisis is going to be like, where obesity is going and what that party is going to do about it. It is unbelievable how much this epidemic is going to cost in our health services. Moreover, it is going to happen within the next 15 years if we do not plan for it now. That should be something that we all talk about in the House. It is something we should take more seriously, rather than the cheap political point scoring that has very much been a part of this debate. I would prefer a more consensus-based approach to the future health care of the people.

I am leaving politics as soon as the next election is called. I will have been 14 years in this House and 30 years as a doctor. Unfortunately, I have seen the quality of the debate about where our future health service is going and it has not changed much in this Chamber. It needs to change radically.

We are lucky. The Minister, Deputy Varadkar, is getting the policy changes and the ap-

proach we need to address the problems in a way that is going to make a major change to the lives of the people. None of the Deputies opposite has to deal with - at least I hope they do not, either personally or with their families - the complications and consequences of the unhealthy lifestyles that so many of our population are living with at the moment. It is absolutely debilitating for the individuals and their families. It is coming on at such a young age. There are people in their 50s who cannot walk the length of themselves because of the complications of blood pressure, diabetes, obesity and all the other chronic illnesses that we are simply not taking seriously. We are condemning people to be almost imprisoned in their own bodies because of the complications associated with these diseases. The only solution really is to have a broader approach. We need to see that as the national crisis. This is the crisis we should be taking seriously in this House.

I remember having these debates in this House ten years ago when I was a health spokesperson. We saw it as something that was coming, but it is here now and it is getting worse. That is where the approach to these debates should focus. I hope that when the election is over and the heat is gone out of these debates, we can come to the House and give full support to the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, and the people in the Department of Health to allow them to implement the policies and get the resources to make the necessary changes.

Not all the issues that are problematic in health relate to resources. There are still incredibly restrictive practices within the health services and in the way the health services operate. They cost money and waste resources and are detrimental to people's health care. I offer one example. A good friend of mine was admitted to a major hospital in this country two weeks before Christmas. She was admitted for an orthopaedic problem. During the course of her stay in hospital, she encountered respiratory, cardiac and renal complications, yet she still remains under the care of orthopaedics. I have the utmost respect for orthopaedic surgeons, but they are not good at dealing with acute chronic medical problems. However, because of the way our hospitals are structured, this woman remains under the care of orthopaedics. She should have been moved to a medical ward and put under the care of a medical consultant. The structures in our hospitals do not allow that to happen. If a patient comes in under medical, he stays in medical; if he comes in under surgical, he stays under surgical; and if he comes in under orthopaedics, he stays in orthopaedics. There are too many barriers. That example may be simple for everyone in the House to understand but such barriers go right through our hospitals. There are numerous hidden Chinese walls that restrict the type of care that is necessary. The accusation has been made by many people that sometimes we have a health care system that is organised for those who work within it rather than those who use it. Perhaps it is a difficult conversation and perhaps not one that too many people in opposition are keen to hold before the general election, but I hope it is a conversation they will be prepared have after the general election.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The next group of speakers includes Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, Brian Stanley, Sandra McLellan and Michael Colreavy.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** I have listened to Deputy Twomey and other Government colleagues for the past while. I know that Deputy Twomey is a general practitioner and has experience of the primary care system. I share his concerns. We watched the documentary about sugar, about the increase in diabetes and about lifestyle. These issues have been on the table for many years. The only difficulty I have is that one would think the Government Deputies had just taken up office for a couple months and were asking us to give them a chance to see what they could do. However, they have been in power for five years.

What we have had is a case of chronic underinvestment in the health services. The chief executive of the HSE told a Sunday newspaper that the whole thing is up in the air. The Minister, Deputy Varadkar, knows that the issues are about chronic underinvestment. Let us discuss Letterkenny General Hospital, which has been linked to University Hospital Galway as part of the Saolta hospital group. It is simply not working. I was speaking on radio in Galway some days ago about some of the numbers relating to University Hospital Galway. The Minister will be aware that there are patients right along the west coast up to the top of Donegal who are being referred to the hospital in Galway. The inpatient and outpatient waiting lists in that hospital amount to 40,000. The inpatient and outpatient numbers waiting for more one year come to 5,000. Despite this, patients are being referred there from as far away as north Donegal. It is utterly stupid. Clearly, the necessary investment has not been put into the hospital.

Let us consider the hospital in Letterkenny which is serving a population of 160,000 in Donegal. There are 15,500 on the waiting list for that hospital, including 1,500 who have been waiting over a year. Now, because the Government has not invested in the public hospital there, the HSE must refer people to private hospitals on both sides of the Border. This does not make economic sense. Since the Government has not recruited enough consultants and doctors, it has to hire locums and, in some cases, pay them two, three or four times more than it should be paying them. What the Government is doing does not make economic sense.

I have spoken to senior people in the hospital in Letterkenny. It has been my hospital for many years. The only way I can describe their opinion is to say that they are in despair over what is happening to our hospital. It is our people's hospital. It is where our children are born and where our loved ones die. It is an integral part of our life, as it is in every other hospital in every community throughout the State. We have seen what has happened there. The number of inpatients going through Letterkenny amounts to more than 20,000 per annum. Despite this, we have had the lowest allocation of budget and staff of any hospital in the State. We have now been linked into the Saolta hospital group. At the start, the people to whom I spoke in the hospital entered into the process with an open mind. They thought things could not get much worse. As I said to the Minister, a year or two on they are in despair. It might do the Minister no harm to meet the clinical directors and senior consultants in some hospitals, have a cup of coffee with them and ask them to speak to him off the record about what is happening. His eyes would be opened.

My local hospital is Letterkenny General Hospital. There are two permanent surgeons to cater for a population of 60,000. To run a 24-hour accident and emergency department in a hospital, a full coterie of consultants and specialties are needed to meet demand. There are locums, who are linked to two permanent surgeons. The Minister will recall that the consultant urologist, Mr. Kevin Moran, had to resign in despair in the early part of 2015 due to the lack of resources available to him.

As the Minister knows, urology is at the heart of cancer care services. Only weeks later, a breast cancer surgeon, who also, like Mr. Moran, carries out other surgeries throughout the hospital, spoke on a local radio station and said he was on the verge of doing the same as Mr. Moran. It was a crisis. The Minister facilitated a meeting in Dublin. It was a good meeting thanks to the fact the consultant, Mr. Michael Sugrue, attended the meeting, told everybody in the room to cut their nonsense and described the reality of the situation and what was needed. We put in place a number of solutions. Some seven months later, they have not been implemented. The Saolta hospital group is all over the place.

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As I said, the issue is chronic underinvestment and a lack of doctors, medical staff, budgets, beds and capital. The same applies to the community hospital and primary care infrastructure in communities. All that has a knock-on effect. The Minister knows why we have an accident and emergency crisis. Sinn Féin worked hard over a long period to consult all sorts of experts to come to the Minister with the constructive proposal we have put to him. It is about investment because there is no other way around the issue.

The solution involves examining the fiscal space of €8.6 billion over the next five years. We would allocate €3.3 billion and recruit an extra 6,600 front-line staff because that is what is required. We would move the health service, on an incremental basis over a period of five years, from a two-tier system that is clearly unjust and in crisis to one that is universal. We have outlined our plan to the Minister and, more importantly, to the people.

The people will soon decide on their Government for the next five years and whether it comprises those on this side or the other side of the House. I am interested in the comments of the Minister. He said if he took on the role of Minister for Health again and the people decided that was the way to go, he would like to have the budget and, what is interesting, the authority to do what needs to be done. Frankly, that is a load of nonsense. The Minister clearly has the authority, but the Government has not invested and put in place the resources required. Instead, we have heard the same nonsense today as we heard before about structural issues, staffing issues and things needing to be sorted out. The problems are always blamed on the system or the HSE when the core issue staring us in the face involves resources. We have given the Minister and the people a plan and that, and nothing else, is what will be required to turn this ship around.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. I heard Deputy Buttimer state that we spend just over €13 billion on health per year. That is wrong. That figure refers to the amount spent on health from the tax take. The Deputy did not include the money that is paid in private health insurance and out-of-pocket expenses to pharmacists, consultants and a range of other services. Several billion euro more is spent on health. The Minister and Deputy Twomey will know, as doctors, that a large amount of money is paid in out-of-pocket expenses, apart from what is allocated from the general tax take. When all the money is added up, one will find we have the second most expensive health system in the world, second only to America.

Deputy Twomey referred to obesity. I saw the television programme featuring Dr. Eva Ormond on Monday. I got somebody to record it in order that I could watch it. The programme shocked me. I thought I was doing well, but it was an eye-opener in terms of sugar intake. Those returned to Government might look for clearer labelling of food. Even with my glasses on, often I cannot read the labels on supermarket shelves when doing the weekly shopping. Labels on food are not clear in terms of how much sugar and additives are in the different processed foods we buy, something which needs to be addressed.

Sinn Féin is putting forward a comprehensive health policy. We know there is no magic wand and it will take time to deal with the situation. It will bring to Government terms to bring us towards a universal public health system. Nothing short of that is what is needed. It is a way of solving the crisis.

There is major concern locally regarding the Midlands Regional Hospital, Portlaoise, ever since the leaked departmental report in 2014 which recommended that 24-hour accident and emergency cover be reduced and the number of beds limited to 20. That would be a major

blow to a hospital where 38,000 people go through the emergency department. It is the second busiest such department outside of Dublin. As I pointed out when the report was leaked, rather than reduce the level of services, extra resources are needed. We need full-time permanent consultants to be appointed to the emergency department. Where will patients go if the hours are reduced or the department is closed? Tullamore and Naas do not have the capacity. Tallaght hospital is choc-a-block. I spoke to Deputy Crowe about it before I stood up to speak. There is nowhere to send patients.

At the time the report was met with significant opposition and a further report, which was to be commissioned under Dr. Susan O'Reilly, was to be issued in September, but so far we have not seen sight nor sound of it. We have now been told that will not go to the Minister but has gone on a detour and has been taken to an official in the Department or HSE. The Minister might update us on the status of the report. Has it been delayed in case it causes political difficulties for Fine Gael and the Labour Party in the run-in to the general election?

The Minister has been less than reassuring. I raised this issue in June, at which time he praised the hospital emergency department and staff for their efficiency and assured us there was no question of it being closed. However, he stood over doubts raised within the Department as to whether 24-hour services could continue in the hospital. I hope the decision is not being held back because of potential negative electoral consequences for the Labour Party and Fine Gael.

When I asked whether it was intended to employ a number of consultants and to continue the 24-hour service, the Minister was vague. Despite referring to the large numbers passing through the emergency department, he said any decision would take account of existing patient flows. There is major concern locally about this issue.

There are two doctors on the other side of the House. Some 43 GPs sent a letter to me and other public representatives yesterday. They have said they are disappointed that the draft action plan which was due to be published, that is, Dr. Susan O'Reilly's report and plan following consultations in September, has not yet been published. They are concerned that the delay is due to a political agenda. They said they are very concerned about the situation, which is similar to Roscommon, and that in the aftermath of the general election the same situation will arise in Portlaoise.

They went on to say that they are aware that the future of the 24-hour emergency department remains at risk and that future services may include a 24-hour paediatric assessment unit and a 24-hour acute medical assessment unit. They said they do not believe that such departments can be run safely in the absence of a properly resourced 24-hour emergency department, that such a model is risky, unsafe and potentially dangerous, and that they cannot support it. They said any reduction in the opening hours of the emergency department would add significant pressures to the GPs trying to practice in the area and the already burdened MIDoc out of hours service. GP posts in Laois cannot be filled and there is a shortage of GPs. The GPs state it cannot be pushed back on them because they do not have the resources and there are not enough of them. I have outlined why patients cannot be sent to Tullamore or Naas, because they do not have the capacity. I am not having a pop. I am just outlining what the staff in the hospitals tell me and others and what the GPs say. These people are in the same position as Deputy Twomey, who is also a GP. They state closing the emergency department at Portlaoise will only ensure unsafe services and they will not support it. They believe the only viable solution to ensuring safe services is the retention and appropriate resourcing of a 24-hour emergency department.

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This was signed by 43 GPs in the county.

There is huge concern beyond the county. There is concern in south Kildare, Offaly and north Tipperary. The mothers of the on average 2,000 babies who are born there every year come from these areas. I appeal to the Minister in the short time that is left-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is ten seconds.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The Minister needs to publish the report. It has been sent off to some official. The report on Abbeyleix and Shaen was sent to an official three years ago. It was to be announced after August 2012 and reported on within a couple of months. I have tried to get an answer on this from the previous Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, and the current Minister but we have not been able to get an answer three and a half years later. Will the Minister publish the report on Portlaoise and set out a clear plan? This is a busy regional hospital. It must be resourced. There is no other show in town. There is nowhere else for these patients to go. They cannot be pushed back on the GPs and they cannot be sent to Tullamore. They must be treated in Portlaoise. This is the simple situation we face. Publish the plan, resource the hospital and let us get on with developing this busy regional hospital.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** Regrettably, I feel this is a topic that does not need much by the way of an introduction. The crisis in our health system appears to have reached new levels. Unfortunately, on one of the last days of the Government's term, we have had to bring forward this Private Members' motion due to its response, or lack thereof, and the renegeing on promises put forward as part of the Government parties' election manifestos last time round.

We all know the pressing issues and strain our health service is under at present, and the media have played an integral and helpful role in highlighting these issues. The number of people on trollies in our hospitals on a daily basis is indicative of a mismanaged system. This is a system that, under the watch of the Government, appears to have gone downhill. Waiting times for appointments have also seen a spike under the current Government. People who require certain special treatments are left in limbo due to long waits. Their conditions are not considered to be serious when looked at relatively. I know of many people who have been on waiting lists for up to four years for hip or knee replacements. I also know of people who have been confined to wheelchairs because they are in so much pain they are unable to get about. Some people are in so much pain that they or family members go to credit unions to take out loans they can ill afford and can hardly pay back to have operations done privately. This is an absolute disgrace. The health services will be unable to cope with the undue stress potentially caused by putting these patients on the long finger.

We require an additional €15 million for the ambulance service. Waiting times for ambulances is an issue that must be addressed immediately. We have seen too many consequences and fatalities of people who may have been saved were response times at recommended levels. This brings me to the nurses who work in these pressure cooker-type situations and conditions. The media have kept us up to date with the current displeasure of those working in our hospitals in recent times. This unrest has, however, been rumbling in the background for much longer than this. Nurses are stretched in every which way possible. Their main focus is the health and well being of the patients they look after. This time is very limited, due to a significant amount of paperwork and other box-ticking exercises that are required, rather than being allowed to focus wholeheartedly on the patients who most need their attention. They work long hours for little thanks, so with all of this taken into consideration is it any wonder that a discourse devel-

oped and proposed strike action was tabled? These are the people who keep the clock ticking and the wheels moving, yet they are treated like spare parts.

Sinn Féin has called for the recruitment of 6,600 additional front-line health workers, including nurses, midwives and consultants. With regard to my portfolio, children face the same issues as adults. Mental health in particular is an area which needs significant increases in funding if we are to protect the health and well being of our generations to come. It must be recognised that we have an aging population and this is why we require more funding for the fair deal scheme which would allow hospital beds to be freed up by increasing the number of nursing home beds. This would require an additional €125 million to increase the amount of nursing home beds by 2,400 over a five year period.

As referred to in my introduction, it seems the trolley crisis will reach a point of no return if left in the hands of the Government. The Government came in with the intention of ending this fiasco, or at least it said it did. Its members state it is down to mitigating factors beyond their control, but it seems a loss of control as opposed to having their backs against the wall. Threatening the closures of accident and emergency departments is a knock-on effect of this lack of beds. It should be addressed in a proactive manner so that a lack of space in accident and emergency departments does not mean hospitals such as Beaumont have to turn people away due to them not being enough of an emergency.

Sinn Féin has been calling for the putting in place of a health care system free at the point of delivery, protecting all the citizens of Ireland. We would like to see an increase of €3.3 billion in spending on health care to move from a failing two tier health system to universal health care. This is all within our alternative budget proposals. We call for a health care system that is adequately funded and a rejigging of the management structures to allow more of the funding to reach ground level. There is no quick fix to our health system, but our proposals would certainly move us in the right direction.

We hope this motion can gain the support of other parties and Independents. This would demonstrate solidarity and a will to fix this problem in a proactive manner. It is all well and good that the economy may be on the rise, but this is not being felt in working and middle class areas. When the Government proclaims the rise in the economy it is meaningless to 90-year-olds on trolleys in accident and emergency departments.

Obesity will be a huge problem. I also watched the programme on Monday night. The situation was a shock to the system and much worse than what I and people to whom I have spoken thought. It will be a huge issue which we need to address. I agree with my colleague, Deputy Stanley, that it is almost impossible to read labels. The incoming Government, at the very least, must ensure all sugar is labelled correctly and that we can read the labels. According to the documentary, there are approximately 78 different words or terms which mean sugar and most people are not aware of this. We need to address it.

**Deputy Michael Colreavy:** One of the hallmarks of a decent republic is that the people can access quality health care when they need it, irrespective of age, geographical location or ability to pay. Unfortunately, we do not live in such a republic. It can be informative to look at the OECD 2014 health at a glance report for 2014. Many people do not know that Ireland is below the EU average number of doctors per 1,000 people. We have 2.7 compared to the EU average of 3.4. The number of hospital beds per 1,000 people is also below the EU average. We have four compared to the average of 5.2. However, the notion is out there that somehow we have

plenty of resources but they are being badly used.

There were 12,683 beds in the system in 2013. As far back as 2006, hospitals were operating at close to 100% capacity and a recent OECD report confirms that is still the case. There is no other word for this but “dangerous”. The accepted and researched wisdom is that any hospital with a greater than 85% average occupancy increases the risk of harm for patients, including the risk of hospital-acquired infections. It is easy to say the resources are there but are not being used. The real problem is that the necessary frameworks and infrastructure are not in place. There have been repeated cuts to the service and when that happens, it is no wonder there is bleeding.

The main issue with emergency departments in acute hospitals is that there have been continual cutbacks to budget, staff numbers and bed numbers. In addition, lack of access to beds in community nursing homes creates a delay in getting people out of hospitals. Another factor is the bureaucracy, red tape and delay involved in accessing home care packages under the home support scheme. It makes no economic sense or health care sense to keep people who could and should be looked after at home in acute hospitals simply because administration has to work its magic before a home care package can be organised. Part of the problem is what is referred to as bunker management. We have a bunker called acute hospital services and a bunker called primary and continuing care services. Occasionally a head will pop up over the bunker but more usually, and particularly following a succession of cutbacks, each bunker will jealously guard what it regards as its budget.

There is nobody standing between the two bunkers or seeking to demolish the bunkers and demanding that the money follow the patient and that what is right for the patient must be done. If continuing care service is more appropriate for a particular patient in a particular set of circumstances, that is where the patient should go and he or she should go there now. We should not have two or three weeks of form filling and a series of approvals, leading to interminable delays. While that is happening, people are lying on trolleys in emergency departments or having to join waiting lists for outpatient and inpatient services. It is disappointing that the best we can apparently do to try to resolve the current emergency department problem in acute hospitals is to threaten the waiting list for planned admissions. People who might already have been waiting for three years between outpatient consultation and inpatient admission will be told they must wait three months, six months or 12 months longer so that we can solve the problem in emergency departments. Is that a decent service in a decent republic? Does it amount to the provision of quality health care to people when they need it, irrespective of age, geographic location or ability to pay? No, it does not.

In regard to the length of hospital stays, Deputy Liam Twomey spoke about Chinese walls in hospitals. Unless it is the Great Wall of China, a Chinese wall is usually made of paper. The Government has had five years to take down those Chinese walls but has not done so. Why do we not have smooth administration within our hospitals? Why is the focus still not on the patient? There should be no Chinese walls. Members opposite speak as if these matters are beyond their control. It is within the Government’s control to effect change; in fact, that is its job. Why was that not done over the past five years? Ministers can blame the hospitals and the professional bodies, but the fact remains it is the job of Government to change what it considers to be wrong. If Ministers cannot or will not do so, they should not be in office. It is very simple. We must get rid of the Chinese walls, if they are the problem, but the Government cannot continue to impose cutbacks while blaming those walls for the failure to create the infrastructure that is necessary to provide an effective service.

Ministers frequently make the charge that Sinn Féin Members criticise what they consider to be wrong but never present solutions. In fact, we have presented the Government with solutions, including a way to approach delivery of a quality health service in this country. The challenge for Government is to take on board the suggestions we have put forward. Unfortunately, on the basis of its so-called amendment to our Private Members' motion, it is clear that, once again, the Government is running away from taking effective action.

**Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Gerald Nash):** I thank Deputies for their contributions. We are all aware of people's concerns and frustrations regarding the number of patients on trolleys, the overcrowded conditions in which they wait for treatment and the difficulties in moving patients from acute care to long-term, community or home care. My colleague, the Minister for Health, Deputy Leo Varadkar, has spoken in detail on this issue and today updated the House on the range of measures being undertaken to address long waiting times and access issues in emergency departments and across our acute hospital services. The Government's commitment to address overcrowding is clearly reflected in the significant additional funding we provided last year and will provide this year. That extra investment has been used to support initiatives to increase hospital bed numbers, provide additional services to support early discharge of patients and help to reduce waiting lists for planned care so that today's cancelled operations do not become tomorrow's emergency presentations. Those extra resources are having an effect and we are seeing improvements.

However, we need to build long-term sustainability for our health service and establish full year-round demand and capacity planning. This must be supported by integrated care programmes between hospitals and social and primary care services. It is essential that the majority of people's care needs are met in the community setting and we are building towards that. In primary and community care, the roll-out of community intervention teams has provided care closer to patients in their own homes and communities. Community intervention teams are specialist nurse-led health professional teams which provide a rapid response for patients who need acute care in a short period of time. Care may be given in the patient's home, other residential settings or in primary care centres. Team members work closely with hospital and community clinicians to provide an integrated health care service. I have seen the system in action in my own community, particularly at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda, and it works very well. In addition, the establishment of the college hospital transitional care unit has alleviated a great deal of pressure on Our Lady of Lourdes.

Community intervention teams help to alleviate the pressures on emergency departments by preventing unnecessary hospital admission or attendance and enabling early discharge of patients from hospitals, freeing up beds for other patients. The teams are having a real impact on patient care. Between January and October 2015, use of their services increased by nearly 30% compared with the previous year. Referrals from emergency departments and hospitals increased by some 21% and referrals from GPs by 47%. GPs and potential patients would be advised and encouraged to make use of other facilities that are available, such as medical assessment units, minor injury units, urgent care centres and doctor on call services, to allow emergency departments to focus on patients who really need emergency critical care.

Hospital groups are being established in line with the Government's programme for reform of the health service. The objective is to ensure we have a health service that has the resources it needs, uses them efficiently and puts the interests of patients first.

**Deputy Billy Kelleher:** The Minister of State's party vehemently opposed them when it

was in opposition.

**Deputy Gerald Nash:** That is a significant reform, whether Deputy Kelleher likes it or not. The Minister for Health, Deputy Varadkar, has mentioned the need for accountability. The Government does not support the privatisation of hospitals, but it recognises that if hospital groups are to have more autonomy, they and their constituent hospitals must be held to account. Action will be taken if improvements are not secured and sustained. The organisation of acute hospitals into a small number of groups, each with its own governance and management, provides the opportunity to deliver high-quality, safe patient care in a cost-effective manner.

Hospital groups and primary care must work together closely. As the Minister outlined earlier, a good example of this has been the development and implementation of winter resilience plans, involving collaboration between hospital groups and community health care organisations throughout the current winter period. We will continue to prioritise enabling older people to remain in their own homes and communities for as long as possible, ensuring that appropriate residential care is available when it is needed.

Overcrowding in our emergency departments and long waiting times are not a new problem. Similar problems are seen in health services across the developed world. Northern Ireland has had its fair share of problems in recent years in respect of overcrowding, and unfortunately it has the worst record in the system in terms of meeting NHS targets. This Government fully recognises that overcrowding is, rightly, an issue of genuine public concern. There is no instant remedy; trolley numbers will continue to fluctuate seasonally and because of our demographics. The Government, the Minister, the HSE and those on the front line want to ensure that we continue to develop a service that has the capacity to respond, to flex and to stretch so that we can cope with seasonal surges. Now that the economy is recovering, we can tackle these problems. With the support of clinical directors, consultants and all the staff involved in the health service, we can secure the long-term solutions we need to address the overcrowding problem and respond to patients' needs in a safe, patient-centred way. I promise the House that the Government, the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, and the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, will continue to work hard to find solutions to this complex problem, which we can all agree has existed for far too long.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Minister of State rehearsed the party line very predictably. We can agree on one thing, namely, that the issue of the health service should not be reduced to the status of a political football. There is a need for a conversation right across society about what kind of health service we want and how we can get to a universal system of health care that is free at the point of delivery. That needs to be at the core of the next general election. If members of Government and, perhaps, others go out and engage in auction politics, promising to decimate the tax base, they then need to explain how we will arrive at that universal health service - how we will finally end the scandalous situation of our accident and emergency departments, of waiting lists and of people in agony, some of them almost despairing, as they wait in real physical pain for treatment. I deal with people like that on a daily basis.

It is often said that the measure of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable. Arguably, the measure of Government is how it provides for the basic needs of its citizens, particularly those who are in a vulnerable position. If we apply that yardstick, it is a damning indictment, not just of this Government but also of previous Administrations. The Minister of State mentioned older people. In the midst of this crisis in our emergency departments, the very idea of elderly people lined up on trolleys, toe to toe, on narrow, clogged corridors, with insufficient

nursing staff to care for them is truly shocking and intolerable. It is a most undignified way to treat any patient, never mind our elderly. These are people who built this State and paid their taxes, and now they find themselves at their moment of need - in some cases in their twilight years - when they most need the supports of the State and when they are weak and vulnerable, lying on a trolley in a hospital corridor. In the Orwellian world of Leo's hospital horror, these elderly patients are lucky because they could be on a chair. Worse still, they might be forced to sleep on the floor, as happened in the Mater hospital in my own constituency.

In the course of this debate - this is not unique - I had a communication from one man whose name I will not mention, but who is watching this exchange. He wanted the Minister to know that he presented at the Mater hospital last Saturday morning with a suspected heart attack and spent 19 hours on a chair. Thankfully, he has now had his surgery and has had a stent inserted.

This is not about a political football; it is about the politics of failure. It is an ongoing failure, but at this time it is on the Government's watch. The situation at the Mater hospital has not improved. In 2011, when this Government came to power, there were 3,936 unfortunate people lying on trolleys in the Mater hospital. Fast forward to 2015 and the number rises to 4,704. That is the reality. Most people have their most critical and sometimes traumatic experiences in the health system in emergency departments. This is intolerable. I have no interest in having a partisan ding-dong across the floor of the House on these issues, although if that is what it takes to get them the attention and resolution they require, so be it. What I do want us to see in the course of the election campaign is an honest, costed discussion about how we get from chaos to stability, from a broken, banjaxed two-tier system to a single universal health care system. That is what Sinn Féin's plan addresses, that is what we want, and that is what we want to debate and - I hope - agree with the Government and with the people.

**Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** I thank all Members who have contributed during the course of today's debate. The Minister, Deputy Varadkar, made reference in his contribution earlier this morning to the budget 2016 commitments of the Opposition parties. He made false claims regarding his and his Government's budget 2016 commitments. I note that he acknowledges that Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil recognised in the preparation of our pre-budget alternative submissions the crisis in the emergency departments and each provided €86 million to address measures needed this year. Fianna Fáil, as it does, rounded it up to €90 million. Nevertheless, we had provision within our alternative address of the crisis. The Minister went on to say it fell short of the €117 million the Government provided in 2015. It was the budget for 2016 that we were preparing. He goes on to mention "the further significant funding we are providing this year". What further significant funding is the Government providing this year?

*3 o'clock*

It does not show at all in budget 2016 announced by the Government in October. In fact, in the summary of the new expenditure measures that was presented in the Dáil by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, there is only €18 million in additional funding provided in budget 2016 for children's health and therapeutic services, totally ignoring the real crises that exist.

The Minister, Deputy Varadkar, states that my party's proposals on general practice would render some GP practices unviable. Contrary to the Minister's claims, we have real and substantive proposals for addressing the shortage of GPs and their current difficulties, and that is the issue the Minister is clearly missing. It is important to take on board that we propose

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increasing the annual training intake, from 161 to 200, to facilitate the growth in the number of qualified GPs. We want to broaden the attractiveness of general practice as a career choice. We want to see 200 salaried GPs brought in as a new measure, with support staff in the form of additional medical secretaries and 200 new practice nurses, in tandem with those specific practices being located in the areas of the country that are currently underprovided for, these being large swathes of rural Ireland and some deprived city areas throughout the State, not least in Dublin city.

I welcome the Minister's acknowledgement that our policy proposals, in terms of my party's new health policy launched before Christmas, contain good ideas, but he went on to state that they "would require a level of investment that is just not realistic". That is not so. Our policy is not only realistic but a no-choice situation. No doubt the Government wants to cut core taxation and put more excess spending power into the pockets of the already well-off. We want to ensure such investment is made instead in quality public services, and let the Minister be in no doubt that health and health care is Sinn Féin's No. 1 priority.

The Minister went on to state that "Sinn Féin's approach to policy is almost childlike". If that is the Minister's view, it is because the proposals we present are straightforward and uncomplicated and will work. The Minister went on to state that my party would put €5 billion into health. As it happens, over a five-year Dáil term we would increase spending on health on the base year of 2015 by a total of €10.5 billion, commencing with €794 million in 2016 and rising to €3.3 billion in the fifth year. These are important commitments.

The Minister, as highlighted by Deputy Kelleher, did not read into the record all that he had been offered. My point is he talks about developing plans recognising the range of difficulties. For heaven's sake, we all know the range of difficulties. It is the plans to address them that we want. The Minister seems to be averse to long-term thinking and I would ask him not to spend too long at it because it does not appear to be something at which he excels.

On the issue of the 30 days he has chosen to cite the statistics on the trolley watch figures, I repeat that there has been an increase of 21% in the position regarding the trolley and ward watch from January to December 2015 compared with the same period in 2014. For the record, there were 443 patients on hospital trolleys this morning, a very serious matter indeed.

On the provision for older persons, the Minister states that home help hours and home care packages were strengthened last year and will be maintained in 2016. We do not only want to see 2015 figures sustained in 2016; we need expansion. As our motion clearly states, we want to see a 10% increase in the expenditure on home care packages and home help hours, with a €31 million commitment in year one rising to €93 million over a three-year period. Those are the sort of serious measures that will address the problems that we currently experience.

On the position in the nursing home support scheme, the Minister speaks of an increase of €35 million on last year's so-called projected spend. It is interesting that the Minister chose such phraseology. What was the actual spend? Is there any increase at all on 2015? We, on the other hand, have committed to spending at least an additional €125 million to create the necessary additional bed capacity that will help to address the current situation of delayed discharges and the need for people to be able to access long-term care provision and to have the alternative of remaining in their home if it is safe and appropriate to do so.

The Minister stated that in January 2015 he set maximum waiting times for inpatient and

day case treatment and outpatient appointments of 18 months by 30 June and 15 months by the end of the year. Of course, the Minister was increasing it to facilitate an easement in terms of the public focus on his failures to ensure the waiting times were being met. The Minister increased it to massage the figures. Let there be no doubt about it, in case there is any, that the situation as of the beginning of this month with inpatient and day case national hospital waiting times is that there are 746 waiting more than 15 months and 5,665 waiting more than 12 months. On the outpatient situation, there are 9,887 waiting more than 15 months - those whom the Minister promised would by now no longer be waiting more than 15 months - and over 12 months, a not unreasonable target to address, there are 37,197. Of course, the overall position is outpatients: 375,440, and inpatient care: 68,086.

I note the Minister concluded his remarks with, “I can assure the House of my ongoing commitment and interest ... and that of the Government”. I wonder about the Minister’s interest and I wonder what he was referring to in relation to the Government. Was it their ongoing commitment or was it just their interest? In the Government amendment, the Minister stated that “timely access ... continues to be a primary focus of Government policy”, but what about Government action? Government policy is all very well; it is only on paper. What we want is the evidence that the Minister has a commitment to do it. What did the Minister actually mean by the phrase “Health will never be a good news story”? Why will health not be a good news story? Of course, it needs to be a good news story.

When we look at the Minister’s 88 actions in addressing the ongoing difficulties within emergency departments, we should take a look at what he talks about. Not enough has been done on increased bed capacity in hospitals. Clearly, not enough has been done either on reducing delayed discharges from hospitals. On recruiting more medical and nursing staff into the health service, again not enough has been. I will not go on with the rest of the list but let me tell the Minister in unequivocal terms that his end of term report card clearly shows that he has failed.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 59; Níl, 39.</i>	
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>
<i>Barry, Tom.</i>	<i>Adams, Gerry.</i>
<i>Breen, Pat.</i>	<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>
<i>Butler, Ray.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>
<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>	<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Colreavy, Michael.</i>
<i>Byrne, Eric.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>
<i>Connaughton, Paul J.</i>	<i>Daly, Clare.</i>
<i>Conway, Ciara.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Stephen S.</i>
<i>Coonan, Noel.</i>	<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>
<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>
<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	<i>Fleming, Tom.</i>
<i>Deasy, John.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>

<i>Deenihan, Jimmy.</i>	<i>Higgins, Joe.</i>
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>
<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	<i>Kirk, Seamus.</i>
<i>Dowds, Robert.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>
<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>
<i>Feighan, Frank.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>
<i>Ferris, Anne.</i>	<i>McLellan, Sandra.</i>
<i>Fitzgerald, Frances.</i>	<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Mathews, Peter.</i>
<i>Hannigan, Dominic.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>
<i>Harrington, Noel.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>
<i>Hayes, Tom.</i>	<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>
<i>Humphreys, Kevin.</i>	<i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i>
<i>Keating, Derek.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>
<i>Kenny, Seán.</i>	<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>
<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>
<i>Lynch, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>
<i>McCarthy, Michael.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>
<i>McFadden, Gabrielle.</i>	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>
<i>McGinley, Dinny.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	
<i>Mulherin, Michelle.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
<i>O'Mahony, John.</i>	
<i>O'Reilly, Joe.</i>	
<i>Phelan, Ann.</i>	
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	
<i>Quinn, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Rabbitte, Pat.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Stagg, Emmet.</i>	
<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
<i>Tuffy, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Twomey, Liam.</i>	
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>	
<i>Wall, Jack.</i>	

<i>Walsh, Brian.</i>	
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Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emmet Stagg and Paul Kehoe; Níl, Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Seán Ó Fearghail.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 57; Níl, 39.</i>	
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>
<i>Barry, Tom.</i>	<i>Adams, Gerry.</i>
<i>Breen, Pat.</i>	<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>
<i>Butler, Ray.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>
<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>	<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Colreavy, Michael.</i>
<i>Connaughton, Paul J.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>
<i>Conway, Ciara.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>
<i>Coonan, Noel.</i>	<i>Daly, Clare.</i>
<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Stephen S.</i>
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>
<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>
<i>Deasy, John.</i>	<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>
<i>Deenihan, Jimmy.</i>	<i>Fleming, Tom.</i>
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>
<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	<i>Higgins, Joe.</i>
<i>Dowds, Robert.</i>	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>
<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	<i>Kirk, Seamus.</i>
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>
<i>Feighan, Frank.</i>	<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>
<i>Ferris, Anne.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>
<i>Fitzgerald, Frances.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>McLellan, Sandra.</i>
<i>Hannigan, Dominic.</i>	<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>
<i>Harrington, Noel.</i>	<i>Mathews, Peter.</i>
<i>Hayes, Tom.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>
<i>Humphreys, Kevin.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>
<i>Keating, Derek.</i>	<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Fearghail, Seán.</i>

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<i>Kenny, Seán.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>
<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>
<i>Lynch, Ciarán.</i>	<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>
<i>McCarthy, Michael.</i>	<i>Ross, Shane.</i>
<i>McFadden, Gabrielle.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>
<i>McGinley, Dinny.</i>	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>
<i>Mulherin, Michelle.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
<i>O'Mahony, John.</i>	
<i>O'Reilly, Joe.</i>	
<i>Phelan, Ann.</i>	
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	
<i>Quinn, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Rabbitte, Pat.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Stagg, Emmet.</i>	
<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
<i>Tuffy, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Twomey, Liam.</i>	
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>	
<i>Wall, Jack.</i>	
<i>Walsh, Brian.</i>	
<i>White, Alex.</i>	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emmet Stagg and Paul Kehoe; Níl, Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Seán Ó Fearghail.

Question declared carried.

### Topical Issue Matters

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 27A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Jonathan O'Brien - the chronic lack of places in autism spectrum disorder-specific special classes in post-primary schools;

(2) Deputies Maureen O'Sullivan, Aengus Ó Snodaigh, Joe Costello, Seán Crowe, Mary Lou McDonald and Sandra McLellan - the restoration works on the national monument at Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street in Dublin and the implication for the rest of the terrace;

(3) Deputy Paul J. Connaughton - the operation of and the difficulties with the young farmer scheme;

(4) Deputy Regina Doherty - the reason one person will receive a full contributory pension following ten years of work, while another person who first started work in 1968 and took a ten-year gap to raise children, working again from 1997 to 2015, will receive a reduced pension at 66 years of age;

(5) Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy - the major structural deficits and disrepair in regional and local roads, particularly those negatively impacted by recent heavy rainfall;

(6) Deputy Thomas Pringle - transport for patients who are referred for treatment from Letterkenny University Hospital to hospitals in Dublin;

(7) Deputy Clare Daly - State of the Nation address by the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, and the global threat caused by the continuing increased militarism of the United States of America;

(8) Deputy Mick Wallace -

Ireland's continuing trade links with Saudi Arabia, given the Saudi Arabian bombing campaign which has killed over 2,800 civilians in Yemen to date; and

(9) Deputy Barry Cowen - the condition of local roads in the Lower Ormond area of North Tipperary.

The matters raised by Deputy Barry Cowen, Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy, and Deputies Maureen O'Sullivan, Aengus Ó Snodaigh, Joe Costello, Seán Crowe, Mary Lou McDonald and Sandra McLellan have been selected for discussion.

### **Convention on the Constitution Final Reports: Statements**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call on the Minister of State, Deputy Paul Kehoe, to make a statement under Standing Order No. 43.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe):** I welcome the opportunity to respond in the House on behalf of the Government to the remaining reports of the Convention on the Constitution. I will deal with the seventh, eighth and ninth reports, and I wish to share my time with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Ann Phelan, who will deal with the fifth report.

The establishment of the convention was approved by resolution of both Houses of the Oireachtas. Membership of the convention comprised 66 ordinary citizens randomly selected, 33 politicians drawn from political parties North and South, and an independent chairman. The Oireachtas resolutions set out eight specific topics that the convention was asked to consider and report on to the Oireachtas. These topics were examined by the convention in its first six reports. Ministers from the relevant Departments have already given the Government's response in the House to five of these six reports of the Convention on the Constitution: the first report, on reducing the voting age and the length of the presidential term, on 18 July 2013; the second report, on the role of women and women in politics, on 10 October 2013; the third report, on

same-sex marriage, on 17 December 2013; the sixth report, on blasphemy, on 2 October 2014; and the fourth report, on electoral reform, on 18 December 2014. In responding to these five reports, the Government accepted four recommendations for constitutional change: removing the offence of blasphemy from the Constitution; reducing the voting age to 16; reducing the age threshold for candidacy in presidential elections; and marriage equality. The Government held referendums on reducing the age threshold for candidacy for presidential elections and marriage equality in May 2015. The marriage equality referendum passed by a majority of 62.1%. This is the first time a proposal for constitutional change put forward by a constitutional convention resulted in actual constitutional change.

I will turn now to the seventh report. The Oireachtas resolutions said that, having completed its reports on the items addressed in its first six reports, the convention could report on such other items as it saw fit. The convention chose two items under this heading, and its seventh report deals with the first of these, namely, Dáil reform. Before I respond on the report itself, I should recall that the Government has already implemented a wide range of Dáil reforms since taking office, many of which have had a significant impact on the way in which the House conducts its business. The process of parliamentary reform is, and always must be, an ongoing one. This Government can be proud of its record in this area. For decades, under previous Governments, reform of the Dáil and Oireachtas committees was ignored. Since taking office the Government has supported Dáil and committee reform by implementing a range of important measures, including the following: increasing the number of Dáil sitting days from 93 days a year under the previous Government to 123 days a year; introducing an additional session of Leaders' Questions on Thursdays; reforming ministerial Question Time by extending each slot to 75 minutes and requiring the Member asking the question to be present in the Chamber, and enabling a Member who is dissatisfied with an answer to a Parliamentary Question to appeal in writing to the Ceann Comhairle; replacing the outdated Adjournment Debate with Topical Issue debates taken by a Minister from the relevant Department, and allowing Deputies to postpone the debate if a Minister from that Department is not available; the addressing of the Dáil each year by the Taoiseach and Tánaiste, setting out the Government's annual priorities; opening up the law-making process through the introduction of a pre-legislative stage for Bills, conducted by the relevant Oireachtas committee, thus allowing for unprecedented and extensive engagement by the public in the law-making process; and the introduction of a provision whereby the proposer of a Private Members' Bill now has five minutes on First Stage to outline the purpose of the Bill to the Dáil, following which the Member can seek to have the Bill debated during a Friday sitting. The number of Bills introduced by Deputies has grown from 14 published in 2010 to 53 published in 2014. The process of reform must and can go further, specifically in the form of the Government's response to the recommendations contained in the convention's seventh report.

Some of the recommendations in the seventh report would require constitutional change, while others could be implemented by means of changes to Standing Orders. I will deal first with those requiring a referendum. The Government does not consider that there should be a change in Article 17.2 of the Constitution, which requires a money message from the Government before the Dáil passes any vote on legislation for the appropriation of revenue or public moneys. Nor, indeed, is it considered desirable to make a change in the related Standing Order. The convention also recommended including a reference to Oireachtas committees in the Constitution. In the programme for Government, a commitment was given to reduce the number of committees and give key committees constitutional standing. The Government has already moved, through its progress on Dáil reform, to reduce the number of committees and to make

their operation more effective. The Government intends to follow through with its commitment in the programme for Government by accepting the convention's recommendation that a reference to Oireachtas committees be included in the Constitution.

The Government also accepts that there is a case for a referendum to enhance the Office of the Ceann Comhairle by giving it constitutional standing. It is true that the Constitution provides, in Article 15.9, that each House of the Oireachtas shall elect from its Members its Chairman and Deputy Chairman. There are also other references to the Ceann Comhairle in the Constitution, including of course the well-known provision with regard to the Ceann Comhairle being returned as a member of Dáil Éireann at the next general election. However, the Government accepts the recommendation that the role and office of the Ceann Comhairle can be further enhanced by giving it constitutional standing. The convention also recommended that the election of the Ceann Comhairle be done by secret ballot in the interests of enhancing the independence of the office. The Government intends to bring a new proposed Standing Order to the House next week and to ask the Members to agree to this reform.

I now turn to the recommendations of the convention that would require a change in Standing Orders. The Government does not propose to establish a forum chaired by the Ceann Comhairle to set the Dáil agenda. As regards the introduction of more free votes, this is really a matter for each political party or grouping. On other Standing Order recommendations, we will, as I mentioned earlier, bring forward a proposal to amend Standing Orders to provide for the election of the Ceann Comhairle by secret ballot. Standing Orders will also be amended to introduce a system whereby the Taoiseach will appear before the Working Group of Committee Chairmen twice a year. Provision will also be made by Standing Orders for the proportionate allocation of committee chairs using the d'Hondt system. As regards resources for committees, the Government welcomes provision by the Oireachtas of increased resources over recent years to support the work of committees.

A number of recommendations will be referred to the Dáil reform sub-committee for further consideration. The sub-committee will look at the recommendations that members of committees should have access to support from a panel of external members and former Deputies and at how the introduction of family-friendly hours for the Dáil and a committee week would work in practice.

I turn now to the eighth report of the convention, on economic, social and cultural rights. Briefly, it recommends that the State progressively realise economic, social and cultural, ESC, rights subject to maximum available resources, that this duty be cognisable by the courts, and that specific additional rights be inserted into the Constitution: housing rights, social security rights, rights to essential health care, rights of people with disabilities, linguistic and cultural rights and rights covered in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Obviously this recommendation raises substantial questions. They include, for example, questions such as the suitability or otherwise of the Constitution as a vehicle for providing for detailed rights in these areas, the possible cost, and the fact that there is already power by legislation to confer rights and determine expenditure via primary and secondary legislation and an elected and accountable Government and Oireachtas and that, unlike the Constitution, such legislation can be varied as needed and as availability of resources allows. Other issues include the absence of provisions for revenue to provide for any ensuing expenditure; concerns about transferring to the judiciary, which is unelected, the power to make decisions affecting the allocation of resources which are more appropriate for an elected Parliament and Government; and the current position of the State as regards debt levels and the need to meet stringent

EU rules into the future. In light of these considerations, the Government has decided that this report should be referred to an Oireachtas committee for consideration of the various issues that arise from it.

The ninth report contains the convention's final recommendations and conclusions. The convention members voted unanimously that there should be a second convention, but the report acknowledges that realistically this is an exercise that could be achieved only once in the lifetime of any Dáil.

The convention also voted on what topics could be considered by a future convention. It is interesting that the top three selected were the environment, Seanad reform and local government reform, as the Government has already taken a number of initiatives in these areas. For example, we introduced the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, which sets out the national objective of moving to a low-carbon, climate-resilient and environmentally-sustainable economy. In terms of Seanad reform, the Government presented a package of procedural reforms for the Seanad Committee on Procedure and Privileges in February 2014. The Government has also published a Bill to enable implementation of the 1979 constitutional amendment to extend the Seanad franchise to graduates from institutions of higher education in the State that do not currently form part of the Seanad university constituencies. A working group on Seanad reform was also established and reported last year. As regards local government, the House will recall that this Government has implemented the most extensive reform package in the history of the State. This included a reduction in the number of local authorities from 114 to 31, a reduction in the number of councillors from 1,627 to 949, the establishment of 95 municipal districts and the dissolution of 80 town councils. However, the question of establishing another convention and any topics it might consider will obviously be matters for the next Government.

I have addressed the recommendations made by the convention in its seventh, eighth and ninth reports. Before I conclude, however, I wish to acknowledge and commend the work of the convention and its members. Under the chairmanship of Tom Arnold, and with the help of the convention staff and the various experts who supported its work, the members of the convention demonstrated high levels of engagement with the issues, not just on the topics addressed today but throughout the lifespan of the convention. The exercise involved a considerable personal sacrifice on the part of the members, as they were required to give up their entire weekend on ten occasions. I take this opportunity to thank all involved for their dedication and commitment to this valuable innovation in our democracy.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Ann Phelan):** I am pleased to have this opportunity to provide the Government's formal response to the recommendations of the Constitutional Convention contained in its fifth report.

Members will be aware of the Government's approach in this matter as the opportunity was taken in launching Global Irish - Ireland's Diaspora Policy last March to outline the Government's position on the fifth report of the convention. The Government's position was also outlined in this House during the debate on the Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Presidential Voting) Bill 2014 on 11 March 2015. A clear majority of convention members were of the view that citizens resident outside the State, including citizens resident in Northern Ireland, should be given the right to vote in presidential elections. It is clear that extending the franchise, as recommended by the convention, would require an amendment to the Constitution.

The Government decided that it would be necessary, first, to analyse the full range of policy, legal and practical issues that would arise before any decision could be made on the holding of a referendum. Accordingly, the Government asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, in co-operation with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Minister of State with responsibility for diaspora affairs, to analyse these issues and to report back to the Government in due course.

It would be useful to remind ourselves of the main issues to be analysed. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has estimated conservatively that there are some 3.5 million Irish citizens resident outside the State, including those resident in Northern Ireland. At the other end of the scale, the Irish diaspora is estimated by some at 70 million. We must be aware, therefore, of the potentially very large number of citizens to whom the franchise might be extended and what the impact might be, both on the population of the State and with regard to the administrative and cost implications that would arise. In our analysis, we are considering a number of questions. Should all citizens resident outside the State have the vote in presidential elections or should it be limited to a particular category? Should it be citizens who are only absent from the State for a set period of time? If so, what would be the appropriate time, for example, five, ten or 20 years? Should it be citizens born on the island of Ireland only? Should it be passport holders only?

The implications of extending the franchise in presidential elections to citizens in Northern Ireland would present significant practical challenges. The potential electorate in Northern Ireland is sizeable. It has a population of approximately 1.8 million, with an electorate of over 1.24 million, the vast majority of whom have a birthright to Irish citizenship. In addition, Ireland and Northern Ireland have a unique constitutional relationship since the Good Friday Agreement and any consideration of the franchise issue would have to be considered fully in that context. This would include considering the political sensitivities there might be in legislating for the electorate in the North to vote in an election in this jurisdiction and the need to ensure that any proposal is fully consistent with the State's recognition of the current constitutional status of Northern Ireland.

Other practical and operational challenges would be no less significant if the franchise in presidential elections was extended to citizens resident outside the State. Arrangements for the registration of new voters and for voting by those voters would have to be workable and robust. Considerations arising here would include the method of voting, cost and resource needs and the security of the ballot. In summary, there is a series of complex and inter-related issues - issues of both principle and practicality - that must be analysed in detail. The Government is committed to undertaking that analysis and a start has been made on the work involved. At this stage, however, it will be for the next Government to consider taking this matter forward.

In conclusion, I commend the work of the Constitutional Convention. We all owe a particular debt of gratitude to the ordinary members of the convention for engaging so positively with this important work.

**Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail:** Fáiltím roimh an deis labhairt ar an ábhar tábhachtach seo. I am conscious of the short period of time we have. The amount of time allocated to deal with these outstanding reports is derisory. The time allocated, the fact that we are dealing with the reports in the dying days of this Government and the fact that so many reports remain to be considered are a total affront to those who participated in the Constitutional Convention, in particular to the 66 citizen members who gave so generously of their time, effort and energy and

who were filled with enthusiasm for the initiative.

Fine Gael and the Labour Party called for the establishment of the Constitutional Convention as a key aim of the programme for Government. Both parties agreed to put agreed proposals made by the Constitutional Convention to referendum as well as putting all proposals made by the forum before the Dáil within four months. Both of these promises have been broken dramatically. None of the proposals of the final report of the Constitutional Convention has been taken on board, including recommendations on removing blasphemy from the Constitution, strengthening economic, social and cultural rights, reforming political and Dáil procedures and giving citizens overseas a vote. The Government has also not taken the opportunity to propose a slate of minor changes advocated by the Constitutional Convention and has given up on much of its vaunted idea of holding a Constitution day. Instead of letting the people deliberate and decide on these important changes to our Constitution, the Government has made a series of shameful U-turns.

Regardless of the merits of particular reforms, there should be an open public debate on the issues recommended by the convention. The people should have their say on the proposals. Instead, the Government has effectively shut down debate on these issues of political reform, denying citizens the right to make decisions on how we can reform the political system and culture in this country. The debate today is indicative of how little respect the Government has for the process of the Constitutional Convention, with the allocation of a mere two hours for the Dáil to discuss the final five reports of the Constitutional Convention. These are detailed reports to which a massive amount of expertise, deliberation and, not least, the valuable time and energy of the 66 ordinary citizens who participated in the forum were given. It is shameful that the Government thinks that by holding this debate today it is giving due consideration to these reports. Now it believes it is free to shelve them. I will use the rest of my time to speak about the recommendations contained in the reports on voting rights for citizens abroad, the removal of the blasphemy provisions from the Constitution, Dáil reform, the potential for inclusion of further economic, social and cultural rights in the Constitution and on the recommendations for further constitutional reform that the convention did not discuss.

Fianna Fáil supports the proposals of the Constitutional Convention to extend voting rights to Irish citizens abroad and in Northern Ireland in presidential elections. A clear majority of convention members favoured a change to the Constitution to give citizens resident outside the State the right to vote in presidential elections, with 78% of members in favour. Ireland is unusual internationally in not allowing citizens resident overseas to vote in any elections. There are two exceptions; members of the armed forces and the diplomatic services are able to vote in Dáil elections, while only NUI and Trinity College graduates can vote in the Seanad. Beyond these exceptions, only those who are ordinarily resident in the State may vote. The Government recently launched its diaspora policy, Global Irish, and claims to value the input and contribution of citizens abroad to our public affairs. However, the report cynically casts aside and downplays the genuine desire of citizens abroad to have a role in electing the President. While the Government applauds itself on its diaspora policy, it is yet again ignoring demands from Irish citizens abroad and in the North of Ireland for recognition from the Irish State. The diaspora policy actually confirms that the Government has chosen to ignore the recommendation of the Constitutional Convention that emigrants and residents in Northern Ireland be given the right to vote in presidential elections. The diaspora report is patronising in its tone towards these citizens and dismissive of the Constitutional Convention. It dismisses the demands of citizens abroad for a vote as being “challenging to introduce and to manage”. Its calls for yet

another consultative report with reference to matters of complexity is utterly disingenuous. It simply fobs off the idea that Irish citizens abroad be given a right to participate in Irish elections. Why do we need another consultative report while the Constitutional Convention has produced such a consultative report which the Minister is simply choosing to ignore?

Another recommendation that the Constitutional Convention made and that the Government has sought to ignore is to hold a referendum on the recommendation to remove the references to blasphemy in the Constitution and replace them with a prohibition on incitement to religious hatred. This is a great pity and a missed opportunity to modernise our constitutional architecture. The current blasphemy provision in Article 40.6 is archaic. Replacing it with a new provision and fresh legislation detailing religious hate crimes would have ensured religious groups were protected from incitement while freedom of speech was not unduly constrained. As a liberal democratic country in western Europe and part of the EU, Ireland has been used by extremist groups and autocratic regimes alike as a pretext for oppressive laws and systematic discrimination, often against Christianity or other religions that do not accord with the majority. There is a moral obligation on Ireland as a democratic nation to stand up for human rights, of which freedom of expression is one of the most fundamental. Ambiguity on the issue undermines Ireland's international standing. The recommendation of the convention struck the delicate balance between freedom of speech, the cornerstone of human dignity, and respect for deeply held religious values. Freedom of expression is the cornerstone of a democratic society. Any constraints on it must be clear and limited. However this is not the case with blasphemy in Article 40. The blasphemy provision in the Constitution has not been properly defined and has been ineffective in achieving its original aim. Replacing it with a new provision on incitement to religious hatred will protect religious belief, which is most important, from unwarranted inflammatory attacks. A new provision on blasphemy and fresh legislation will protect deeply held religious beliefs more effectively.

The Government has failed to live up to its much vaunted new politics with a botched Seanad abolition referendum. Subsequently, it has abandoned any effort to change how we do politics in this country. The Government promised a democratic revolution and delivered quite the opposite. The history of the Government's measures to date illustrates its failure to grasp the nettle of reform. Instead, it has concentrated power in the hands of the EMC at the expense of the Houses of the Oireachtas. In Dáil Éireann, the Government has completely broken its promises for a new politics in a damning indictment of its commitment to reform. For instance, the Government is systematically breaking its programme for Government pledge not to guillotine Bills, with 63% of legislation being guillotined to date. A fine example is the ramming through of the Irish Water legislation in a single day. In respect of 78% of Bills, the Government has failed to implement its programme for Government commitment to allow two weeks between Stages. The Topical Issues debate is being completely undermined by the failure of relevant Ministers to turn up in over 40% of cases. The Friday sittings farce is mere window dressing to bolster sitting days without any real debate. Only one piece of legislation taken on a Friday, which was Deputy Penrose's Bill Private Members' Bill, has found its way to the Statute Book. The Government continues to engage in cronyism in State board appointments, ignoring the open public process. The recent raft of Dáil measures taken without consultation will, in reality, disempower the Opposition and give more time for Government back slapping by its own backbenchers. The attitude displayed to date by the Government belies the fact that the people have voted for genuine change. Instead, the risk is that it has hardened its centralising agenda to the detriment of pursuing meaningful change.

14 January 2016

Fianna Fáil has been committed to finding common ground in developing a consensual approach in reforming the Dáil. Reform must encompass a broader approach to all tiers of the State in order to re-shape the structure of Irish politics to make it fit for purpose. We need a holistic political reform which is critical to genuinely changing how we do politics in Ireland. As the Government has abolished town councils and slashed local democracy, the need for real reform is more apparent than ever. To free up the Oireachtas from Government control and strangulation, a number of key measures could easily have been implemented which still can be. For example, establishing a new office of policy and economic oversight would ensure that Members had access to expertise and sufficient information in the decision-making process. As the Constitutional Convention recommended, the Government could use its current powers under the Constitution and appoint experts via the Seanad as Ministers. We could revamp Standing Orders for the Dáil to strengthen individual Members' roles and create an independent committee system. Finally, we could introduce an independent, properly resourced electoral commission with a wide remit and adequate enforcement powers. It is a grave indictment of the Government's political reform agenda that none of these measures was taken.

The Constitutional Convention also explored what further economic, social and cultural rights could be inserted into the Constitution. A key issue in the debate around whether to enshrine socio-economic rights lies in whether this would mean handing decisions on the allocation of scarce resources away from the Oireachtas and to the Judiciary. In other states where socio-economic rights are enshrined, judiciaries have generally taken a restricted view of their application and avoided wading directly into government decisions. In Ireland, under Article 40.3.1o, the Judiciary has been empowered to interpret unenumerated rights. This has meant that since the seminal mid-1960s case of *Ryan v. the Attorney General*, the Supreme Court has used case law to find rights not explicitly stated in the Constitution but drawn from the broader spirit of the document. The Constitutional Review Group report in 1996 advocated amending Article 40.3.1o to restrict wide ranging judicial interpretation and to list out explicitly the fundamental rights contained in the Constitution. Enshrining socio-economic rights without amending Article 40.3.1o may lead to a further extension of judicial power as the creative approach to the Constitution enables the Judiciary to widen its influence over areas currently considered the remit of day-to-day politics. Our stance is that Article 40 could be amended so that judicial activism was constrained and a comprehensive but not exhaustive list of rights explicitly stated. This would allow for a judicial discretion to react to social change and avoid rigidity while stating the values and goals of the State through the people's express will. Such new substantive rights, in addition to the right to a primary education, could include a right to housing or shelter or a right to a decent standard of living or income. I see many issues with inserting such explicit substantive rights into the Constitution, not least the unintended consequences it could have on the State finances.

The final report made some valuable further recommendations for constitutional reform. The recommendation to insert a declaration on environmental protection or stewardship has merit as a fundamental constitutional principle. It also recommends local government reform.

*4 o'clock*

After the abolition of town councils and the other backward steps the Government took in respect of local representation, we need a new vision of local government in order to engage ordinary citizens, strengthen representation and deliver for people on the ground. This must involve a fairer level of representation in towns, the creation of community councils and reforms to executive powers, such as directly elected mayors or new cabinet structures at local author-

ity level, if we are to ensure more genuine powers in terms of enterprise support, planning and recreation for those local authorities.

The Constitutional Convention was a remarkable forum and it was great to be involved but it is a shame that more of its recommendations were neither taken on board by the Government nor allowed be put to the people in referendums. Given the quality of the deliberations that went into the convention's work, it is incumbent on the next Government, whatever its composition, not to shelve these reports but to use them to modernise our Constitution further and reform the political process.

Recently, the Taoiseach proposed the establishment of a people's forum of one sort or another regarding the right to life issue. It is difficult to be wildly enthusiastic about this proposal when one considers the commitment made by people to the Constitutional Convention and the fact that the timescales initially set out for it by the Government were not met in any case. As the Dáil draws to an agonising close, we find no fewer than five of the convention's recommendations being considered in a very short and inadequate timeframe. There is no one sitting on the Government side who participated in the Constitutional Convention and heard the recommendations-----

**Deputy Robert Dowds:** I participated.

**Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil:** My apologies. There is no one sitting on the ministerial benches who participated but Deputy Dowds was most certainly there and made his presence felt. I would like to have seen the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan, who engaged directly in the process, in attendance today. He has a detailed understanding of how the convention worked and the value of its output.

I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for giving me this time. I wish to express, perhaps as well as the Minister of State did, my hope that the outstanding reports will not be put on a shelf to gather dust but will instead be used by the incoming Government to advance the cause of change that the people have supported.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The convention was established in 2012, which seems a lifetime ago, to discuss amendments to the Constitution. It met on 1 December 2012 and sat until 31 March 2014, which also seems a lifetime ago. It was a great undertaking and I acknowledge and commend the work of the convention's chairs, its secretariat, the expert advisers and panels and, in particular, the citizens who participated in the exercise.

There was an element of scepticism and criticism - some of it worthy - when the convention was first established. This was an experimental approach that drew on a representative group of citizens to participate with politicians in considering an eclectic and Government-selected range of topics. It never went as far as we in Sinn Féin would have liked. We had our criticisms. Nonetheless, we played our full part in all of its deliberations and our party attended all of its sessions. We were fully committed to making it work well.

Overall, the convention was a worthwhile exercise. In some cases, it dealt with serious constitutional changes, albeit in a piecemeal way. It is good and healthy for any democracy to give citizens an opportunity to play their part in a process that could decide groundbreaking constitutional changes and take a country in a new direction politically. Involving citizens made democracy more inclusive and representative. They took their participation seriously and there was a high standard of debate at every session. People were passionate and idealistic

and argued their points with thought and obvious commitment. It was refreshing for politicians and citizens to interact in that manner. Too often is it the case that citizens across the State feel excluded from and irrelevant to the democratic process. The convention process was a deliberative one, which made it all the more interesting, as citizens and political representatives were challenged to consider, reconsider, reach a position, revise it and draw a conclusion.

Let us consider our current position. It is almost two years since the convention concluded its deliberations and nine reports have been issued. In a statement to the Dáil in July 2012 on the convention's establishment, the Taoiseach stated how important it was to have a timely response to its recommendations. He stated: "The Government recognises that unless the reports the convention produces are responded to quickly, the convention and, indeed, the very process on which we have embarked will be called into question." Here we sit in what my colleague called the twilight hours of this Dáil. By the Government's inaction, it has essentially called into question the efficacy of the process from start to finish. Sinn Féin, the other parties and the citizens who gave of their time certainly played their parts. What is in question is the Government's lack of engagement and its neglect. This seems a deliberate ignoring of the convention's recommendations and reports. No one signed up to this process to be ignored, sidelined, second-guessed or patronised. An inordinate Government delay is disrespectful to those who gave of their time and it is disrespectful to the citizens in question that we are only dealing with these reports in a rushed and restricted way when they should have been addressed separately and through proper debate. That was the least that was required.

Given the political scandals that have plagued domestic politics for decades, who can blame the public for their cynicism towards high-level politics and politicians? It is not only incumbent on everyone elected to public office to adhere to high ethical standards, although that is crucial, but to demonstrate to our citizens that politicians are not just here for self-aggrandizement or selfish gain or to pursue our own agendas at the expense of ordinary persons. The Constitutional Convention enabled the inclusion of ordinary citizens and helped to give them ownership of the democratic and political processes through a partnership. Some of the cynicism that people felt towards the political process could have been alleviated. How disappointed and let down must they feel after so much dithering? We have waited almost two years for movement from the Government. What there has been has effectively been non-movement. We acknowledge the convention's great success that was the passing of the referendum on marriage equality. Besides this one blip on the radar, though, there is an obvious Government disinterest in and detachment from the process, which confirms the worst fears of a disillusioned public that a convention touted by the Government as a central plank of its proposed political reform agenda was, in the Government's mind, really a talking shop. I suspect that were it not for the imminent election, we might never have heard again about the Constitutional Convention. More than likely, the reports and consideration would have been consigned to some dark cabinet to gather dust.

A great deal of goodwill was invested in this work, the deliberations and consideration. Therefore, I do not make criticisms lightly at this juncture. One should remember that when this process started, the Government gave the appearance of being fully committed and engaged therein. The convention, with a very modest and limited budget and few resources, met its deadlines. In the end, it produced 38 recommendations, including significant proposals for reform. The Government committed to responding to each report, within four months of publication, in a full debate in the Houses of the Oireachtas and to establishing a timeframe for the holding of referendums. One can almost hear the wind whistling and see the tumbleweed

rolling by waiting for this to happen.

I want to address what I believe to be a worrying aspect of the responses the Government has given, such as they are. In the first instance, I wish to address the statement made by Minister of State, Deputy Ann Phelan, on votes in presidential elections for citizens resident outside the State. It is self-evident that such a departure carries with it complexities, as she put it, and issues of principle and policy. I do not thank the Minister of State for coming into the Chamber and making such an obvious statement. That said, these issues need to be teased out. The convention, in deliberating on these matters, hearing from expert witnesses and debating the various topics, considered very many of the complexities. It took a decision that the matter of voting rights merited the making of a proposition to the people by way of a referendum. It now seems the Government is rejecting that decision of the convention. It states these issues must be considered time and again. Inadvertently, it seems anxious about the electorate in the North of Ireland. I wonder why that might be.

Having committed to the convention and seen how right it was on the issue of marriage equality - an issue that was complex and potentially controversial in and of itself - the Government should not be overriding the decision and recommendation of the convention. It would be a different matter if there had been a split vote or a decision on the margins. This issue, however, commanded overwhelming support and it must be put to the people. The Government's foot-dragging on the matter is wholly unacceptable.

I am very concerned about the Government's response on economic, social and cultural rights. The Government knows that we signed up to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as long ago as 1973, and we ratified it in 1989. Therefore, we have accepted these rights in principle. Clearly, it seems we are in favour of them. The next logical step is to enshrine the framework and entitlements in our basic law and constitutional text.

I recognise that there are real issues to be weighed up and considered, as with any form of constitutional change, but I am most alarmed by the very predictable response of the Government to the effect that it does not wish the Judiciary to intrude on matters that properly belong to the Government and to have an undue influence in respect of the use of the resources of the State. I do not accept that the resources are limited, as stated by Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil.

**Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil:** They are finite.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** They are finite, yes. We could debate that.

**Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil:** The Deputy is splitting hairs.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The very purpose of enshrining rights such as these for citizens is that it makes those rights justiciable and places an onus on the State to vindicate them. It is disingenuous and wrong of the Government to state it is bothered by this because the Judiciary might get stroppy with us. Perhaps it is bothered by this innovation, supported by the Constitutional Convention, because it would actually force the State to honour basic entitlements of the citizen. Many of the entitlements have been trodden on for generations.

Both Fine Gael and the Labour Party supported the constitutional enshrinement of economic, social and cultural rights when in opposition. In 1999, Members from both Government parties voted to support a Labour Party Bill that sought this. How is it that the parties have changed their mind now? How is it, despite the deliberations and firm conclusion of the Con-

stitutional Convention, that the Government thumbs its nose not only at the process, but also at its conclusions?

Over the holiday period, the Minister of State, Deputy Gerald Nash, looked into his soul, de Valera style, and said he believed the constitutional position on women in the home ought to be put to the people in a referendum. Well done to him. Bravo. I thank him for catching up. In fact, that very matter was deliberated upon and considered by the Constitutional Convention. The issue, as with many addressed by the convention, should have had its complexities and nuances well teased out at this stage, and it should rightfully have been put to the people in a referendum. We need another Constitutional Convention. I hope it will not be as *ad hoc* and piecemeal as its predecessor. At its core must be an understanding that when the deliberative process ends and citizens and convention as a whole make decisions, those decisions will be respected and honoured by the Government of the day.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The next slot is shared by Deputies Maureen O’Sullivan, Thomas Pringle and Paul Murphy.

**Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan:** Having been a member of the Constitutional Convention and, with Deputies Buttimer and Keating, having an attendance rate of 100%, I can certainly acknowledge the tremendous work and commitment of its members, both political representatives and citizens, in addition to the staff and chairman, Mr. Tom Arnold. I acknowledge, in particular, the meticulous planning, the availability of experts, the submissions and the input on the various matters the convention was dealing with. The principles guiding the convention were such that it was to be innovative, influential and independent. Once it got going, it certainly showed its independence. It would have been truly independent if, at the first meeting, it could have chosen the topics to be considered. However, we were presented with a *fait accompli* regarding what was to be discussed. There were eight designated topics, from the Presidency down to women and blasphemy, but a real opportunity was missed. While each of the topics was significant and important to certain sectors, they were not all burning issues of the day. Nevertheless, each was discussed at length and there was testimony and input from a range of people.

The convention certainly did its work in a very timely way, and the secretariat must be acknowledged in this regard. The nine reports were published. To date, however, only five have been subject to statements in the Dáil. This shows a lack of respect for the convention. There is now a rush in respect of the remaining four topics. Despite this, there have been occasions in the Dáil when time allowed for legislation or other statements was not all used in full or when certain items due to be considered were not considered. It is a pity that the time could not have been used.

All the discussions at the Constitutional Convention were conducted in a manner that was respectful of the wide variety of views on the issues at hand. As with previous speakers, I acknowledge that the highlight of the convention was the discussion on marriage equality, which was a respectful, dignified and emotional debate. There was obvious relief at the end of the weekend in question when the convention voted overwhelmingly in favour of marriage equality.

At the end of the discussion on Topic 8, the Constitutional Convention demonstrated its independence when members discussed other potential topics for debate. While a wide range of issues arose, those on which the largest number of submissions were made were, first, the

environment and, second, economic, social and cultural rights, on which 132 and 104 submissions were made, respectively. The two additional areas were Dáil reform and economic, social and cultural rights. The environment must be a topic for a future Constitutional Convention. I do not believe the Minister of State's comments on the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Bill because the legislation most certainly does not cover all the issues that must be covered in the area of the environment.

This debate focuses on voting outside the State, Dáil reform, economic, social and cultural rights and the Constitutional Convention's final recommendations. The possibility of allowing people to vote abroad received widespread support at the convention. One issue that arose in the discussion on this issue was the position of people who are outside the State at the time of elections, whether on holiday or for work purposes. As the Dáil does not operate to a fixed term, people do not know on what date an election will be held until shortly beforehand. If people were aware of the date of an election, they would be able to make arrangements to vote. I have met Irish people abroad, particularly those who are doing development work with non-governmental organisations in very difficult circumstances, who are upset that they cannot vote in elections. While no one wants a return to electronic voting, which was a debacle, information technology has come a long way in the intervening period. That option deserves to be examined again.

The Taoiseach has responded to the report on Dáil reform and supports the election of the Ceann Comhairle by secret ballot. This could be an academic exercise in cases where governments have significant majorities. More respect must be shown for the role of the Ceann Comhairle, and perhaps that would be the case if the Ceann Comhairle were to challenge Ministers to a greater extent when questions are being asked, in particular when they are not being answered.

I am aware of the proposal to have a committee week and I accept that committee work is interrupted when votes are called in the Chamber. However, the proposal would not work for practical reasons. For example, the design of this building means we could not accommodate simultaneous sittings of all the committees. I am a member of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade whose staff and secretariats do amazing work.

I listened to the Minister of State's comments on economic, social and cultural rights. The fact that addressing this issue would be difficult should not preclude us from doing so. I refer in particular to the rights of people with disabilities.

Speaking as an Independent Deputy and member of the Technical Group, the Oireachtas must keep up with the changing nature of Irish politics. Irrespective of how many Independents are elected to the next Dáil, they must be recognised in Standing Orders to ensure they are not required to fight the battles that Independent Deputies had to fight in this Dáil.

As chairperson of the Irish section of AWEPA, I thank the Constitutional Convention for facilitating a number of parliamentarians from Libya, Yemen, Egypt and Tunisia who wished to attend the convention. We had a very good discussion when they were present.

I will repeat a point I made when I spoke at the opening of the Constitutional Convention in Dublin Castle. We must balance the need to reform certain areas of the Constitution that are in need of reform, while protecting those parts of the Constitution that have served as a solid foun-

dation for our democracy. As a woman who enjoys many rights because I live in a democracy, I am very conscious of those women in other countries who have few, if any, rights.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I am glad to have an opportunity to contribute to the statements on the Constitutional Convention. The Government's response to the recommendations of the convention makes for sobering reading. According to Second Republic, overall, the Government has accepted 32% of the convention's recommendations for constitutional reform and 58% of its recommendations for policy reform. While this may look good on paper, when one delves a little deeper, one finds that only 11% of the convention's recommendations on constitutional reform and only 5% of its recommendations on policy reform have been implemented.

Most strikingly, according to Second Republic, key provisions such as citizen initiatives, for example, 1YI, the one year initiative, for which I have been campaigning, have been rejected or have received responses from the Government that can be described as ambiguous at best. It will be very important, as we enter the general election campaign, that candidates add citizen initiatives to their agenda. A second Constitutional Convention, as called for by Second Republic, should be established or citizens forums should be introduced, as proposed by the one year initiative.

It is vital that the Government acknowledge that its response to the reports before us is 313 days overdue. This is pathetic. It is clear the Government has not taken the Constitutional Convention and parliamentary procedures seriously given that it has not bothered to respond in the Oireachtas to two reports within the prescribed four-month timeframe. The 66 ordinary members of the Constitutional Convention gave up their time free of charge and showed incredible dedication to the convention process. They deserve more respect and recognition than has been shown to them. If that does not make one angry, what about the fact that the Government will be between 533 and 660 days late in responding to the final four reports being debated today?

I will dedicate my time to advocating that the Government or its successor address economic, social and cultural rights. Last year, the Government voted down a Bill I introduced which would have enshrined economic, social and cultural rights in the Constitution. It argued, as the Minister of State has done again today, that it would be difficult to enshrine these rights in the Constitution. That is not the case. What would be difficult for the Government would be to accept the burden of vindicating the rights of citizens in the economic, social and cultural spheres. This is the reason it resists proposals to enshrine such rights in the Constitution.

Limited provision is made for economic, social and cultural rights in Bunreacht na hÉireann. Enshrining such rights in the Constitution would bring it into line with a growing trend in many countries which have revised their constitutions to include economic, social and cultural rights. Some 26 European Union member states have made some form of constitutional provision for economic, social and cultural rights. Internationally, 106 constitutions protect the right to work and 133 provide the right to health care. This demonstrates that the idea that one can reflect such rights in the Constitution is a tangible objective.

In the ninth and final meeting of the Constitutional Convention in February 2013, 85% of its members voted in favour of strengthening these rights and the Government made a commitment to respond to its recommendations within four months of publication. In March 2014, the convention issued to the Government a recommendation that it implement these rights and the Government was due to respond by July of the same year. Almost one year later, we are still waiting for a response from the Government to proactively address the status of economic,

social and cultural rights.

To counter the lingering myths presented by the Government, it is important to give an idea of what these rights would entail. Economic rights would entail the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his or her living by freely chosen or accepted work and to just and favourable conditions of work; the right of everyone to form a trade union or join a trade union of his or her choice; and the right to strike. Social rights would entail the right to social security; the right to protection and assistance of the family; the right of every person and his or her family to an adequate standard of living, including food, clothing and housing, and the continuous improvement of living conditions; the right to be free from hunger; the right of everyone to the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health; and the right of everyone to education. Cultural rights would entail the right of everyone to take part in cultural life, enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and benefit from the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he or she is the author.

The Constitution should provide for these rights. It would be difficult for the Government to do so because vindicating these rights would require a change in the culture of government, which is what this Government is afraid of.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I thank the ordinary people who participated in the convention on the Constitution and produced a series of recommendations within the limited framework under which they had to work. It is the position of the Anti-Austerity Alliance that a left-wing Government would begin a more fundamental process than the Constitutional Convention. We would commence a debate in society with the aim of writing a new Constitution because the current Constitution is utterly unfit for purpose in today's society, as it was in the society in which it was written. We need a Constitution that places equality and social justice at its core, one which enshrines economic, social, cultural and environmental rights as primary rights which are superior to the right to profit. We need a secular Constitution which enshrines the separation of church and State, unlike the current Constitution, and is democratic and socialist.

I welcome the recommendation from the Constitutional Convention on strengthening economic, social and cultural rights. If that were done, it could make a real difference to people's lives, but it is clear that the Government has no interest in that happening. Let us suppose the right to a home were enshrined in the Constitution and were said to be higher than the right of a bank to maximise its return on a mortgage, the right of a landlord to squeeze as much as he can out of a tenant or the right of developers to maximise their profits. That would make an immediate difference to ordinary people. It would blow away any idea that there is a constitutional problem with having proper rent controls. It would bring pressure on the Government to build the homes that are needed. The same applies in terms of the right to decent health care for all as opposed to the right to access second-tier health care. The same applies to the right to work and the right to strike. I also welcome the fact that a majority took the view that the rights of the environment should be enshrined in the Constitution.

Why is the Government not interested in that? Why do the people responsible in the Government say these matters need to be considered when it is obvious the Government will not consider them? It is clear that the Government does not want to constrain future Governments in having to meet the aspirations of people in terms of economic, social and cultural rights.

The Government and previous Governments were happy to constrain future Governments to implement a great deal of austerity. They were happy to sign up to the fiscal treaty, the six-

pack and the two-pack. They had no problem constraining future Governments, including in respect of the potential to end up in other courts, etc. The problem arises when it comes to enshrining the right of people to a decent living standard. The Government has a problem with that. They fear a Portuguese-type situation. In that country under a relatively progressive constitution the citizens were able to take the Portuguese Government to court and win by way of rejecting some austerity measures. The Government's response says it all.

I also wish to reference the question of the separation of church and State. The convention did not get a chance to discuss this matter properly. We believe this is central. It is unacceptable that the State, from its inception, handed over the provision of many public services to the church to get away from its responsibilities and as an instrument of social control. That close connection between the church and the State was the context in which scandals such as the Magdalen laundries could take place. It is also the context in which people do not have the basic right to abortion, for example. We still have blasphemy in the Constitution. Despite the fine promises of the Minister of State, Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin, we still have not seen a referendum on this issue.

My final point relates to the question of the future amending of the Constitution. A burning issue for many is the question of the repeal of the eighth amendment. The utter, deep and cynical hypocrisy of the Labour Party will not go unnoticed by ordinary people.

**Deputy Robert Dowds:** What utter rubbish.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Labour Party is having meetings around the place. Those involved, having been in power for five years, are saying it is time to repeal the eighth amendment. They had plenty of time to do it. However, they rejected a Bill in the Dáil precisely to repeal the eighth amendment. I am referring to the Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution Bill. It is utter hypocrisy and people can obviously see through it. Incredibly, the Minister of State, Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin, has said that the reason the Labour Party rejected that Bill was because the Bill was unconstitutional. A bill to amend the Constitution cannot be unconstitutional. People should campaign for repeal of the eighth amendment and for the right of women to access abortion.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan):** Deputy Robert Dowds and Deputy Eoghan Murphy are next and are sharing time.

**Deputy Robert Dowds:** It was an honour for me to be a member of the Constitutional Convention, as was the Acting Chairman. It was very good that this initiative was agreed and followed through. In the first instance it was a Labour Party initiative to have a constitutional convention. While there were many shortcomings in terms of how it was run and so on, there were many positives too, especially the recommendations which led to the marriage equality referendum. I pay particular credit to Deputy Eamon Gilmore for his work on that. There were certainly shortcomings. For example, it was a waste of time to spend a weekend discussing the length of time that the President should serve. It would have been better if more time had been spent discussing the issue of Dáil reform.

My time is limited and I may come back to some other points. I welcome the announcement by the Chief Whip in respect of the election of the Ceann Comhairle by secret ballot and the other two reforms to which he referred. These are good developments. I am keen to concentrate most of my remarks on the question of Dáil reform. Much of the discussion on this topic

at the Constitutional Convention was around the question of our electoral system. I regret the general thrust of the recommendation on that front, because it was largely a rehash of our current system with what I regard as its worst points amplified. For example, many people were in favour of even larger multi-seat constituencies. I regret that the Constitutional Convention did not warm to a system of elections like those in Germany and New Zealand, where there is a split system involving single-seat constituencies that elect half the members, while the other half come from a party list. That would be a better system. It can be done to give parties approximately the right percentage of seats according to their percentage of the vote. Clearly that would be fair and such a system would have numerous advantages. Our system with multi-seat constituencies, whether at national or local level, leads to considerable duplication. For example, the four Deputies from a given constituency could pursue the same issue. We should consider this in respect of the cost of parliamentary questions and so on. If we had a situation where a constituency was represented by one Member, it would help to remove some of that and it would have many other advantages as well. There would be fewer internal party disputes in all political parties in scenarios where Deputies are trying to get the better of a constituency colleague. In many cases that colleague is his greatest rival, more so than a colleague from an opposing party. It is reminiscent of comments supposedly made by Winston Churchill to a new Tory backbencher, although perhaps he made them in a slightly different context. He told the backbencher that his opponents were across the floor but that his enemies were behind him.

I will go on in this vein a little. If we had such a system there would be less of a need for individual parliamentarians to pander to the lowest common denominator in terms of their constituents' needs and they could take a long-term view.

Deputy Murphy has agreed to allow me to go on for two more minutes.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan):** The Topical Issues debate will begin at 4.42 p.m.

**Deputy Robert Dowds:** I will finish quickly. It would be easier for people in that situation not to be populist. That sort of populism was one of the things that got this country into great trouble. We need to try to move away from it to the greatest extent possible. Also, in that alternative scenario it would be easier to have a more flexible Whip system, because a party would not have to protect people against other people in their constituency. A broader view needs to be taken, not only by politicians but also by the general public. The referendum on inquiries was voted down by the general public. That happened because people are so suspicious of politicians. It is important that people realise that, while it is clear there are a few corrupt politicians, the vast majority are not and they need to be given the power to do their job properly. The great advantage of politicians is that, unlike the Civil Service and the Judiciary, we can get rid of them if we do not like them or what they are doing.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** I echo the comments of Deputy Dowds on how we elect people in this country. Just because something comes from a Constitutional Convention does not mean that it is right.

I have already spoken in the Chamber on the Constitutional Convention's report and will not repeat what I said but I would like to focus on the seventh report on Dáil reform in the limited time I have. I thank the members for their work in that regard. When we discuss changes to the Dáil and what we do in here, changes to the Constitution are not necessary to achieve fundamental reform. There can be changes to Standing Orders and simple changes in practice

and habit.

The proposal to elect a Ceann Comhairle by secret ballot is a fundamental reform which is very welcome. It will mean that greater independence will be given to the Chamber and greater powers for it to act as a check and balance on Government behaviour, which is what it is meant to be. We did not have that in the years leading up to the crisis and it is part of the reason we had a crisis. It is a welcome change from which a lot more change will flow. It is important to note that when we see commentary on this change, people refer to it perhaps coming back to haunt the Government. That proves that it is a fundamental change because the Government is ceding power to the Parliament, which means it is a fundamental and important change.

Some of the things of merit that need to be fleshed out include how exactly the election will take place. Such a change was introduced in Westminster in 2007 and has been very successful there. It is important that there are no party nominations and that nominations come instead from the Members of this House, separate from their party affiliations, to ensure independence in terms of the vote. It is important that a candidate going forward needs nominations but the threshold for nominations should not be so high that it would be difficult to be nominated.

It is important that there is an opportunity for candidates to address the Chamber but not so much opportunity that they can have private meetings in the background or do deals. Rather, they should be able to speak to Members about why they should be elected to chair the House. I would also like to see the election take place after Ministers are appointed, thereby not precluding anyone who might be very well got in the Chair from going forward because he or she might have hoped for preferment to ministerial office.

The further change in regard to the d'Hondt system is another fundamental change that is very welcome. I also agree with the point on finding some way to allow people who are outside of the country at election time to vote by way of a postal vote.

### **Message from Select Sub-Committee**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan):** The Select Sub-Committee on Education and Skills has completed its consideration of the Technological Universities Bill 2015 and has made amendments thereto.

### **Resignation of Member**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before proceeding to the Topical Issue debate, I wish to announce to the Dáil that today I received a letter of resignation from Deputy Brian Walsh, who is a Member of Dáil Éireann for the constituency of Galway West, and I will lay the letter before the Dáil. In accordance with the provisions of Standing Order 174, the resignation takes effect upon my receipt of the letter of resignation.

I am sure I speak on behalf of everybody in this Chamber in wishing Deputy Walsh well for the future. I thank him for his service to the House as a public representative and also for his assistance to me, as Ceann Comhairle, through his membership of the panel of temporary Chairs. I wish him and his family every success in the future. He will be sadly missed in public life in this country. He served as a member of Galway City Council - as far as I remember he

was mayor of Galway. His public service has been second to none and he was, of course, a very good Deputy in this House.

## **Topical Issue Debate**

### **Roads Maintenance**

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I raise this Topical Issue matter in the House following a public meeting I attended immediately before Christmas in a village called Rathcabbin on the north Tipperary and Offaly border, which is known as the Lower Ormond electoral area. I am not elected to the district but it will form part of the new constituency of Offaly. I, along with my colleague, Deputy Corcoran Kennedy, and other councillors in the electoral area were invited to the same meeting.

The meeting was very well attended. It was called by the residents of the village and the immediate area of Lorrha and surrounding areas because many people are frustrated, infuriated and quite angry about the gradual decline in the condition of the roads in the vicinity. We heard various speakers from those in attendance who were informed in the preceding days by schools in the areas of Birr and Roscrea that school transport providers and bus companies were seriously considering withdrawing their services because of the terrible state of the roads in the area. We also heard from many business owners in the area. It was explained that suppliers were ringing them in advance of deliveries and asking that people meet in locations three miles from their place of business, again because of the unfortunate state of the roads.

It is predominantly a rural farming area which depends on a major form of infrastructure to carry out their daily business and social and economic lives, such as bringing children to school and whatnot. It is becoming a very dangerous chore and impinges on livelihoods, cars and so forth. Unfortunately, over time, very little has been spent. I have submitted many parliamentary questions to the Departments of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Over time, and in particular over the past number of years, we have under-invested in local county and regional roads, a fact which is now coming home to roost. It is estimated that there has been up to a 50% underspend in the maintenance of our roads. That is putting extra pressure on capital investment and the reconstruction of roads. It is plain to see that the recovery has not taken hold in many rural areas but it has very little chance of taking hold if infrastructure is not put in place or brought up to the sort of level that people would expect, considering the amount of tax that is paid, such as road tax and property tax, and notwithstanding the fact that those two sources of funding were diverted to Irish Water over the past number of years, something which does nothing to assist people in thinking that progress can be made in this regard.

I am also conscious of the ongoing flood situation and the further damage being done to our roads. After the last major storm in June 2014, the Department called on local authorities to apply for funding to repair the damage, but up to 37% of what was requested was not forwarded by the Department. This is causing local authorities to fear doing the work they want to do. Further to a suggestion made by Deputy Corcoran Kennedy and I, a meeting took place between local authority members, a section of the community and engineers from Tipperary

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County Council. Immediate remedial works were carried out as best as they could be but, unfortunately, they were nothing along the lines of what was intended.

Very significant pressure will be placed on other local authorities as a result of the recent weather conditions. Will the Department make a specific and special case in this instance to address this issue and allow people to see local and national government are aware of the situation and are willing to put in place a plan or programme, over a number of years if necessary, to address this issue and return us to a level playing pitch with other parts of the country?

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan):** I am responding to the Deputy on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport who regrets he cannot attend.

The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority, in accordance with the provisions of section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from local authorities' own resources, supplemented by State road grants. The selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is, therefore, a matter for the local authority.

Ireland has just under 100,000 km of road in its network, and the maintenance and improvement of national, regional and local roads places a substantial financial burden on local authorities and on the Exchequer. The national financial position has meant there have been very large reductions in the Exchequer funding available for roads expenditure over the past number of years. State funding for regional and local roads in 2008 was €604 million while funding last year was €320 million. In this context, it is important to reiterate that the purpose of Exchequer funding is to supplement the own resources spending of local authorities, and the Minister has been emphasising to local authorities the importance of prioritising expenditure on roads when allocating own resources, including revenue from local property tax receipts.

Local authorities are aware that it is a matter for each council to determine its priorities and to allocate funding accordingly. Given funding constraints, the Minister's objective has to be to allocate funding to local authorities on as equitable a basis as possible. The main grant categories are, therefore, based on road lengths in each local authority's area of responsibility. The division of Department grant moneys under the restoration improvement, restoration maintenance and discretionary grant programmes between various local authority districts is decided at local level.

It is important to note that while the Minister's existing road budget will continue to be tight for the next number of years, reflecting the constraints relating to the EU fiscal rules, the seven year transport capital plan provides for the gradual build up in capital funding for the road network from the current relatively low base towards the levels needed to support maintenance and improvement works. Of course, damage caused by the severe impact of the recent storms and flooding will be assessed and prioritised as required by councils, and the Minister has asked his officials to review the Department's overall budget allocations with a view to engaging with local authorities to address critical repair needs.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I thank the Minister of State for his response. Unfortunately, what it contained will be of little solace in the near future for those who asked us to put forward this case and highlight it in our national Parliament. The Minister of State stated a five year capital expenditure programme in the form of a national plan is in place, that there would be gradual

improvement over time, that we are coming from a very low base and that the allocation of funding in this area has decreased from €604 million to €300 million. With the best of respect, we already knew much of this information. According to the reply, the responsibility is, in the main, primarily with local authorities, which should use their own resources. Unfortunately, this avenue is not open to many local authorities. The constraints upon local authorities with regard to the own resources element because of a lack of funds mean the work simply cannot be done in a timely fashion.

As I stated earlier, there must be an effort on the part of the Government to bring about better balance, better regional development and a semblance of an intended recovery in the regions, rather than it being concentrated on the east coast as it is at present, with specific and specified funding geared towards restoring vital infrastructure in the constituency I am discussing and the one adjoining it. I attended a similar meeting in Lusmagh where the same issue arose, with the same frustration and anger. A commitment is sought by the electorate from those who represent them to steer funding in this direction to put in place a plan to help these regions benefit from any recovery as it emerges.

I implore the Minister of State to bring back to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, and the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, the implicit wish of people in this area, and others, that a realistic programme and funding be put in place to address the further dilapidation of these roads by recent weather conditions. A proper and adequate funding stream should be put in place so people can see the situation is being treated with the attention it deserves. It should be treated properly and effectively, with a plan in place to rectify it over the coming two to three years.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** I certainly will convey the Deputy's sentiments to the Minister and I am sure he will see the record. I suggest the Deputy write to the Minister on this matter, which affects various local authorities throughout the country. It may involve a change of policy and direction in future.

### **Road Network**

**Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy:** Recent heavy rainfall and flooding has been an enormous source of stress in communities throughout the country but, naturally, my concerns must be local. Constituents in Offaly and north Tipperary have raised the issue of structural problems occurring on regional, local and tertiary roads as a result of recent downpours. In areas which had been previously neglected the problem has been exacerbated by the recent storms. In some areas filling in potholes would be sufficient, but in other areas local towns and villages have been cut off. For example, the access road to Banagher from Lusmagh in west Offaly has been flooded since the beginning of December. This inconvenience is bad enough for day to day travel, but recently I heard from a bed and breakfast owner who had to cancel her bookings over Christmas because nobody could access the property. She is concerned, naturally, about loss of earnings. She was not flooded but her home was inaccessible.

Lack of access between Shannon Harbour and Banagher meant the local public house suffered a loss of income despite the fact the property was not flooded. There was a lack of access to the village at a very busy time of the year, which was important for the business. These are local roads which will require considerable investment in future.

*5 o'clock*

They need to be improved to a level where people can actually access their own homes and businesses at times of flooding. We must accept that flooding will occur on a regular basis and we must plan for that reality. Whether we like it or not, whether we are climate change deniers, sceptics or whatever, the fact is that our climate is changing and this type of torrential rain will be a feature of our lives into the future. We need to do the necessary planning to ensure people do not have their access to their properties cut off on a regular basis.

Extra funding is required for the considerable investment that must be put into regional roads. Last week, I visited the flooded section of the N65, which is a national secondary route located between Borrisokane and Portumna. Lough Derg flooded at Ballyquirke Cross, cutting access for ordinary vehicles. Only those driving large jeeps or trucks could get from one area to another. Such was the level of flooding that in order to highlight it, several local sports enthusiasts took to their water skis. I am not condoning that necessarily, but it was an imaginative way of showing the difficulty involved in getting from place to place. Some excellent improvement work was done by the National Roads Authority last year on a section of the road near the new bridge. That section did not flood. I appeal to Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, to continue its good work in the area by putting a programme in place whereby the rest of the road can be resurfaced and upgraded to achieve the same positive impact. It is vital that this important artery through the area does not flood again.

The regional and local roads network likewise needs attention. During the recession, all budgets were cut across all Departments. The focus in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport was on capital projects, concentrating on motorways and some national secondary roads. The sections of the N62, for example, between Birr and Athlone and between Cloghan and Banagher were badly in need of upgrading. That work was started as part of a multi-annual investment plan and will be finished next year. However, the focus must now shift to regional, local and tertiary roads, some of which have been neglected to the extent that they are beginning to deteriorate. I have in mind, in particular, the R357, a regional road from Blue Ball to Shannonbridge which continues on to Ballinasloe. It is another very important route in which investment is required.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** I am responding to the Deputy on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, who regrets that he cannot be here this afternoon. The most extensive impact of the weather to date in the transport sector has been on the road network through both pluvial and fluvial flooding. This has caused serious disruption to daily life in many areas and has led to the cutting off in some cases of small communities and households across the country.

Regional and local roads are the statutory responsibility of each local authority, and the authorities in the affected areas have been working very closely with all the relevant State agencies, including An Garda Síochána, to manage the immediate impact of the storms and floods. The Minister has asked me to acknowledge the tremendous work done by all concerned to ensure warning signs were in place, diversion routes were organised and signposted, and information and advice were made available to the public via websites, social media and local radio. The Road Safety Authority has also played its role in supporting and disseminating safety messages for all road users.

Local authorities and Transport Infrastructure Ireland have advised the Minister's Depart-

ment that it is not possible as yet to obtain a comprehensive view of damage to road pavements until the floods fully recede and investigations and assessments are carried out. Bridges that were damaged as a result of the flooding and storms will need to be inspected and a detailed assessment of the damage undertaken. TII has engineering consultants on a bridge framework available to commence inspections once flooding has subsided. Where underwater inspection is required, this is a specialist area and only a limited number of consulting engineers have the capability to undertake such inspections. The chief executive of TII has written to local authorities offering the services of the framework consultants if there are non-national road bridges that need to be inspected. In certain cases, it may be some months before full information is available on the cost of repairs. In other cases, where water levels have receded more quickly, the timeframe will be shorter. The Minister's officials and TII staff will engage with local authority officials to minimise the timeframes associated with critical repair works.

The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government has been taking the lead in responding to the immediate needs of local authorities arising from the storms and flooding and has provided funding to local authorities to allow them to deal quickly with the clean-up and implement the measures needed to protect public safety. That Department has also sought submissions from local authorities setting out both the estimated short-term costs and the costs related to damage to infrastructure, including transport. This is to ensure that a comprehensive picture of the full cost of the recent flood event across all sectors, including the road network at national, regional and local level, is garnered both by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. So far, 25 of the 28 local authorities have reported on their estimated infrastructure damage costs, and my Department is in the process of reviewing the estimates received so far.

The roads capital budget for 2016 is tight but, as indicated to Deputy Cowen, the Minister has asked his officials as a matter of urgency to assess areas where funding can be reprioritised or reallocated in order to release funding to deal with the consequences of the storms. The Minister is also conscious that the scale of the damage incurred and the overall substantial cost involved will require a cross-departmental response and he is liaising with Government colleagues on the funding needed.

**Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy:** I thank the Minister of State for his reply. In the time remaining to me, I will focus on the area to which Deputy Cowen referred. I attended the same public meeting he mentioned and, prior to that, surveyed the flooding with a number of local residents around Ballhea and Rathcabbin. Having served many years on Offaly County Council, I am aware that this road has not been included in a roads programme for at least a decade. The extent of the work that now needs to be done is a result of that neglect. If the road had been included in a programme under which a section at a time was upgraded over a number of years, it would have prevented the absolute mess we have now. I have never seen a road as bad in all my time as a public representative. More than 100 houses are affected along the 15 km to 20 km section. One knows it is bad when the school bus cannot get down it and people are asking neighbours to take them out in tractors. All of this is without even much flooding; the road is that bad.

The type of investment that is needed in this case will be much more significant than what the local authority will be able to access. As such, a special case should be made for it. The council has had an assessment done of the likely costs and it seems we are looking at the guts of €750,000. That is a conservative estimate. We need to think creatively in situations like these. In a rural area, people have access to diggers and tractors and the manpower is there. Let us

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work in partnership to resolve the problem. We need to get creative or we are facing terrible consequences. We must start using our imaginations in the face of the terrible storms we have seen this winter.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** I will convey the Deputy's concerns to the Minister. I advise that she write to him outlining the details of what is clearly a very inferior road which is having a huge effect on the lives of people in the local community in different ways. I will be happy to convey the Deputy's sentiments to the Minister. He asked me to do so.

### **National Monuments**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan):** Deputies Maureen O'Sullivan, Aengus Ó Snodaigh, Joe Costello, Seán Crowe, Mary Lou McDonald and Sandra McLellan are sharing time. They have 12 minutes in total which I presume will be allocated on the basis of two minutes to each Deputy.

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** It is very timely that this has been chosen because of what has happened in the past week. When one sees the route taken by the 300 men and women of the Volunteers and the Citizen Army along Moore Street that Thursday in 1916 and when one walks that route today, it is clear that so much happened at different places along the lanes and in the houses. This is a battlefield site of historical significance and it is not just Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street that should be a national monument. What happened on the battlefield site did not just involve the leaders, it also involved men and women from the Volunteers and the Citizen Army, and the ordinary citizens of Dublin. Why is the area, including the laneways, not a designated national monument? Was NAMA ever asked to gift the battlefield site to the Government and to the nation because it is of such huge historical importance? Why, when paying the €4 million, did the Government not consider that this sum should have included the entire battlefield site, because it is recognised as a battlefield site, both by our National Museum and by the British Imperial War Museum?

As it stands, Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street will be preserved and the rest of the street will be a shopping centre, which is totally inappropriate in an area of great historical significance, not to mention that Dublin does not need another shopping centre. There is a need for a different vision of a historic cultural quarter that will link up with the plans for Parnell Square, which will maintain the fabric of how the street looked in 1916 and which will be much better for the street traders.

We know the work began last Monday week when the builder moved in. Who is monitoring and overseeing that work? Who is on-site to ensure those builders know exactly what they are doing? Where is the conservation architect who will oversee that and ensure that no more is lost in the area?

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I congratulate the relatives, who succeeded in getting an injunction to prevent any further damage to the national monument and to the site as a whole. It is a debacle that we are here, 15 years after this issue was first highlighted, and there is a threat to a national monument. By national monument I mean not only the small portion of what should be a national monument that has been designated as such so far. For any proper understanding of what happened in Moore Street in the future, we need to understand the context. Deputy O'Sullivan just outlined the Government's intention, namely, to secure a number

of buildings in the middle of a street and surrounded by a shopping mall. This would mean the historical context of the buildings is gone, along with the understanding that is gained from it. Anybody who understands history understands that the historical context is nearly as important as the building itself. Unless children, visitors and anybody else coming to Dublin in the future have a full streetscape, including the lanes of history around it they will not fully understand what happened in Moore Street. People can be imaginative and use the whole street as a living museum, if they so wish. That is what I suggest the Government look at and it should designate the whole street and the laneways as a national monument. Even at this late stage, I believe the Minister has that power.

**Deputy Joe Costello:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the restoration of the national monument on Moore Street. It is nearly 20 years since I first put forward a motion to Dublin City Council proposing that No. 16 Moore Street, where the last council of war was held, with James Connolly, Pádraig Pearse and other signatories to the Proclamation, be made a protected structure and a 1916 commemorative centre. I put forward the original motion when the National Graves Association brought to my attention the unauthorised removal of the 1916 commemorative plaque, which had been erected in 1966, 50 years after the Rising. Together with the National Graves Association, I established the Save 16 Moore Street campaign. This led to the eventual recognition of Nos. 14 to 17 together with the GPO in 2007. The Moore Street national monument was at that time in private ownership and I opposed a number of large-scale planning applications for the site and its environs as recently as 2010. I also gave evidence at oral hearings, most recently in 2010, opposing the manner in which the planning application for that development was put forward.

James Connolly Heron and other relatives of the signatories became deeply involved in the campaign in the last number of years and thankfully in 2015 the national monument passed into the ownership of the State. It is right and proper that a national monument of such significance be held in the possession of the State and that the State take full responsibility for its restoration. We must remember that under the legislation, the restoration of the national monument has to be carried out under the auspices of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, in consultation with the director of the National Museum, so there is already a monitoring process in place. It is now essential that the restoration work on the national monument goes ahead without delay, so that Moore Street national monument can play its rightful role in the centenary commemorations. This national monument should be developed together with the neighbouring national monument, the GPO, which was the headquarters of the Easter Rising, in a manner befitting their iconic importance in the history of our Republic.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** I am proud of those who took part in the revolution of Easter Week 1916: the youth of Fianna na hÉireann, of which my grandfather was a member; the women in Cumann na mBan; the Volunteers; and the men and women of the Citizen Army. As one of those lucky people who knows a bit of the history of this country and this city, I am appalled by what is happening to the national monument and to the terrace in Moore Street. I am not ashamed of that freedom struggle. That is the difficulty and that is what we are dealing with in respect of this monument. I commend not only the relatives of 1916 and their actions through the courts but also those who recently occupied the buildings in Moore Street to prevent their demolition. We have not got leadership from politicians on this issue and hopefully the courts will now give that leadership.

I remember attending the 1966 commemoration as a young child and the pride people had at that time. I also remember this State banning the Easter commemoration in 1976 and Nora

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Connolly O'Brien being brought through the courts and fined for taking part in that. We have come a long way since then, but unfortunately we now have a similar Government, a Labour Party-Fine Gael coalition, to that in power in 1976, and it seems determined to demolish these buildings. I am standing here this evening in this Chamber and I am saying to the Minister that the people of this city and of this country will not allow her to do that.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is hard to credit that the Minister and her Government are standing over what is planned for Moore Street. It is hard to grasp fully how utterly crass and ignorant is the approach. It is hard to credit that anybody with even a passing interest in or faint respect for the events of Easter week 100 years ago, for the women and men of that time but, perhaps more importantly, for the country and the citizens in the here and now, could promote a commemorative shopping mall on Moore Street because, when one strips it all away, that is what it boils down to. By the way, I have nothing against shopping malls. I probably need to put that on the record because the Tánaiste earlier today intimated that I might hurt the feelings of shopping malls by speaking in this way.

It is self-evident and blindingly obvious that what is happening here in this year with the Government's intention to vandalise our national heritage is a direct re-run of what was envisaged for Kilmainham Gaol. One should bear in mind that fine edifice and recognition of the history of our struggle for freedom would not be in its current state had it been down to the State or any Government in particular. No doubt at that time some might have thought it a bright idea to bulldoze that and erect a shopping mall. Fortunately, the National Graves Association did not let that happen. We see a direct re-run now.

It is astonishing in the commemorative year that the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and her crass and ignorant colleagues in government would insist on proceeding with this approach. She should do the right thing, at a very late hour but nonetheless. I believe the Minister would enjoy full support, not only of the Oireachtas but of the people, if she does the right thing.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** It is baffling that in the second week of the centenary year the issue of Moore Street is still on the agenda and has not been dealt with in an appropriate manner. As demonstrated by the occupation that took place last week, an occupation the Minister herself described as extremist with what was termed "questionable motivations", and the legal battle that is currently making its way through the courts, the public will is there. The want and the need for the retention and restoration of all the area is present but it has fallen on deaf ears time and again.

We in Sinn Féin have consistently called for the preservation of the buildings, laneways and surrounding areas as it is a battlefield site of substantial historical and national significance. The proposals to develop a historical quarter will be of considerable benefit to Dublin, both economically and socially. As the Minister will be aware, the National Museum described the site as the most important historic site in modern Irish history.

The proposals to turn parts of this site into a shopping centre can only be described as ludicrous, but it is also very sad. Once these buildings are demolished, the history contained within the bricks and mortar die with it. In any other country, the mere proposal to demolish parts of an area that is of such importance would itself be a catalyst for an uprising. It is a national disgrace that these works have already begun. This is history that led to the foundation of the State.

The Minister needs to intervene. We do not need another shopping centre. There are lots

of shopping malls but there is only one Moore Street. Is this the legacy the Minister wishes to be remembered for?

**Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** On 10 November 2015, I announced that I had approved a comprehensive scheme of restoration works to Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street. The announcement of the commencement of works featured in national media coverage at the time and was widely welcomed. Having secured ownership of the buildings at Nos. 14 to 17, following agreement from the Government to purchase the site, work got under way by Lissadell Construction, who are recognised conservation and heritage experts. Projects that they have completed, to name but a few, are the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, the Gate Theatre, and Rathfarnham Castle. Over the past week, we have had a situation where a group of individuals, led by Éirigí, occupied the national monument, delaying and jeopardising the entire restoration project. I note Deputy Crowe's comment commending them. The works that are now resuming will stabilise, underpin and conserve these buildings for future generations to enjoy and visit. They will provide for the creation of a 1916 commemorative centre, which will be a fitting tribute to the leaders of 1916.

The archaeological and conservation work undertaken to date has revealed the tunnels where the rebels broke through from one house to the other, and these will be kept and preserved. The painstaking manual work has also revealed period details from 1916 and before. It will allow the public to see first-hand what the rebels encountered and where they made their final decisions to end the uprising to avoid further loss of life. The work under way will return the houses to their 1916 state, for which there is ample witness, anecdotal, physical and documentary evidence.

On the issue of the buildings on either side of the national monument which have been the subject of some commentary, Nos. 18 and 19 were in ruins at the time of the Rising. No. 13 is a modern build, internally and externally. Nos. 18 and 19 have been rebuilt and remodelled in the meantime too. None of these houses has any evidence whatsoever of the presence of the rebels. They are modern inside and out and lack any fixtures, fittings, finishes, partitions, stairs or other original elements. This is backed up by documentary evidence, including valuation records from 1911 to 1915 and from 1915 to 1925, Thom's Directory 1915 and the Dublin electoral lists from 1908 to 1915. The removal of these fundamentally new buildings will allow the national monument to be comprehensively underpinned and stabilised and the gables to be given permanent finishes, protecting them into the future on a permanent basis.

Discussions on Moore Street have dragged on for decades. Moore Street is now being dealt with and our approach is neither crass nor ignorant. It was 2007 when Nos. 14 to 17 were declared a national monument and we are only now at the point of restoration. As everyone in this House will be aware, the development of the wider Moore Street area is a matter for the local authority, Dublin City Council. It does not fall under my remit. However, a report was prepared for my Department by Shaffrey Associates architects and Frank Myles archaeologists in February 2012, and they are experts in this area. Their report included an inspection, assessment and fabric investigations of an area incorporating the block formed by Moore Street, O'Rahilly Parade, Moore Lane, Henry Place and some of the areas south of Henry Place extending back towards Henry Street. The methodology used was approved by my Department and the director of the National Museum.

The report reinforced the status of Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street. The main conclusions of the report were that there is little surviving of the historical landscape of the republican occupation

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of the Moore Street area on the final night of the Rising. The buildings along Moore Street do not demonstrate any exterior evidence of the conflict and what does survive is the street plan itself which retains something of its legibility as the route of the evacuation, or indeed as the advance on the British position, is followed.

Under the planning permission given by An Bord Pleanála in 2010, Moore Street itself will continue as an open street. As part of the wider development plans for the area, Henry Place, Moore Lane and O’Rahilly Parade are also to be retained. Before any further development takes place, a detailed project proposal must be submitted to Dublin City Council in which the historical significance of the critical locations along the evacuation route from the GPO are featured and interpreted.

The fabric of the national monument is extremely delicate and I do not want to see it deteriorate any further. We are at a stage now where people need to decide whether they want to save the national monument. I hope good sense will prevail.

**Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan:** The answer ignores all the other events that occurred on these streets, coming from the GPO around to Moore Street and down to the place of the final surrender. The Minister is not taking into account all these other events which involved the members of the Volunteers, Irish Citizen Army, Cumann na mBan and ordinary citizens. Some very significant events happened on that streetscape. We are talking about the fabric and the sense of what Moore Street was like at the time of the Easter Rising. The Minister was at Google recently launching a virtual reality tour of 1916. On Moore Street we have a real reality of what it was like. We know the value of folk parks and we know that, with a different vision, Moore Street could be that historical area. At the moment, a shopping centre is planned.

There has been a litany of mistakes, in which Dublin City was also involved. Where was the engagement between the Government and Dublin City Council on it? A week ago, I watched the “Scannal” programme about Wood Quay. We could remove the words “Wood Quay” and substitute “Moore Street”, given that exactly the same thing is happening. There is a need for a different vision and time is running out. Who is monitoring what is happening? The builders are going in. They have no historic or conservation experience and more could be destroyed.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** The Minister tried to use a logic that much of what is on the street did not exist in 1916 or has been built since then. By this logic, if An Post said it wanted to demolish the GPO, the Minister would agree, given that the GPO did not exist after 1916: it took eight years to rebuild it to its current glory. It was faithfully rebuilt, and this is what we are calling on the Minister to do.

We ask her to have some understanding of the context of these buildings. They are not three buildings alone. If they were, we could move them to the Phoenix Park and people could visit them there. The important thing is the context of Moore Street and the lanes off it. The cobble stones that the men and women, and even the British soldiers who were shooting them, went on still exist. It is a battlefield site. It is not three buildings in isolation. I urge the Minister to step in and ensure Moore Street is a full national monument.

**Deputy Joe Costello:** People are coming very late to Moore Street and what it stands for. The late Tony Gregory and I were two of the people who went to prison to protect Moore Street traders and their conditions.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I was battered off the street for it.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan):** The Deputy without interruption.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** He should not be lecturing people.

**Deputy Joe Costello:** Moore Street has been derelict for 100 years, and nobody considered preserving it at the time. Now, there is tremendous interest, which is right and proper.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** It was because the State controlled it for the past number of years.

**Deputy Joe Costello:** Much could have been done in the past, for example, people could have objected to the shopping mall. It was not for the Minister to object to a planning application by Dublin City Council.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** The Government controls it through NAMA.

**Deputy Joe Costello:** The planning applications were made before NAMA owned it.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I am talking about the recent years when the Deputy was a Government Minister.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Frank Feighan):** Please, the Deputy without interruption.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** The Deputy is encouraging me.

**Deputy Joe Costello:** It is no use giving out about a shopping centre in the area when nobody here objected to the planning application. I objected to it and gave oral evidence against it.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Fair dues to the Deputy. He said nobody objected.

**Deputy Joe Costello:** However, it went ahead. It would have been wonderful if all the people who are so concerned about it now and are raising it so loudly had been there when it mattered. Now, it is very important that we get the restoration of the national monument. When the national monument came up first, the aim was to protect No. 16 Moore Street. It was extended to Nos. 14 to 17. We need it restored for the 1916 commemoration. It has been left derelict for far too long. The director of the National Museum of Ireland is the person who must liaise with the Minister about the development. Has this liaison taken place and what is the role of the director?

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** Moore Street has a special place in the hearts of Irish people and it is vital that it be redeveloped in a manner worthy of its importance. The delays and negligence of successive Governments cannot be allowed to continue to damage and destroy the Moore Street terrace. The Minister's plan is minimalist and lacking in vision. It is an embarrassingly cobbled together bunch of ideas that fails to protect or enhance the 1916 monument and the greater battlefield site.

We are talking about a shopping centre. This is the Minister's vision of the 1916 leaders and the revolution, but it certainly is not shared by me or the majority of people in this city and country. The Minister must wake up to what is happening to the monument. If any damage is being done, it is by the wreckers and developers on site, not those who were occupying it and protecting the area before the courts could move. While the Minister and her Department sat on their hands and did nothing, people went in and protected the site, and they should be com-

mended.

The Minister said different groups were involved in the occupation. Individuals were involved. Members of my party were involved. Friends of mine were involved. I was outside, and I will support them. The end result will be a shopping mall, which is the Minister's vision of the men and women of 1916.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The State, the Government and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht have operated in cahoots with developers. Joe O'Reilly made his planning application for a shopping mall, a controversy ensued and his loans were taken over by NAMA. NAMA acquired the entire portfolio, which it flogged off last November under the very appropriate title "Project Jewel". Deputy Ó Snodaigh argued that the Government should have intervened then, as it had full authority to do under the NAMA Acts. It was the window of opportunity. The Minister's colleague told Deputy Ó Snodaigh that it was his view and the view of the Government that it would be inappropriate. Dear divine God. There were ample opportunities time and again to intervene, yet the Government failed to do so.

It is a view widely held that the very idea of a shopping mall in the middle of Moore Street with a cultural and historical museum latched onto it is utterly crass to the point of being vandalism of our heritage.

**Deputy Joe Costello:** The Deputy should have objected to it.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is tasteless and is the action of absolute ignoramuses, or ignorami, in the Government. The Minister needs to fix it. That is why she is elected to public office; not to sit and take the part of developers.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** I have raised questions on Moore Street ever since I took my seat in the Chamber. I have put questions to the Minister ever since she took office. She has repeatedly absolved herself of responsibility for anything outside 14 to 17 Moore Street. It is time the Minister took a stand and listened to the people. We do not want another shopping centre. As Deputy Joe Costello said, the fight took place, and we initially acquired No. 16 Moore Street, followed by Nos. 14, 15 and 17. However, this is not enough and we need to acquire more. The other buildings are of grave importance because of the history associated with them. Why should they be demolished?

Although there is a public outcry for these concerns to be listened to and acted upon, opinions continue to go unheard. James Connolly said, "We believe in constitutional action in normal times; we believe in revolutionary action in exceptional times." These are exceptional times as we watch our heritage being pulled from under our feet. The mobilisation of the people was what brought about the rising 100 years ago. Would it not be fitting if the same were to happen in this historical year to retain the memory of those who fought and died for our freedom?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Deputy Costello is correct when he says that planning permission regarding Moore Street was given by An Bord Pleanála in 2010. The Deputies opposite should have objected at that stage. The shopping mall is a matter for Dublin City Council. I am responsible for the national monument at Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street. Anything outside the national monument is a matter for Dublin City Council.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** We know that. Never mind that.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** To clarify, Lissadell Construction, which is carrying out the work on the national monument, has significant experience of restoration and conservation work.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** I hope it will not be sub-contracted out.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The expert advice I have received is very clear. As I have outlined, Nos. 18 and 19 Moore Street were in ruins. None of the original fabric of the building at No. 13 is still present, as it was rebuilt in the 1940s. It has been clearly demonstrated that Nos. 14 to 17 are of historic importance.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** All of it is of historic importance.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** The Minister is missing the big picture.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I have been inside those buildings.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** So have I.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I have seen at first hand the fabric of the buildings that date back to 1916. I refer to what is there at Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street. If one goes into Nos. 18 and 19, one will see that the inside of those buildings has been completely changed.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** What about No. 10?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I have been there, yes.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** What about Nos. 11 and 12?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** This is the first Government to do something about Moore Street. We purchased the national monument. We have made money available to carry out restoration work.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** The Government has not done enough.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** We are developing a legacy that will be a tribute to the leaders of 1916.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Is the Minister referring to the shopping mall?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** It will be a step back in time to see-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** To see the shopping mall.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** -----what life was like for them in 1916.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Give over.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** It has taken us eight years to get to this point. One hundred years after the Rising, we are conserving and protecting the final headquarters of the leaders.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** A bit of it.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Time is of the essence. It has been my intention to allow limited access to the site at the national monument during the centenary commemorations. If

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further delays are caused, that quite simply will not be possible.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** The Minister is looking for a ribbon to cut.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I appeal to everyone in the House to help to bring to an end to the efforts to frustrate the safeguarding and preservation of the national monument.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.42 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 19 January 2016.