



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 20 Deireadh Fómhair 2016

Thursday, 20 October 2016

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 12 p.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Robert Troy: We are all aware that the Brexit result sent shockwaves across Europe. It has very serious ramifications for the future of the EU and our island. We all agree that hard borders should not be reintroduced between North and South and that the common travel area should remain. There have been positive soundings about these but there have been mixed messages about how this special relationship between Ireland and the UK will be handled. It is most unfortunate that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was excluded from a recent Cabinet committee on Brexit set up in London. What the Tory Government does is outside our control but if the way it treats Northern Ireland is an indication of how it will treat the Republic of Ireland under special treatment, it does not give much cause for hope.

I want to focus on what the Irish Government needs to do because this is having a detrimental effect on businesses. It will have a detrimental effect in the medium and long term on businesses across this island. Preparations should be started to allow companies to be shielded and to give them comfort during what will be a very uncertain two year-period while negotiations take place. Companies that are reliant on exports need to be given the necessary supports to give them the confidence to ride out the storm of this uncertainty over the next two years. Through no fault of their own, good businesses that have been built up over the past number of decades are facing hugely uncertain times. While there have been many soundings about being prepared, very little action has been taken to show that we are actually prepared.

We have already seen the impact of the dramatic drop in sterling on businesses here. Some companies have already closed while others are at the edge of the cliff working at a loss and hoping that sterling will rise again. I spoke to a business in my region in the prepared consumer food sector that is working on a net margin of between 4% to 5%. It is now suffering a loss of between 20% and 25%. That is not sustainable. We know that the small and medium-sized sector employs over 780,000 people, particularly in rural Ireland, and is the backbone of employment in the regions. IBEC has called for a currency crisis fund to be set up but it appears its request has fallen on deaf ears. A total of 42% of our tourism market comes from the UK

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and the impact of the fall in sterling will reduce this dramatically. Some predict it will be reduced by as much as 10%. Last week's budget underscored the seriousness of Brexit and the threat it poses to Ireland. It was just tokenism against the greatest threat that has faced the Irish economy for many decades. I am worried about the businesses that depend on exports. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will make a fund available to help shield Irish companies from Brexit and assist them in working through the uncertainties over the next two years until we all, eventually, know what will be the real outcome of Brexit?

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Government recognises the enormous challenges that face Ireland as a consequence of Britain's decision to leave the EU, including for farmers and exporters, as a result of the currency changes the Deputy mentioned, for the tourism industry, which is so dependent on visitors from the UK, for the service industry and for individuals. As the Deputy said, what the British Government decides to do is a matter for it. However, we can control what we do and we can prepare. The Government's sub-committee on Brexit, of which I am a member, met this week. The sub-committee discussed the very important actions that have been taken. There is additional funding in the budget for the employment of extra staff by IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland to ensure our message is heard overseas. Notwithstanding the performance of tourism, it was decided to keep the VAT rate at 9% for tourism and hospitality, recognising the risk that there may be a fewer tourists coming from the UK. We are rolling out a new low-interest loan scheme to farmers valued at €150 million to help with cash flow. There is a new business support scheme related to risk sharing under this development. The Deputy may be aware that the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Doyle, arranged for a payment of just under €1.57 million to one of the mushroom producer organisations under an EU scheme.

We are acting to deal with the immediate consequences caused by the uncertainty and the fall in the value of sterling that have followed the vote. We are also planning ahead. The Taoiseach will visit Northern Ireland on 3 November and will meet all the party leaders and chambers of commerce. We will establish an all-Ireland civic forum to discuss the consequences of Brexit. It will be of particular relevance to Border communities which are most at risk from Brexit. The next North-South Ministerial Council summit will occur on 18 November in Armagh, which will give us an opportunity to discuss the consequences of Brexit with the Ministers from the North and work out how we can work together to meet those challenges head on.

Deputy Robert Troy: Although we were told that the budget would be Brexit-proofed, this has not proven to be the case. During recent weeks and months, I have spoken to business owners in my region. It is not like when the Taoiseach tells the story of the man he met the night before who was having a pint. I spoke with the owners of real businesses who are creating real jobs: one had created 100 jobs, another 170, and another 500. Every one of them is dependent on exports and they have a real fear about the outcome of Brexit. Our region has already suffered job losses during recent months and we do not want any more. The Minister talked about the 50 staff recruited for IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland. Most of these were recruited before Brexit happened. The Minister talked about the retention of the 9% VAT. It has been in place for many years. I acknowledge that it was the Minister's Government that put it in place and it was a welcome boost to the industry at the time. Everybody who works in the tourism industry has real concerns about Brexit here and now. I will reiterate the question I asked at the beginning and perhaps the Minister will answer it this time. Will the Government make a fund available to help Irish companies that are dependent on exports and vulnerable to currency fluctuations work through the uncertainties of the next two years so that, hopefully, they will be able

to ride out these uncertainties and be in a stronger position after the two years' deliberations?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I cannot give the Deputy a specific commitment today. I am not in a position to make policy decisions on the hoof. Some funds are already available. For example, a payment has been made to a producer in the mushroom industry and, as part of the budget, a low-interest loan scheme to the value of €150 million is being put in place for farmers.

Falls in the value of sterling have happened before. They can happen independently of any concern or decision around Brexit. They work both ways. For some companies, they can be devastating, moving them from a position of profit to one of loss. For others, they can be a benefit. If companies import from the UK, for example, their costs will be reduced. Although it is not possible for every industry, the solution for most is to diversify and not be dependent on one market.

I will leave the Deputy with a final thought. Four times in its history, Ireland has gone down a different road from the UK. In 1921, we became independent, which came with challenges. In 1948, we left the Commonwealth and became a republic. There were challenges associated with that. In 1979, we broke the link with sterling, which came with challenges. In 2002, we decided to join the euro without Britain and, of course, there were challenges with that. On every occasion, we rose to those challenges and Ireland emerged stronger and more prosperous as a result. We will ensure that the latter will also be the case on this occasion.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister's colleagues in government have consistently refused to tackle and put a stop to the outrageous proposed increases in politicians' pay. He will agree with me that we are all well paid. Deputies earn a basic salary of €87,258. It is a wage that many workers would envy. Indeed, it is a wage that the majority of workers will never earn. Of course, the Minister and his ministerial colleagues take home much more - in excess of €150,000 - but let us stick with Deputies.

The proposed increases of more than €5,000 would bring a Deputy's salary to over €92,000. That is unacceptable, in particular at a time when Deputy Varadkar, as the Minister for Social Protection, is telling pensioners that they are worth an extra fiver per week and young people who are out of work are worth even less than that, a mere €2.70 per week. He still has not told social welfare recipients when they will get their increases. He might enlighten us in that regard.

The issue is one of fairness. That is what is driving pay disputes among gardaí, nurses and teachers. Today, Sinn Féin is publishing a motion that will stop these unfair payments to Deputies, Senators, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister. This is not because we do not believe that people should be fairly paid but as a result of the fact that it is unfair that someone who is on €30,000 or €40,000 per year, an average wage in the public sector, gets pay restoration of €1,000 while Deputies expect to be paid €92,000.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Where is the Northern Bank money?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: At a time when €5 is the best that the Minister can do for pensioners and many private sector workers, politicians cannot and must not get special treatment. We need to put a stop to this. That is what citizens wish to see. That is the fair thing to do. Will the Minister give a commitment that the Government will act properly and legislate to stop unjust pay increases for political representatives?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I thank the Deputy. The situation is as follows: there are no pay rises and no pay increases proposed for politicians. There have been no pay rises and no pay increases for politicians since 2008. What is happening in respect of Deputies is a restoration of some of the pay that was cut from their salaries as a consequence of the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act. With respect to Ministers, pay was cut by 35%. We will not be accepting any restoration. The Taoiseach's pay was cut by 40% and he will not be accepting any restoration. The pay of Ministers of State was cut by 25% and they will not be accepting any restoration. Therefore, the Deputy does not need to include any provisions in this regard in her Bill. We will not be accepting any restoration because we earn more than €100,000 and have special responsibilities as officeholders to hold the line when it comes to public sector pay across the board.

For Deputies, the situation is slightly different. The pay of Deputies is, as it should be, linked to that of other people in the civil and public service, specifically to the rank of principal officer. Deputies should not decide their own pay. A link was established between the pay of Deputies and that of principal officers some years ago and it should remain. We do not want to go back to what Deputy McDonald wants, namely, a situation where politicians decide what they are paid. The link between the pay of Deputies and principal officers will remain and if pay is restored for other public and civil servants in line with the Lansdowne Road agreement or any agreement that may replace it, it will apply accordingly.

It is interesting to hear Deputy McDonald attempting to lecture me about what I am saying to pensioners and social welfare recipients in this jurisdiction. Sinn Féin is in office in Northern Ireland, where it tells pensioners, people who are unemployed, carers and people with disabilities they are worth less than £100 per week. The Deputy's party tells lone parents in the North whose youngest child is six years of age that they should not be treated any differently from other lone parents. Do not pretend to me, Deputy McDonald, that somehow your party is not in charge of that. Remember what you did because you were not willing to make decisions around welfare in Northern Ireland.

(Interruptions).

Deputy John Deasy: Hush now.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: This always happens with Sinn Féin when it does not want to hear the truth.

An Ceann Comhairle: It would be helpful if the Minister would address his remarks through the Chair rather than to the Deputy. I ask Members to have a little respect and allow the Minister to respond.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: This always happens because Sinn Féin does not want to hear the facts. We all know what happened in Northern Ireland where the party's representatives voted to transfer the powers relating to welfare back to London in order to avoid making decisions. They then tried to claim they never had those powers. In fact, they did have those powers but they voted to transfer them back to London for a period of time so that the British Government could make decisions for them. That is what Sinn Féin means when it talks about republicanism and sovereignty. It is about making popular decisions when it suits and, when it does not, transferring the decisions to others.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister might raise his concerns regarding welfare re-

ipients in the North with the Tory Government. He might also raise the issue of partition. That would be a helpful thing if his concerns are genuine. I am fully conversant with the facts in this scenario. It is the Minister who turns his head away from the very simple fact that the proposed increases for Deputies, Ministers, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste simply cannot be justified. He reflected that fact in his answer when he clung to even the most implausible of explanations for those increases. We in this House earn more than €87,000. It is enough. I wonder whether tax-paying citizens reckon they are getting €87,000 worth of value out of everybody seated here? I wonder whether tax-paying citizens reckon they are getting €150,000 worth of value from every sitting Minister? That would be an interesting question to pose to the public.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I know, and the Minister should know that there is no public tolerance at this time, when a fiver is given to pensioners amidst great fanfare and €2.70 is afforded to young people out of work, for so-called political leaders having the brass iron neck to suggest our generous salaries and the Minister's generous salary should be hiked up again.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time has elapsed. I ask her to resume her seat and allow the Minister to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: If the Government is not prepared to legislate on this matter, will the Minister, his ministerial colleagues and others, including on the Fianna Fáil and Labour Party benches, support the Sinn Féin motion?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: If Sinn Féin gives us access to the Northern Bank account, we will.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputy McDonald and all other Deputies to adhere please to the ruling of the House that sets out particular times-----

Deputy Martin Ferris: I was watching the clock.

An Ceann Comhairle: That includes-----

Deputy Martin Ferris: I was watching the clock. The Fianna Fáil speakers went over time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, and I asked them to do likewise.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Deputy Ferris always had a keen eye.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will ask the Minister, likewise, to adhere to the rules.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Deputy always had a good aim. He always had a good sight line.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we have some order please to allow the Minister to respond?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Perhaps we should have a special new session where Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin can have questions among themselves and see how that dynamic plays out.

Deputy Robert Troy: That will happen after the next election.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Timmy Dooley: It might be handy to have a GP on the sideline.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I will, of course, pursue Deputy McDonald's suggestion of raising the issue of the paltry welfare payments paid to people in Northern Ireland with the Tory Government. I will also bring it up with the Minister of Finance in Northern Ireland, Mr. Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, who is a Sinn Féin Minister-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister, Deputy Varadkar, should look somewhere else.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Again, I am being interrupted mid-sentence because Sinn Féin is terrified of the facts and really hates the truth being spoken in this Chamber.

Deputy McDonald is correct in saying that she is paid €87,000 per year as are all of the other Teachtaí Dála who are on her party's benches now. However, they claim that they only draw the industrial wage. Perhaps Deputy McDonald will tell us how much they return to the State. Perhaps she will tell us why the exact salaries of special advisers in Northern Ireland are not published, even though those of their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland are published.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Perhaps she will tell us how much money Sinn Féin MPs, including some who are now Teachtaí Dála, claimed from the British Treasury for jobs they never did. Perhaps she will explain why they-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister is over time now. I call Deputy Michael Lowry on behalf of the Rural Independent Group. The Deputy has three minutes.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister has not answered my question.

Deputy Michael Lowry: Before raising some questions about Templemore Garda training college, I would like to commend the Government for prioritising Garda recruitment. Obviously, the accelerated and expanded recruitment campaign is very welcome from a national perspective and will help to address the deficit in Garda numbers.

The increased activity at the training college in Templemore will make an enormous contribution to the economic and social life of Templemore town and its community. This growth in college activity must be sustained into the long term. However, there are currently practical and logistical problems that need to be addressed. There is a need for more bedroom accommodation. Additional classroom space is required and parking around the college has become a nightmare for everyone, including those working in the college and locals living in the town. At present, there are 450 students at the college and another 200 students will start there on 20 November. From February to November of next year, 800 new recruits will attend the college. We now have serious accommodation and facilities problems at the college.

The Department of Justice and Equality is currently preparing a competitive tender for hotels to provide bedroom accommodation and classroom facilities. I am anxious to ensure that the competition will be run within the county of Tipperary and that no excuse will be made for moving some of that work to Dublin or elsewhere. I also want to raise the concerns of the catering and cleaning staff of the college, whom I met recently. They have a hugely increased workload, are completely understaffed and they feel that they are being treated very unfairly.

There is a great deal of discontent, which has led to a threatened strike because staff are so overburdened.

I would also ask the Minister to consider a more permanent accommodation solution. The Office of Public Works, OPW, against Garda advice, purchased 200 acres of land in Clonmore, which is about eight miles outside Templemore. This land was purchased at an outrageously high price. The OPW paid in the region of €5 million for it but it has become a green elephant. Nothing has happened there since it was purchased. There was a security patrol on it for years and now it is being leased as farm land. There was a grandiose pie-in-the-sky plan to relocate the driving school, the firing range and the Garda mounted unit to this land. It was never going to happen. It is not going to happen. I suggest that this land should be sold and that land available adjacent to the Garda College should be purchased to facilitate these plans. Will the Minister confirm that the multi-tiered block of office accommodation will go ahead? I understand that officials in the Department are attempting to invest €2 million in that. Will the Minister tell me what is the status of that project?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I thank Deputy Lowry for his acknowledgement of the reinvestment in the Garda that is occurring under the leadership of the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Fitzgerald. I will give some examples of that investment. We provided for 457 new vehicles in 2014 and 486 new vehicles in 2015. More than 500 new vehicles will come on stream this year, compared to just 50 new vehicles in 2010 when the party opposite was in power. We have provided an additional €205 million to equip gardaí with much-needed new technology and ICT equipment. The number of civilian staff will be increased to provide support services and thereby allow gardaí to concentrate on their front-line work. The aim is to increase the strength of the force to 15,000, with Garda Reserve and civilian staff being in addition to that. A big programme of investment in Garda stations is under way. Anyone who passes Kevin Street Garda station on his or her way home today can take a look at what is being done there.

On the specific question of the Garda College in Templemore, I assure Deputy Lowry that the Government is committed to the target, as set out in the programme for Government agreed by Fine Gael and the Independents, of increasing the strength of the force to 15,000 gardaí. The Government reopened the Garda College when it restarted Garda recruitment in 2014. The Tánaiste has secured funding for the recruitment of 800 gardaí in 2017. It is anticipated that this level of recruitment will continue until the strength of the force reaches 15,000 by 2021. A major OPW programme of works to improve the accommodation and blocks in the Garda College in Templemore is necessary and well advanced. Plans are being drawn up and the Minister is seeking funding from within her Vote to allow these works to proceed. It is also acknowledged that further work may be required to provide additional facilities. The Garda and the OPW are analysing the needs and precise requirements for the coming years. We are confident that we can meet our target of putting 800 recruits through the college next year without significant additional works. It is essential that we ensure An Garda Síochána has the capacity to train larger numbers without any diminution in the quality of its training programme, to provide appropriate supervision to support newly qualified gardaí and to ensure the victims of crime are well served.

Deputy Lowry will be aware of the crucial role the training college plays in the local community in Templemore. It is a significant source of employment in north Tipperary and the surrounding region. Templemore will be part of the significant investment programme that is under way in An Garda Síochána, as will funding for the new forensic science laboratory, which

is a very important facility. Budgetary increases have also been provided for regulatory bodies like the Charities Regulatory Authority and the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I welcome the Minister's comments. I ask the OPW to expedite the development programme. We need a tiered office block and training centre on the site in Templemore. The Minister told me recently that it is at an advanced stage and I welcome that.

I would like to bring to the attention of the Minister and the Department of Justice and Equality that a disagreement has arisen involving rent arrears at Templemore Golf Club. The golf club, which was founded in 1970 and is affiliated to the Golfing Union of Ireland, was controlled by the Garda authorities before it was handed over to the civilian membership by agreement. I am anxious to ensure the golf club, which has 300 members who value and appreciate the facility that is available to them, is retained. There are options to expand and develop the Garda training facilities at Templemore without encroaching on the golf club, which is used extensively by the local community. I would ask that the development programme would take account of that. In other words, it can happen without encroaching on the club.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy might invite the Minister to play a round.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I do not have any detail in front of me in relation to the golf club or the other site mentioned by the Deputy. I know this is a matter of great interest to him. This important national facility is located in his constituency. I think Templemore has served the Garda and the State extremely well over the years. I refer to the quality of the training that is provided at the college and the quality of the supports that are available in County Tipperary. I was speaking to the Tánaiste earlier this morning, and I know she is back later today. I will certainly bring Deputy Lowry's comments to her attention. I know she will be happy to engage directly with Deputy Lowry on the matter.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: This is a great opportunity to ask Deputy Varadkar a fundamental question. Where would he lead this country if he were Taoiseach? One aspect I wish to delve into is whether Deputy Varadkar is more Berlin or Boston in his attitude and thinking. A key example is where Deputy Varadkar lies on the issue of how we care for caring in this country.

We know now that Fine Gael does not want parents to care for their children in the home. We know this through the introduction of certain measures, including the combination of tax individualisation and supports for alternative care, something we also support, but also by the discrimination or lack of any support for parents who raise children in the home. In this way, Fine Gael is steering us in a Boston direction with all the downsides that brings.

Deputy Varadkar seemed to make it clear at the weekend that any further supports for parents in the home is out, that any supports for parents who might use childminders - again, they would be working in the home - is out and that any supports for grandparents who do that valuable and most important work is out as well.

No doubt, Deputy Varadkar will come back to us and say that the Government has just put in a paternity leave and benefit Bill. I very much welcome the fact that we now get two weeks parental benefit compared with getting nothing in the past. As part of this fundamental question of whether we go in the direction of Berlin or Boston, I wish to cite the fact that in Germany, as in 30 other European countries, people have potential access to up to three years of parental leave for either the father or mother. The Government maintains we are going all Scandinavian in the measures it is introducing, but I will outline the reality of what the Scandinavians

do. In Norway, they provide paid parental benefit of up to 59 weeks. In Sweden they provide this leave for 480 days and have certain provisions to ensure the father takes up the leave. In Denmark, they take 52 weeks of parental leave. In case Deputy Varadkar makes the point that we have child benefit, those countries also have child benefit at €50 higher than our level. We are creating a system that amounts to going down the American corporation route to running our country. Would Deputy Varadkar have anything more to offer if he were leading Fine Gael in government, or is that it?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: In fairness their next leader could be Deputy Paschal Donohoe.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Has Fine Gael locked us into a system that discriminates against parents in the home through our tax system and the provisions we have made? Does the Government have any plans for further improving parental leave or other measures that could help all parents equally and in such a way that the State does not determine or decide how people raise their children? Are these Government plans in the interests of the corporation rather than the interests of the children? That is what Fine Gael is doing at present.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Ryan. I do not think that we can focus on the leadership of any particular party, but certainly the child care issue is critical.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We can hear from Deputy Coveney next week and the Tánaiste the week after.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Varadkar, on the child care issue, please.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I am happy to talk about the issues. I think that distinction was created by Mary Harney, someone I admire very much individually and as a politician. I have always taken the view that the attempt to create a distinction between a vision of Boston on the one hand and Berlin on the other to be somewhat bogus and a little outdated. It is somewhat outdated in many ways that the Green Party is still thinking in that way. There is a serious difference between a Christian Democrat Berlin and a Social Democrat Berlin, just as there can be a major difference between a Boston run by Republicans and a Boston run by Democrats.

I am unsure whether Deputy Ryan knows much about American companies, but I had the pleasure to visit Facebook recently, which is an American company that provides four months paid paternal leave to all employees. That is quite extraordinary and is very much to be welcomed. This is an American company that no doubt Deputy Ryan would like to characterise as something rather different.

Our view, as a Government, now and for the future, is that it is the role of Government to support families and to enable them, as much as possible, to make the best choices for themselves, their families and their children. How do we make that real? What policy decisions have we taken to show we are serious about that? First, we have introduced the second year of free preschool. That saves parents, on average, €4,000 per child per year. As Deputy Ryan acknowledged, we have introduced paid paternity leave and paternity benefit for the first time. That started in September and the uptake from those measures has been rather encouraging. I will be publishing those statistics soon. It is our intention to extend that and provide an additional two weeks of parental leave which can be shared by either parent. That requires legislation and funding but we have made a commitment to do that. We have also brought in free general practitioner care for children younger than six years and we intend to extend that to all children younger than 18. In the budget one of the increases that perhaps went unnoticed was

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an increase in maternity benefit and paternity benefit. As the Deputy is aware, we are going to bring in a radical and new programme to subsidise the cost of child care, for all parents, for young children and for parents, subject to a means test, of older children.

We have also increased the home carer's tax credit which was not acknowledged by Deputy Ryan. There is a tax credit for home caring parents worth €1,000 a year which allows income up to €5,000 to be sheltered from any taxation. That was increased by €100 or 10% in the budget and that increase takes effect in January, long before the child care measures in September. We are supporting the home caring parents first, before the child care measure comes in. As the Minister for Finance has indicated it is our view that in the coming years, and I am sure this would be true for anybody in Fine Gael, should the economy allow it, we would continue to increase the home care tax credit to recognise the value of parenting at home and we will continue to expand the child care subsidies to support families to make the decision to go for one or two incomes should they choose to do so.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There is a difference between Boston and Berlin so it is perfectly valid to use that in a question because in Boston, as in the rest of the United States, there is no statutory right to leave to help parents, whereas there is in Germany and Scandinavian countries. The Minister gave me no answer as to what fundamentally he would do differently. He seems to agree with the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Zappone, about the measures the Government has announced, which absolutely discriminate at scale against parents who decide that their best approach, whatever way, is to raise children at home. Fine Gael seems to have nothing for that. It gave a €100 increase in the tax credit. The total value of that is approximately €7 million as set out in the budget. The Government has given four times as much for sheep welfare as for the welfare of those parents raising children at home. That speaks about where the Minister stands. I hear the Minister promise possible increases in that tax credit. I would like to see the provisions that are given to one parent given to all. Let us treat parents equally, as they do in Scandinavia. The Minister is not going in that direction, he is going in the Boston direction. That is a mistake and it is wrong. I would oppose the Minister's leadership of Fine Gael if that is the direction he wants to go in. I would be interested in what the people behind him think.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Is there going to be a vote?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: How will they vote?

Deputy Robert Troy: Is Deputy Ryan a member of two parties?

Deputy Dara Calleary: What about Frances?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I hate to disappoint Deputy Ryan but he would need to be a member of Fine Gael in good standing for at least two years before he had an opportunity to vote on that question.

An Ceann Comhairle: He does not appear to be contemplating it.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I would buy Deputy Ryan a pizza if he were.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: He is doing a head count.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: It could well be two years or more so perhaps he will have the opportunity to join up. I understand the Minister, Deputy Zappone, is from neither Boston nor

Berlin but from Seattle. Leaving that aside, I have a radical suggestion for Deputy Ryan, rather than try to ape systems in other countries, whether Boston, Berlin or the Nordic countries, we should strive to take the best from Boston, Berlin and the Nordic countries and maybe even the best from Singapore and other places around the world-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The idea for Seanad abolition came from Singapore.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: -----and design a vision for Ireland that suits our culture and aspirations. The aspiration of this Government is to support families by doing the things I have mentioned already, expanding maternity, paternity and parental leave-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Not for all families.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: -----by reducing the cost of health care and education for children and supporting stay at home parents through the home care tax credit, child benefit and subsidising child care. We do not want to force Irish people and families to make a choice between Boston and Berlin, we want to build the best model for everyone.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: That was a reasonably good audition.

Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Robert Troy: In the budget there is a 10% increase allocated to fixing the roads while the overall budget to local authorities was decreased by 7%. There is a commitment in the programme for Government for this Government to restore fully the local improvement scheme. That was a very beneficial scheme in terms of supporting the upgrade and repair of non-local authority roads across rural Ireland. Can the Minister confirm to the House today that this scheme is to be introduced, when that will happen and if there will be a specific allocation to each local authority to administer the scheme?

Minister for Social Protection(Deputy Leo Varadkar): I will have to ask the Minister, Deputy Ross, to answer that question in detail for the Deputy.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: He would not know.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: As the Deputy said, there is a commitment in the programme for Government to reintroduce it, so it will be reintroduced, but I cannot tell the Deputy the exact timeframe. During my time in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport we allowed local authorities to decide from their discretionary grant and discretionary budget whether they wanted a local improvement scheme.

Deputy Robert Troy: Could the budget not help to do that?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: In many ways, that made sense because some local authorities want to prioritise roads that are not taken in charge and others do not. Any commitment in the programme for Government will be honoured, but the exact timeline would be a matter for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to communicate directly with the Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I ask about the help to buy scheme, which is part of the finance Bill to be published today. The scheme, which will provide a rebate of income tax over the four previous years up to 5% of the purchase price of new build homes, is a deeply flawed

and dangerous scheme. Before the Government pressed ahead with the launch of this scheme last week, the overwhelming majority of expert opinion told them it would not work and would make the housing situation worse. The reports on its impact on property prices since then confirm that and bear out that expert view. The asking price for new build homes is reported to have significantly increased in various parts of the State, effectively wiping out any potential benefit for the help to buy scheme. The reported changes to the scheme on foot of the Central Bank concerns do not make the scheme any more workable. Fianna Fáil's proposal to include second homes goes against the thrust of the scheme, which we were told was to drive up the supply of affordable first-time homes. This was a very bad proposal to begin with. It will not help first-time buyers. It will not increase the availability of new build homes, and it will add to the crisis in housing for which this Government is responsible. Will the Government do the sensible thing, even at this stage, and scrap this scheme?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I am delighted to hear that Deputy McDonald is interested in expert opinions and I hope she will seek an expert opinion on her own party's tax policies. She might ask the experts about the impact on our health service and our financial services of a major hike in income taxes on consultants and IT specialists-----

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Minister has not read the document.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: -----or, similarly, on the prospects of multinational investment in Ireland. I challenge her to seek an expert opinion on that and perhaps to publish it.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It is there in black and white.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: On the question the Deputy asked, the purpose of the help to buy programme is twofold: first, to help first-time buyers and to give them an edge over others who are seeking to buy homes, particularly investors who are looking to rent properties - even if prices rise, this still gives them an edge; and, second, but importantly, to incentivise builders to increase supply to build more homes, and particularly homes that are affordable for first-time buyers that cost €400,000 or less. The details are in the finance Bill, which will be published today, and I hope Sinn Féin will reconsider its position, support it and show that it supports first-time buyers.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: As the Minister for Social Protection is taking Leaders' Questions today, I ask about the Social Welfare Bill. Have the discussions concluded and can he tell the House now, and the people who are dependent on social welfare benefits, when the social welfare increases announced on budget day will take effect next year? Can he also indicate whether they will all take place on the same day in March or are there to be staggered dates on which different recipients are to receive the increases?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: All social welfare increases announced in the budget occur in March, although some will occur in January because I will be able to implement them by order. The exact date will be in the social welfare Bill, which goes to Cabinet on Tuesday and will be published either next Friday or the week after, so people will have plenty of notice as to when the increases will come into effect. I am currently working with my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to profile spending in such a way that allows us make those payments as early in March as is possible, ideally on the same day for everyone. The work is not yet concluded, however, and as no decisions have yet been made by Government, I cannot give the Deputy a precise answer. I can give a precise answer to the question on

the Christmas bonus, however. It will be paid in the week starting on 28 November running to 2 December. Some 1.2 million people will benefit from it, including 600,000 pensioners and 600,000 other welfare recipients, including people with disability, carers, jobseekers, lone parents and parents in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance. Payments will range from €20 to €387 and will result in an injection into the economy, in particular into the retail sector, of €225 million, which is €25 million more than last year.

Deputy Martin Kenny: There is a clear commitment in the programme for Government to support our tourism industry, in particular, the development of the angling sector. Earlier in the summer there was a proposal from Inland Fisheries Ireland to shut a number of the hatcheries which produce the small fry which angling clubs and fishing associations use. It has been seen as a very retrograde step and a review was sought to consider whether the decision could be reversed. Has the review concluded? Is the Government prepared to invest in those hatcheries in order that this vital service will be maintained?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I ask the Minister responsible to take that question.

Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Seán Kyne): I confirm that the board of Inland Fisheries Ireland made a decision to postpone indefinitely the decision to close the hatcheries at Cullion in Mullingar and in Roscrea while it examines the future plans for them. I dealt with a Commencement Matter on this topic in the Seanad this morning, raised by Senator Robbie Gallagher, in which I said we would examine the plans when they come before us. There may be issues relating to planning permission and the board has to decide its future investment plans for the sites in question or for new sites, as the case may be.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: In the context of the Government's plans to bring forward the education (parent and student charter) Bill, will the Minister confirm what plans it has to deal with the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland, ASTI, strikes in the coming weeks to prevent schools closing? Is the Government seriously intending to employ parents to supervise in schools when teachers are taking industrial action? Will the Minister give an assurance to parents that schools will remain open and that children will not be subject to the stress that the strikes will otherwise cause?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: The Government's plan is to prevent strike action taking place, if at all possible, and discussions took place in the Department of Education and Skills yesterday involving departmental officials and representatives of the ASTI. We want to come to an agreement to ensure there is no disruption to the provision of children's education and that parents are not inconvenienced by taking their children out of school.

We will do everything we can to avoid strike action taking place, but any agreement with the ASTI has to be reached within the confines of the Lansdowne Road agreement. We have agreements with the majority of teachers' unions, the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO, and the Teachers Union of Ireland, TUI, representing the vast majority of teachers, and that has allowed for a very significant uplift in pay for new entrant teachers, ranging from 15% to 21%. This demonstrates that the Lansdowne Road agreement is the best way to achieve public pay restoration in an affordable and sustainable way and is the best mechanism within which individual concerns in particular groups can be dealt. We have to stand by that agreement and we will.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Given the findings this morning that only 119 childminders are registered on the Tusla system, what measures will the Government put in place to support childminding? Has it met Childminding Ireland? What will happen if childminders come on board as regards Garda vetting, given the backlog there is at present?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Officials from my Department have met representatives of Childminding Ireland and will meet them again. There is time between now and September to legislate for the new programme and to put the necessary websites and administrative systems in place. It also gives us a window of opportunity to ensure more childminders can be registered with Tusla and that is certainly the objective of the Government. We need to ensure anyone who receives payment from the State through the new child care subsidy scheme is vetted and is registered with Tusla for the obvious reason that we cannot have the State paying child care supports to somebody who may not be safe to be with a child. That is a principle we cannot depart from because it does not just relate to reducing the cost of child care and early education for parents, it is also about ensuring that we have quality child care and quality early education for children. I know the Deputy will share that objective.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I want to ask the Minister about the commitment in the programme for Government to improve pensions. I refer specifically to those who are on partial pensions or reduced contributory pensions because they were outside the PRSI network, often caring for children or the elderly at home. What is the position or what plan has the Minister for correcting that imbalance? These people are falling behind every day because they took on the role of caring for their children or the elderly at home.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: The programme for Government contains a commitment to increase the State pension, both contributory and non-contributory, by more than the rate of inflation. We have done much more than that in this budget in view of the fact that inflation is minimal. No matter how modest the increase may be, it more than fulfils the commitment made in the programme for Government with regard to increasing pensions.

On the more substantive question the Deputy raises, as he will be aware, this is a complex area. My officials are now going through individual pension records of hundreds of thousands of people, trying to work out the impact of any change we might make because any change to the pension regime could result in significant costs for the Exchequer which we might not be able to bear, and also could create winners and losers. One needs to know, if one intends to make a change, how many winners and losers there will be and the extent to which they will either gain or lose. The move will be towards a total contributions approach. It will be not when one made contributions but how many one made. It will also have to take account of the fact that many, particular women, have to take time out of the workforce to look after children or relatives. We will need a major reform in this regard and a transition period, and new legislation, and that is unlikely to happen in the coming year.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: In the context of the long-overdue and welcome changes to the farm assist scheme in the budget, the disregard of 70% in respect of income and the child disregard are being restored. Will the Minister indicate how this will be done? Will a desktop exercise be conducted in respect of all existing farm assist recipients to ensure that they can benefit from those disregards immediately or will they be forced to wait until their next review before they can do so? As the Minister will be aware, the relevant cuts caused much hardship to many farmers and farm families across the country. There are almost 10,000 individuals involved. It is crucial that this be applied to them and that they are not forced to wait.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: The social welfare Bill will be published either on Friday of next week or the week after that and all the relevant details will be contained therein. We will totally reverse the cuts made to farm assist by the previous Government - of which I was a member - for the obvious reason that farm incomes are down. We want to be able to support farm families who are on the margins and also give other farmers the reassurance that should they fall on hard times, there is a stronger safety net to pick them up.

It is intended that the normal procedures will remain in place and that somebody's circumstances will be reviewed as part of his or her annual review. However, we will allow farmers to request an early annual review should they have a particular change in circumstances. That option will be available.

Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Government Chief Whip and Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach, Deputy Regina Doherty, to make proposals regarding the arrangements for statements on Syria this afternoon.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Regina Doherty): It is proposed, notwithstanding the order of the Dáil of 18 October 2016, that the Dáil shall sit later than 5.48 p.m. and shall adjourn on the conclusion of No. 18a, statements on the conflict in Syria, with particular reference to the ongoing crisis in Aleppo, which shall be taken immediately following Topical Issues, and to which the following arrangements shall apply: the statements shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after two hours and five minutes; and the statements of a Minister or Minister of State and of the main spokespersons for the parties or groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed 15 minutes in each case, Members may share time and a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed five minutes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

An Bille um an gCúigiú Leasú is Tríocha ar an mBunreacht (Neodracht) 2016: An Chéad Chéim

Thirty-Fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Neutrality) Bill 2016: First Stage

An Ceann Comhairle: Táimid ag dul ar aghaidh go dtí an Bille um an gCúigiú Leasú is Tríocha ar an mBunreacht (Neodracht) 2016. Glaoim ar an Teachta Aengus Ó Snodaigh chun cead a lorg an Bille a chur i láthair.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tairgim:

Go gceadófar go dtabharfar isteach Bille dá ngairtear Acht chun an Bunreacht a leasú.

I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Constitution.

Lorgáim an cead sin.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach(Deputy Regina Doherty): No.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Snodaigh might give us an outline of the Bill.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá mé ag iarraidh an Bille seo a chur faoi bhráid na Dála. Táimse agus an Teachta Seán Crowe ag iarraidh déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil neodracht na hÉireann iniata sa Bhunreacht sa chaoi is nach bhfuil aon dabht dlíthiúil ann maidir le stádas na tíre seo nó maidir leis an míleatú leanúnach atá ag tarlú san Aontas Eorpach le tacaíocht ó urlabhraithe sa tír seo agus leantóirí eile.

This Bill we are seeking to introduce is to enhance Irish neutrality, ensuring that the State would strictly adhere to a policy of non-membership of military alliances, including the likes of the Partnership for Peace and the EU battle groups. It will empower Irish citizens by giving them the opportunity to reaffirm the State's neutrality in a referendum at a time of increased EU military expansionism. We urge all Members to support this Bill and move away from implementing the policies that for years have eroded the State's neutrality and have allowed foreign military to use and exploit Shannon Airport, in particular, as a stopover to and from conflict zones in contravention to our supposed neutral status.

This legislation seeks to put a proposition to the people that they vote in a referendum to greatly strengthen Ireland's status as a neutral country by amending the Constitution to ensure the State would be prevented from aiding any foreign powers in preparation for a war unless it had the assent of the Dáil.

This is an opportunity and we should allow the people to have their say on this issue. I hope the parties in this House will assent to this legislation when it comes before them on Second, Committee and Report Stages and allow the people have their full say in this matter.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to move that Second Stage be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: An Teachta Crowe wishes to speak.

An Ceann Comhairle: Gabh mo leithscéal.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Déarfaidh mé cúpla focal. Táim an-sásta, i dteannta le mo chomrádaí, an Teachta Aengus Ó Snodaigh, an Bille seo a chur os comhair na Dála.

As Deputy Ó Snodaigh said, this Bill is similar to the one I introduced in the Thirty-first Dáil in that it seeks to amend the Constitution to ensure Ireland will not and could not aid foreign powers in any way in preparation for a war save with the full assent of the Dáil. The Bill also affirms that Ireland is a neutral State and that the State would have a policy of non-membership of military alliances. The continued use of Shannon Airport for foreign military to facilitate their ongoing wars, coupled with the increased militarisation of EU and this State's deeper integration into the EU's military system, the so-called battle groups, the European Defence Agency and Partnership for Peace, which is a misnomer, ensures the Bill is timely in its inception. I urge the Government, all parties and individuals in the Dáil to support this Bill when it comes before us for debate and to stop the decline and the undermining of Irish neutrality.

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Seán Crowe: Tairgim: "Go dtógfar an Bille in am Comhaltaí Príobháideacha."

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

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

Funding for Education: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Joan Burton on Tuesday, 18 October 2016:

"That Dáil Éireann:

welcomes:

— the allocation of sufficient resources to meet demographic growth in our school system, including the allocation of additional special needs assistants and resource teachers;

— the funding of agreements reached with trade unions regarding pay levels for new entrant teachers, and full resourcing of the reform of the junior cycle; and

— the commitment contained in the programme for Government to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools;

notes:

— the failure to take any action in budget 2017 to continue the reduction in primary school class sizes that began in budget 2016;

— the lack of any measures in budget 2017 to begin reducing school costs for parents and, in particular, the absence of any improvement to school funding, which the Department of Education and Skills has described as 'a critical issue';

— that official costings provided in advance of budget 2017 estimate the cost of maintaining existing levels of funding per student in third level at €21 million in 2017; that the Department of Education and Skills has identified a requirement of at least €10 million each year to fund the development of technological universities; and that the cost of increasing the number of apprentices in budget 2016 amounted to €10 million;

— that the funding of €35 million provided for investment in further and higher education in budget 2017 will not even cover the items listed above, let alone the determination of the Minister for Education and Skills to fund targeted initiatives to provide skills, additional research funding and to support disadvantaged students; and

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— that a minimal increase of 0.1% to the national training fund levy would have raised €67.1 million in 2017 which could have been used to fund such developments; and

calls on the Government to:

— immediately commit to a one-point reduction to the staffing schedule of primary schools which controls average class sizes for the coming school year;

— publish a roadmap to outline how we can reach an average class size of no more than 20 within the lifetime of this Government;

— commit to multi-annual increases to school capitation rates, sufficient to end the practice of requesting voluntary contributions from parents;

— provide the full €21 million funding required to meet demographic growth in third level, and to direct additional resources at improving the staff-student ratios in third level and reducing the student contribution; and

— guarantee the funding required to fully roll out all new apprenticeships which will provide a wider range of opportunities for young people and, in particular, young women.”

Debate resumed on amendment No. 4:

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

“welcomes:

- the commitments in the Programme for Government and in the Confidence and Supply Arrangement for a Fine Gael-led Government in the education area, including reducing class sizes, reintroducing guidance counselling for secondary schools and increasing financial supports for postgraduate students with particular focus on those from low income households;

- the commitments and allocations of resources in Budget 2017, including:

- an additional allocation of €458 million, a five per cent increase in 2017, resulting in an overall budget of €9.53 billion, the third highest in the history of the Department of Education and Skills;

- the recruitment of 2,400 additional teachers and 115 additional special needs assistants in 2017;

- the allocation of two thirds of the guidance resources that were previously cut, separately and transparently outside the quota on the staffing schedule;

- the reintroduction of the full maintenance grant from September 2017 for 1,100 postgraduate students from the lowest income category; and

- the allocation of an additional €36.5 million for higher education in 2017 as part of a broader multi-annual package; and

- the Government’s restatement of its commitment to delivering on all the elements of the Programme for Government and Confidence and Supply Arrangement for a Fine Gael-led Government in the education area over the lifetime of the Government.”

-(Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to amendment No. 4 to the motion regarding funding for education. On Tuesday, 18 October 2016, on the question that the amendment to the motion be agreed to, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 70(2) that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 55; Staon, 41; Níl, 47.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Stاون</i>	<i>Níl</i>
<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	<i>Adams, Gerry.</i>
<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>
<i>Breen, Pat.</i>	<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Burton, Joan.</i>
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Casey, Pat.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>
<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Chambers, Lisa.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>
<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Daly, Clare.</i>
<i>Deasy, John.</i>	<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>
<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Gallagher, Pat The Cope.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>
<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>
<i>Halligan, John.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>
<i>Harty, Michael.</i>	<i>Moynihán, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Moynihán, Michael.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>
<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>

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<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>O’Keeffe, Kevin.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>O’Loughlin, Fiona.</i>	<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>O’Rourke, Frank.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>
<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>
<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>		<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>		<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>
<i>Neville, Tom.</i>		<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>
<i>Noonan, Michael.</i>		<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>
<i>O’Connell, Kate.</i>		<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>
<i>O’Donovan, Patrick.</i>		<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>
<i>O’Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Rock, Noel.</i>		
<i>Ross, Shane.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		
<i>Zappone, Katherine.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Regina Doherty and Tony McLoughlin; Níl, Deputies Brendan Ryan and Joan Burton.

Amendment declared carried.

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 55; Staon, 42; Níl, 46.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Staon</i>	<i>Níl</i>
<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	<i>Aylward, Bobby.</i>	<i>Adams, Gerry.</i>
<i>Barrett, Seán.</i>	<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>
<i>Breen, Pat.</i>	<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Burton, Joan.</i>

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<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Casey, Pat.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>
<i>Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.</i>	<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Chambers, Lisa.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>
<i>D'Arcy, Michael.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Daly, Clare.</i>
<i>Deasy, John.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>
<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Ferris, Martin.</i>
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>
<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	<i>Gallagher, Pat The Cope.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Kelleher, Billy.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>
<i>Halligan, John.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>
<i>Harty, Michael.</i>	<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>	<i>Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.</i>
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>
<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>	<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Jonathan.</i>
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>
<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>	<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>	<i>O'Sullivan, Jan.</i>
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>	<i>O'Sullivan, Maureen.</i>
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>	<i>Penrose, Willie.</i>
<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>	<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>		<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>
<i>Neville, Tom.</i>		<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>
<i>Noonan, Michael.</i>		<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>
<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>		<i>Wallace, Mick.</i>
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		

20 October 2016

<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Rock, Noel.</i>		
<i>Ross, Shane.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		
<i>Zappone, Katherine.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Regina Doherty and Tony McLoughlin; Níl, Deputies Brendan Ryan and Joan Burton.

Question declared carried.

Financial Resolutions 2017

Financial Resolution No. 2: General (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following motion:

THAT it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in connection with finance.

- (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade).

Deputy James Lawless: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the budget, albeit a week after the budget was passed. I understand that in times gone by it was common for the budget debate to span many weeks. Perhaps the fizz has gone out of the bottle somewhat since the weeks before the budget have become the time for the primary debate rather than the weeks afterwards. There are few surprises on budget day that have not been flagged in advance and focus groups tested. Some items are withdrawn and added before and after the budget. This is the first budget adopted in what is termed a time of new politics. I welcome the new politics and I find it normal and democratic. The old days of winner takes all and an absolutist rule by a majority Government do not reflect a fair exercise of the mandate of 158 Deputies elected to the Chamber. Although the last Government had the biggest majority in the history of the State, few would suggest it was a good Government, as last February's election showed. For decades in the North of Ireland we saw how an inbuilt majority could scupper every piece of legislation from the other side of the House. In 40 years of Stormont, the only piece of Nationalist legislation to be passed was the Wild Birds Protection (Northern Ireland) Act 1931.

Minority governments are commonplace across Europe. Recently, I was privileged to visit the Danish Parliament with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment. The Danish Government serves with only one third of the seats in the Parliament. Our near neighbour, the National Assembly for Wales, also has a minority arrangement. Earlier this year, after our Government had been formed but before the Welsh Government had, it studied the confidence and supply arrangement which we have in place for guidance. I hope it was of some assistance. The Scottish and many other parliaments also have such arrangements. However, some Dáil Members struggle with our new arrangements. Some show withdrawal symptoms from the overly adversarial days of the past. Some seem to seek the Punch and Judy show and a binary arrangement in which one side must lose in order for the other side to win, including some in the media, some Deputies and some Ministers. I was struck, in particular, by the performance of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, last week when he devoted most of his allocated speaking time for his Department's brief to engage in scathing invective in respect of my party. His origins are in the Fine Gael Party and perhaps he has gone native or reverted to type with the increased zeal of the convert.

In any event, that episode and the new reality remind me of debates in the early days of democracy, with the gradual realisation that peace was preferable to war and pooling sovereignty delivered better results. Early political philosophers such as Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau rejected the idea that the state of nature is a state of war and moved on from that. They also noted that, in the absence of co-operation, life in the wild is not attractive. Life or, as in this case, ministerial careers or Government terms could, in the words of Locke, be "poor, nasty, brutish, and short". However, we have moved on.

Turning to the substance of the budget, just one and a half of the 12 minutes for which the Minister, Deputy Ross, spoke on the budget were devoted to his brief. The remainder of his contribution was partisan in nature. Perhaps that is because only three pages of the 207-page public expenditure document contain details on transport issues. The Minister had nothing about which to talk. In the three pages on transport, there are two sections on roads projects, although little detail is provided, and one short section on public transport, which principally consists of re-announcing pre-flagged Luas works that are already under way. Considering the importance of climate action to this House and the world in general and in view of the gridlock which sometimes surrounds this city and which is worsening as the economy - thankfully - begins a slow recovery, the paucity of any big picture, or even a small one, in respect of public transport planning in the budget is shocking.

The greater Dublin area strategy for the next 30 years was announced during the election interregnum but there is no hint of it within the budget. My constituency of Kildare North is the home of the commuter belt, with tens of thousands of people travelling daily from towns such as Sallins, Naas, Clane, Kilcock, Celbridge, Maynooth and Leixlip by multiple modes of transport. However, the infrastructure needed to support them, make their lives easier and commutes shorter and increase their quality of life and work options is not being provided. Where in this budget is there any provision for the interconnector rail tunnel, the much-needed metro, a new circle line, the next Luas extensions, the electrification of rail lines, the extension of quality bus corridors or incentives to promote cycling, pedestrianisation, connectivity and wider forms of sustainable transport? There is none. Despite the Minister sneering during last week's speech about the metro being on the way, it is not happening. If the Minister of State read the detail of the budget, he would see that not a single cent can be spent on the metro - not even on an investigation - in all of 2017. That is not to mention multiple road schemes - such

as the critical Sallins bypass, M7 widening in my constituency and many related projects - that are not flagged at all.

There are few new measures in the energy and environmental provisions. Some colleagues on the left have highlighted that there is no apparent money to wind down Irish Water. Apart from the never-ending debate on whether we should pay for water, is it not time for us to decide what to do with Irish Water? There needs to be a little imagination in this regard.

Energy in Ireland is lost wholesale as power plants, factories and many other heat sources literally pump power into nearby watercourses instead of usefully capturing it. So much heat is poured down the drain or pumped into the River Liffey, the temperature of which is 7o Celsius higher than it should be for a river of its size. There are more innovative solutions across Europe. For example, district heating captures excess heat and water and pumps them directly into households as a form of heating, comprising one third of the energy mix. These and many other innovative solutions could and should be explored instead of interminably debating costs and charging. Let us decide what we will do about this situation.

Turning to jobs and enterprise, the greatest challenge facing this island now and for the foreseeable future is Brexit. Many claims were made in advance about how the budget would be Brexit-proof and would contain many measures to address the situation. However, there are precious few. Brexit is the greatest challenge we face. In the coming 12 months, which will be the lifetime of this budget, many decisions will be made in British boardrooms and institutions on whether they will relocate or stay put. With a little bit of creativity, we could have had a Brexit package that included a number of measures to target and attract foreign direct investment to our shores, for example, a work visa programme, office space, fast-tracking inquiries of interest, share ownership packages for employees who were relocating, transport infrastructure and the well-rehearsed arguments on accommodation, energy and quality-of-life issues. Our personal taxation rate is comparable with the rest of Europe, if on the high side, but we do not enjoy the services that other countries do. As to capital gains tax for entrepreneurs, it is 10% under the €1 million threshold. This is welcome, but the UK's 10% threshold is £10 million. This makes it more difficult to relocate capital to Ireland.

Brexit offers opportunities but there has been a lack of imagination in that regard. The same can be said in terms of energy and climate action. I hope that these issues and those relating to transport will be addressed because they are critical.

Deputy Seán Haughey: In May, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael came to an agreement to enable the formation of a Fine Gael-led minority Government. As part of this arrangement, Fianna Fáil committed to facilitating the passage of three budgets, subject to progress being achieved on a number of our core policy priorities. In taking a responsible approach to government formation, Fianna Fáil, unlike many other political parties in the Dáil, has sought to ensure that the needs of the people who voted for us last February are reflected in the annual budget.

The budgets of the previous Fine Gael-Labour Government were repeatedly found by the ESRI to be regressive. A core objective of Fianna Fáil in entering into the current confidence-and-supply arrangement was to ensure that budgetary policy was reshaped in the direction of fairness. Under this agreement, we secured a commitment that available resources would be allocated on the basis of at least a 2-1 split in favour of public spending over tax cuts. This has been exceeded in budget 2017 with a 3-1 split between spending on services and investing in our citizens at every stage of the life cycle and reduced taxation.

Despite these improvements, this is not a Fianna Fáil budget and we did not get everything we wanted. However, we have secured a major departure from the policies of the previous Fine Gael-Labour Government and considerable progress on a number of our core policy objectives. The confidence and supply agreement has underpinned a shift in budgetary policy by moving away from a policy of tax cuts that result in the greatest gains going to the well-off in favour of a greater emphasis on investment in key public services, increases in social welfare payments and helping families with the cost of living.

Despite the relatively limited scope for increased public spending and reduced taxes, this budget will bring some relief to hard-pressed families. The reduction in the first three rates of USC by 0.5% is consistent with Fianna Fáil's pre-election commitment to reduce the burden of this tax on low and middle-income earners. This will ensure that working people will see some of the benefits of a growing economy reflected in a modest improvement in their disposable incomes.

Self-employed people often find themselves paying more in tax than a PAYE worker earning the same amount in income. The increase in the earned income tax credit for the self-employed to €950 represents an important move towards the eventual equalisation of the tax treatment of the self-employed with PAYE workers. It is to be hoped that further progress towards full equalisation will be realised in future budgets.

Securing greater investment in third level education was a key objective for Fianna Fáil in the budget negotiations. Therefore, we welcome the increase of €36.5 million in funding for higher education in 2017. However, the increased resources provided in the budget can only be seen as first step, particularly as many of those involved in the sector have stated that third level requires an additional €100 million per year in investment and in light of the long-term funding challenges set out in the recent Cassells report.

While the additional funding for social housing announced in the budget is to be welcomed, there is a need to develop a concrete strategy to underpin the significant and necessary expansion in social housing provision. There is a concern as to whether local authorities have the capacity to deliver on social housing targets. In light of the limited output on the part of local authorities in recent years, additional staffing and expertise may be required to drive the substantial increase in output.

The low level of investment in public transport is disappointing, especially in view of the increase in passenger numbers on bus, rail and Luas services owing to increasing numbers of people returning to employment as the economy continues to improve. My colleague, Deputy Lawless, referred to this matter. It is regrettable that budget 2017 does not provide any capital investment to progress key public transport projects such as metro north and the DART expansion programme. The level of investment in public transport in Dublin must be increased significantly, particularly when we consider that *per capita* spending on transport here is considerably below that enjoyed by London and Manchester, cities we compete with for foreign direct investment and jobs.

Fianna Fáil does not agree with every measure contained in the budget. Home ownership is an important objective of public policy. As such, we included in our election manifesto a proposal for a deposit saving scheme to assist first-time buyers to reach the deposit needed to purchase a home. Several experts have given their view that the first-time buyer's tax rebate announced in the budget will do little to stimulate the much-needed increase in supply but

will, instead, serve only to drive up house prices further. Given the uncertainty surrounding the impact of this measure, it is necessary to carry out an independent assessment of the likely implications of the tax rebate on the housing market. I understood a number of changes in the scheme have already been agreed for implementation in the Finance Bill.

The budget will see an increase of €5 per week in core welfare payments. Under the confidence and supply arrangement, Fianna Fáil secured agreement on increases to the State pension. We also welcome the increases in weekly welfare payments to carers, the disabled and the unemployed. Excluding the State pension, these represent the first increases in weekly welfare rates since 2009 and will go some way to ensuring the social welfare payments these groups depend on to maintain their income keep pace with the modest inflation that has occurred over the past seven years.

Deputy John Brassil: Will the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, confirm in his response whether the Finance Bill has already been published? A great amount of detail about it was given on “Morning Ireland” earlier, with reference in particular to changes to the housing tax relief scheme. I have been waiting three and a half days for an opportunity to speak in this House on the budget measures only to discover that the Bill to effect their implementation may already have been published. It would be the height of disrespect to Members to have measures finalised before the debate on them concludes. I notice, too, that if the Central Bank makes a recommendation, it will generally be taken on board, but not a blind bit of notice is taken of recommendations from Members.

Regarding the tax relief for first-time buyers, I am concerned that the provision whereby eligibility reverts back to the first mortgage drawdown will impact negatively on people who build their own homes. In other words, first-time buyers who are about to move into their self-build home having drawn down the last tranche of their mortgage will not qualify. That is unfair. The last drawdown should be the defining criterion according to which a first-time buyer qualifies or does not qualify for the scheme. As it stands, the provision reverts back to July of this year. I hope that will be changed so that anybody who has a last drawdown after July will qualify. In the case of self-builds, it is only when the last mortgage drawdown is complete that people can move into their home. I will be pushing for that change and have already spoken to my party’s finance spokesman, Deputy Michael McGrath, about it.

I welcome the modest increases in welfare payments provided for in the budget. However, there is a real sense that the disability sector has been let down by budget 2017. It should be a priority in future budgets that the sector receives special treatment. We have a Minister of State with a specific interest in disabilities and I hope that is reflected in future provision. The measures to assist the sector are welcome but underwhelming.

My colleague mentioned funding for roads, which is under the remit of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross. Together with several colleagues, I recently brought forward a Topical Issue matter requesting that funding for local improvement schemes be recommenced in 2017. The Minister stated clearly in his reply that this would be done. I hope that promise will be adhered to because it is very important for those of us living in rural areas.

In regard to the rent allowance, I have brought to the attention of the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Leo Varadkar, and the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Simon Coveney, that the increases in Kerry were in the region of

5% while the increases in other counties were upwards of 15% to 20%. I compared Kerry and Galway as being two very similar counties in terms of population, size, tourism and so on. The *daft.ie* report for the first quarter of 2016 gives the average rent in Kerry as €623, with a corresponding figure for Galway of €618. However, the rent allowance increases in Galway were substantially greater. When I checked last Friday on *daft.ie*, six properties were available in Tralee, a town facilitating 30,000 people, all of which were outside the rent allowance boundaries. Something must be done to address this problem. Will the Minister of State instruct his officials to ring the relevant social welfare officers in Kerry to ask how they are dealing with the rent allowance crisis there? People cannot find a suitable qualifying property and the situation is getting worse week after week. Nobody seems to be listening to us.

I hope somebody in Government will take on board the points I have raised today. I hope, too, that the legislation is not already published, because that would mean my proposals have no chance of being taken on board.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies Charlie McConalogue and Lisa Chambers will share time.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I welcome the opportunity to discuss this financial resolution. As my colleagues noted, Fianna Fáil has taken a very responsible approach in recent months, taking into account the challenges facing the country and the need for stable Government. We are aware, too, of what the alternatives to such an approach might be when we see what has happened in Spain, which still does not have a government despite the major challenges facing that country. We were keen to be in government following the election and fought hard for that outcome. Having accepted that we did not have the required support, we decided to seek to offer the most effective Opposition there has been in this House in the context of the unique circumstances that presented after the election.

We have taken the same approach to the budget, our concern being to ensure it was framed in a way that was significantly different from what was rejected by the public in the election and from the approach taken by the previous Government. Although that Administration had a difficult job to do in hard times, in carrying out that responsibility it placed the burden and pressure on the people who could least afford it. Our approach is very different from that of other parties and Independent Members on the Opposition benches. Despite having huffed and puffed for five years in the previous Dáil and having put themselves before the people and sought a mandate for their platform, when the opportunity arose to form a new Government, they headed for the hills and were nowhere to be found for several weeks or even months. Anytime they were found, their sole contribution was to peep up and canvass for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to go into government, neglecting the platform and the canvass they had undertaken in the election campaign. A very dim view has been taken by many people who voted for them in terms of the value of the vote that they cast. Some members of the public will simply cast an opposition vote. I remember canvassing a person during the general election and fighting hard for his vote. He told me that he would not be able to vote for me on that occasion, despite the fact that he wanted to give me a number two. He said he was voting for another party but that he would never want that party to be in government. He said that its members were great at opposition and at shouting, so he was going to vote for them. He liked the way they shouted but he was not voting for them to go into government. Maybe they were true to that particular person's vote but that was the exception. People who actually voted for one party or another, or for an Independent, ultimately wanted to see the mandate they were giving to that person implemented in government. That is the approach that my party took. That is also the approach that the public

wanted my party to take, as well as other parties who failed to live up their responsibilities and who continue to huff and puff now. They failed and showed their true colours because when they got the opportunity to take on responsibility, they would not do so.

Regarding the influence Fianna Fáil has brought to bear on this budget, the ESRI has shown that this is the first budget in the past five or six years which is progressive in nature and which gives the small benefits of the improving economy to those who most need them. That is the direction that has been taken although I would have a number of problems with many measures in the budget. Certainly, in terms of the steer of the budget, it is important that it is going in that direction. In several previous budgets under the last Government, the ratio of expenditure increases to tax reductions was 50:50. Indeed, in the first year that there was a little money available to spend, we saw the top rate of tax being reduced by 1%. That happened three budgets ago while at the same time there was massive pressure on our public services. In this particular budget, the expenditure to taxation ratio was 3:1. Furthermore, the tax measures are targeted at those who are most under pressure. The general thrust of this budget is a welcome departure and is starting to reflect the views of the public. Fianna Fáil is making every effort to exert whatever pressure it can to ensure that the fairness in public services that we seek to achieve is reflected in public policy, albeit from the Opposition benches.

As my party's spokesperson on agriculture, I wish to refer to a number of measures in the budget relevant to farming. There are some welcome measures in the budget, particularly the €25 million fund for a new sheep scheme. There has also been a welcome increase in the funding for the rural development programme, RDP. However, it must be pointed out that the form and record of the Government on the beef data and genomics programme, BDGP and the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, under the RDP, is not good. In both cases, we have seen an underspend over the past two years, which were the first two years of the reformed CAP programme. The upshot is that farmers have been missing out on much needed income. The uptake of those schemes was less than what was expected because the schemes were closed prematurely and there was also a delay in commencing them. Fianna Fáil will be pushing in every way possible to ensure that the RDP allocation is spent in full. We will also work to ensure that the aforementioned schemes are reopened and brought up to capacity. In respect of the BDGP in particular, we will seek to ensure, in the context of the underspend from the first two years, that a payment of €200 per cow is made to support our suckler herd, if at all possible. That is our objective in terms of the RDP underspend and the BDGP.

The loan fund is a new departure which will be welcomed by some. It is certainly something which, at EU Commission level, will be seen as a financial instrument that is available to farmers to deal with income volatility. However, it is crucial to ensure that it does not draw from single farm payments or from payments to the various agricultural schemes. While the loan facility is something that farmers will certainly avail of, particularly those who are under financial pressure, there must be a separate scheme or payment for the tillage industry. The Government has indicated in recent days that the loan fund should be the preferred avenue for providing support to tillage farmers, even those who have actually lost their crop this year. I would draw a very strong distinction between those farmers who have actually harvested their crops, although they are under pressure for the fourth year in a row, and those farmers who have not been able to harvest their crop. The former need our support but the latter are in a crisis situation. They have not gone away. They are still out there, dealing with the after effects of the very bad weather this year. They have either not harvested at all or if they have done so in the past few weeks, they have harvested a crop that is worthless. They do not have the cash flow or

income to be able to meet their outgoings. This is not confined to specific parts of the country and affects only a minority of tillage farmers, but for them it is a crisis. If they are to be able to continue in the sector, the Government must provide an emergency or crisis fund to support them and to acknowledge the tremendous difficulty they find themselves in.

I wish to touch on the issue of the challenges facing the mushroom sector. The Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine met the EU Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mr. Phil Hogan, this morning. My party spokesperson on horticulture and food, Deputy Jackie Cahill, raised the matter of the mushroom sector with the Commissioner. As a party, Fianna Fáil will continue to push this issue. The particular and very immediate pressure on the mushroom sector demands a response from Government to ensure that the sector can survive and pick up again. There is a good future for the mushroom industry in the longer term but it is under very significant pressure at the moment.

There are several other issues on which I look forward to achieving progress and following up.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: I welcome this opportunity to contribute to the debate on budget 2017. There is no doubt that the budget was a test for the minority Government. It was a hurdle that had to be overcome but many in the media and the public generally thought that the Government would fall at this particular hurdle. I very much welcome the fact that we have come through this budget intact. It was an important point in terms of ensuring the stability of our Parliament, making sure that our country continues to be run properly and efficiently and that Parliament continues *in situ*. It also marks an important turning point in terms of how we conduct the budgetary process.

We will look back on this particular budget in years to come as a point in history when we really changed how we did our business and when things were done very differently in terms of how we put our budgets together. It is a huge privilege to have played a role in that, to have been here for that budget process and to see it completed. It will be fully completed in the next few weeks. In terms of the budget process in question, I sat on the new Committee on Budgetary Oversight, the first of its kind in this country. That committee allowed for cross-party influence and participation in the budget process, which is not the norm and which had never been done before. The idea behind that was to take away the big-bang effect of budget day and to ensure that there would be no surprises.

2 o'clock

It was intended that when all parties came into the Chamber on the day of the budget announcement, they would have made an input into the budgetary process and would know what was contained in the budget for the coming year. It was intended that the public would be aware as well. The thinking behind this process was that it would give parliamentarians from across the board an opportunity to analyse the budget, to contribute to it and to critique it properly, rather than being landed on budget day with new measures they had no sight or sound of in advance. I think this is a welcome and positive transformation in the budget process. Although the amount of time available to the Select Committee on Arrangements for Budgetary Scrutiny was quite truncated this year, we had an opportunity to hear from the Minister and from many stakeholders and organisations that assist the Department of Finance in its deliberations. It was hugely helpful for the committee to have informative debates and discussions with the Economic and Social Research Institute, the Nevin Economic Research Institute, the Department of

Finance and the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Noonan. One of the things I have taken from the process is the respect that was evident across the committee room for the differing views of Deputies from all parties and none. It was okay to have differing views on the matters being discussed. All views were taken on board and given due credit and credence. I think that marks a huge and positive change in how we conduct our business.

It is generally accepted by the public and in this House that the mark of Fianna Fáil can be seen on the budget and that the party's input is evident in the outcome of the budget. During the general election campaign earlier this year, we advocated very strongly for increased investment in public services to be prioritised over tax cuts at all times. We carried that perspective into the negotiations on our confidence and supply agreement with Fine Gael. It was at the heart of the interactions between Deputies Calleary and Michael McGrath and Deputies from the other side of the House during the budget negotiations. The outcome of that process can be seen in this budget. We pushed for a 2:1 split between expenditure increases and tax cuts, but we achieved a 3:1 split. That shows we have listened to the views of the public in this regard. The public did not want cuts in taxation to be imposed left, right and centre at the expense of good public services. They wanted the wriggle room that is available in the public finances for 2017 to be used to prioritise investment in public services that have been decimated in recent years. I am glad the budget reflects the will of the people, and the majority of Members of this House, in this respect. The Fianna Fáil Party is proud to have played an instrumental role in ensuring the achievement of a 3:1 split.

After the budget has been announced, we normally wait to see what the ESRI has to say about it as an independent body that analyses the effects of budgets on citizens. Although the increase in household spending power as a result of this budget will be modest and minimal, I am pleased that for the first time in many years, the benefits of a budget in terms of increased spending power will be felt by the lowest income earners, first and foremost. I think that represents a marked change on the past five or six budgets. It is extremely positive that this change has come about. I believe it can be attributed to the involvement of the Fianna Fáil Party in the budgetary process.

It was important to address a number of key issues in this budget. It was clear that we had to do something to help people to access affordable child care of an appropriate quality. I commend the Minister, Deputy Zappone, on the work she has done in this regard. I would also like to mention the contribution of my party's spokesperson on children and youth affairs, Deputy Anne Rabbitte, in this area. The child care measures in this budget amount to a start, but they do not address all of our concerns. This budget was never going to address all of our child care concerns, but it is a positive step. I welcome the Government's decision to invest money in allowing families to access affordable child care of a certain quality. We have a long way to go in that regard.

I welcome with caution the first-time buyers initiative. It has become increasingly difficult for people in my peer group in their 30s and 40s to buy their first family homes. The feeling among many such people is that buying a house is now out of their reach. They are concerned that they may never aspire to own their own homes. I am glad to see that this issue is on the minds of the Members of Dáil Éireann because it needs to be addressed so that the pressure on prospective house buyers can be alleviated. Having said that, I share some of the concerns about the incentive scheme that is being introduced. It seems to have already started to increase the price of new-build houses. It is clear that developers are aware that people are going to get tax rebates when they purchase new houses and are accordingly adding sums of money to their

prices. We really need to have a look at this scheme. We should be open to reassessing it on an annual basis to ensure it continues to be fit for purpose. We should be willing to give it a chance and see whether it works and it does what we hope it will do.

It is important to remember that this was a modest budget. It was not a giveaway budget or a budget to fix all problems. When we speak in here or among the public, we should not be lauding ourselves for managing to find €5 to give to pensioners. While this increase is welcome, it is clear that €5 is not a lot of money. I do not think anybody who stands up in this Chamber should be hugely proud of giving €5 back to pensioners or other social welfare recipients. This modest amount of money is an indication of the direction in which we want to go as a country and an acknowledgement of the fact that the income and spending capability of pensioners, in particular, has diminished significantly in recent years. That has led to increased poverty, stress and anxiety among people who receive the State pension. While I welcome this positive initiative, I emphasise that we have much more to do in this regard. I am pleased that we have taken a step in the right direction by increasing the State pension.

I welcome the increased budget of €12 million in my own portfolio of defence. I understand some of that money will be spent on capital investment in our Defence Forces. It is worth noting that we have one of the lowest defence spends in the developed world. It represents 0.35% of GDP, which in a European context is an exceptionally low proportion of a country's overall budget to be assigned to defence. While I do not dispute that other pressing issues, such as the housing crisis, homelessness and health care, need to be addressed, I reiterate that if we are to have the properly functioning and professional Defence Forces we need, we must ensure they are properly funded. I have repeatedly reminded the Minister that Defence Forces numbers have decreased. We are now well below the 9,500 full-time serving members we are supposed to have. I have repeatedly asked the Minister to address this. I certainly believe some of that budget needs to be spent on addressing the numbers in our Defence Forces, which are continuing to decrease.

By any standards, last week's budget was a good one for this country in terms of the direction in which we are going and the policy changes we are making. As a country, we have refocused our efforts to ensure we have good public services, a fair society and a working economy. These are the priorities and clear objectives of any parliament. I welcome the fact that this budget, as I have said, benefits people on the lowest incomes first and foremost. I think it is one of the proudest aspects of the budget. I am pleased that the Fianna Fáil Party has made a valuable contribution in that regard.

Debate adjourned.

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 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Jan O'Sullivan - the need to announce the patrons of the nine new post-primary schools that are due to open in 2017 and 2018, including the school in Limerick city's south-west environs; (2) Deputy Pat Casey - the retention of Ardmore film studios as a centre for film production; (3) Deputy Thomas P. Broughan - the supports needed by St. Joseph's national school in Marino, Dublin 3, in its application for DEIS 1 status; (4) Deputy James Law-

less - the reason volumes of waste from the greater Dublin area are being deposited in Drehid landfill site in north-west Kildare, and related issues; (5) Deputy Imelda Munster - the cuts in primary care staff and service provision and the loss of clerical and administrative posts in counties Louth and Meath; (6) Deputy Pat Deering - the closure of the Carlow ambulance base, which is raising concerns about response times for Carlow emergencies; (7) Deputy Martin Ferris - the health and safety issues at Kilmoyley graveyard in County Kerry; (8) Deputy Niamh Smyth - the need to address the issue of substance abuse following a recent case at Cavan General Hospital's accident and emergency department; (9) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - an gá atá ann a chinntiú go leanfaidh seirbhís farantóireachta chuig Árainn (Inis Mór) ó Ros a' Mhíl sna míonna ó Shamhain go Márta i bhfianaise an fógra a rinneadh inniu go bhfuil an farantóir leis an tseirbhís atá á chur ar fáil aige faoi láthair a stopadh ó thús na míosa seo chugainn; (10) Deputy Frank O'Rourke - the resourcing of the adult degenerative spine service in Tallaght Hospital and the Dublin Midlands hospital group; (11) Deputy John Lahart - An Bord Pleanála's decision on planning permission for Airbnb properties; (12) Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin - the reduction in services at an Alzheimer's day care unit in south Kildare; (13) Deputy Anne Rabbitte - the closure of the only waiting list for free eye tests for children; (14) Deputy Timmy Dooley - flood alleviation measures in County Clare; (15) Deputy Mattie McGrath - the need for flexibility in the timetable for slurry spraying on agricultural farmland; (16) Deputy Martin Kenny - flooding on the River Shannon around Lough Allen; (17) Deputy Jackie Cahill - competition concerns in the beef industry; (18) Deputy Mick Wallace - the need to discuss the implications of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA; and (19) Deputy Lisa Chambers - the Minister's views on the report on the well-being of members of the Permanent Defence Force.

The matters raised by Deputies Jan O'Sullivan, Pat Casey, Imelda Munster and Pat Deering have been selected for discussion.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Cultural Policy

1. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to outline the status of Culture 2025; the funding arrangements for its implementation in 2017 alongside the Ireland 2016 legacy programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [31239/16]

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Will the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs outline the status of Culture 2025 and indicate the funding arrangements for its implementation in 2017 alongside the Ireland 2016 legacy programme?

Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I published the draft framework policy document Culture 2025 - Éire Ildánach, in July. The draft was submitted to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs for input.

The Culture 2025 framework policy has several features. It sets out a series of high-level objectives under the heading “Enrich. Engage. Participate” to establish Government vision on culture and society in Ireland. It also sets out a set of key values, including the intrinsic value of culture, the right to participate in the cultural life of the nation and the role of culture in fostering a more sustainable future in Ireland. It further sets out a series of priority measures for implementation across Government and public bodies.

I understand that the committee is preparing a report on the draft framework policy, which I will consider when I receive it. In the meantime, it is important to continue the momentum of delivery of the priorities set out in the framework policy and to build on the positive legacy of the Ireland 2016 centenary programme. Consequently, my Department has been developing a cross-Government initiative to mainstream culture and creativity into the life of the nation and to promote individual, community and national well-being. It will focus on boosting cultural provision and participation in communities as well as harnessing the goodwill and engagement generated by the commemorative programme this year. It will also act as the main vehicle to take forward the priorities identified in Culture 2025.

I have secured funding of €5 million in budget 2017 to underpin this new initiative and I intend to announce further details in the coming weeks.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The additional €5 million allocated by the Minister for Culture 2025 is welcome and I wish to acknowledge that. Can she confirm whether there is a separate mechanism for arts funding? Will the initiative conclude in 2017? Can the Minister explain the criteria for allocating funds to artists or arts organisations and how they might apply?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The new initiative is designed to build on the positive legacy for our arts and cultural sectors arising from the success of the 2016 commemorations. In particular, I am keen to build on the positive levels of engagement in our arts and culture experienced throughout the year. I have spoken of my desire to increase access and participation in the arts at local level. After all, we recognised the many local events organised by communities throughout the country which ensured the commemorations were such a success. It was important to me in the context of the recent budget to secure increases in funding for all the key arts and cultural bodies under my remit. The Arts Council remains the body to which artists make applications for funding. I was pleased to be able to give the council a €5 million increase.

I do not envisage any funding stream or applications under Culture 2025. That is not my plan. I am working on it at the moment. It is my intention to be in a position to announce details in the coming weeks.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I am trying to read the Minister’s mind. She referred several times to local groups and getting funding to people in communities. The Minister is supportive of the local arts in education partnership in Monaghan. Will she consider funding for groups in the same way as funds come from the Arts Council? Perhaps the Minister has more programme funding in mind. Perhaps she will consider the 2025 cultural programme in this regard. I am mindful that Culture 2025 is in draft status and is with the Oireachtas committee. Can the Minister confirm the arrangements for independent arm’s-length governance of the Culture 2025 initiative?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I will announce details of the new initiative next month. I have met key cultural stakeholders in the past week to bring them up-to-date with what I am

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keen to do. This initiative will be anchored in boosting and valuing creativity in all its forms. I want to make clear that I fully respect the arms-length principle. No interference takes place in the funding decisions of the subsidiary bodies under the Department, including those of the Arts Council and the Irish Film Board. I have no input in the decisions of the Arts Council. It is completely independent and I absolutely respect that. I was delighted to get the increase in funding for the council and I hope it will be able to support more organisations and artists in the coming year. I completely respect the arms-length principle.

National Monuments

2. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the reason the Office of Public Works is not employed to carry out the current works at the national monument on Moore Street (details supplied). [31237/16]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I understand the Government and the State own the buildings at 14, 15, 16 and 17 Moore Street. Yet, a company called CCJV is operating on the site. I got a chance to examine the management flowchart for that site. It sets out exactly where responsibility lies and who people report to. It is clear that the Government is in one place and CCJV is in another, with the other organisations involved working under CCJV. Who owns CCJV? Why is it working on the site? Why is the OPW not managing the site?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The State acquired ownership of the national monument at 14 to 17 Moore Street in July 2015. The aim was to get conservation work under way as speedily as possible with a view to having the proposed 1916 commemorative centre opened during the centenary year. My Department concluded a tendering process that had been initiated when the property was under lien by the National Asset Management Agency. The tenders sought related to proposals for the conservation and restoration of these buildings, for which consent had been given by my predecessor under section 14 of the National Monuments Act in April 2014. My Department subsequently awarded a contract to carry out these works after a detailed assessment, including a process audit, multi-criteria analysis and independent legal advice. My Department established a steering committee to guide the project. The committee includes representatives of the Office of Public Works and the National Museum of Ireland.

The skilled workforce employed by OPW Heritage Services is focused on the care and maintenance of national monuments in State care. These include iconic sites such as Newgrange, Clonmacnoise, the Rock of Cashel and Skellig Michael. The key skills and strengths of OPW lie in the conservation of ancient fabric and structures in such places.

I am advised that in cases where works to heritage buildings of more recent origin are concerned, for example, the recently-completed visitor centre at Kilmainham Gaol, OPW will generally utilise the services of experienced construction companies that possess the necessary skills and expertise to work on listed, heritage and protected structures. I understand that the contractor employed on the Moore Street site was responsible for key phases of the stabilisation of the structure of Kilmainham Courthouse. This enabled the building to be adapted as a visitor centre as one of the permanent reminders under the Ireland 2016 centenary programme. The same contractor has also been employed by OPW on other heritage projects, including the refurbishment of Killarney House for my Department.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Moore Street battlefield site is the most important such site in

contemporary Irish history. In many ways, it represents the collision of two Irelands, the Celtic tiger developer Ireland and the selfless sacrifice of the Volunteers of 1916, colliding in one space. It has been a long-running sore. I am very concerned about the role of CCJV because I understand it is an associate company of some sort of Chartered Land, the previous owner of the property. If I bought a property, it would be strange for the previous owners to be still working on it years after I made the purchase. I am trying to understand why that would be the case. We have already tabled parliamentary questions on this matter. If the company is working on a Government site, the Minister should know who owns it and to whom it is affiliated. That would give us a better understanding of the motivations of a particular company because if the company is working for a previous owner and the owner of the general site on which the project is situated it does not give us full confidence that it is working to the objectives of the State.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Our contract is with Lissadell Construction, which is carrying out the work. It is a highly respected heritage builder and the OPW uses it regularly on different sites. It is respected for the level of its expertise in that area.

The Deputy received a chart detailing the construction and multidisciplinary team of professional experts involved in the work. CCJV is an affiliate single purpose entity set up as a special purpose vehicle. It oversees and manages boundary arrangements, including security elements, utilities interface, access, rights of way and intellectual property, IP, between the national monument project and adjacent properties, and its interface with planning permissions, consents and so forth. It is not involved in the restoration work which is under the instruction of the courts. Lissadell is doing the work but this is a special purpose vehicle to deal with the other issues.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We received a brief outline of the management flow of a particular project and the interface between the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and the rest of the project, under CCJV, which is an affiliate of Chartered Land, the company that wants to build a gigantic shopping centre on that space. This is at the heart and the crux of the battle between this State and that developer over recent years. It shocks me that the State is paying an affiliate of Chartered Land in respect of what is our property. There is no way that if I purchased a house, the previous owners would still be managing its development.

It seems the High Court will decide on the future of this project in December 2017. It will then be up to the Government to appeal the matter to the Supreme Court if it so desires. It may also appeal it to the European Court of Justice. As a result, the site will remain under-developed, in a state of dereliction although a good bit of conservation work has been done to it but it will be empty and useless in contrast to the resource that it could be in the heritage quarter there. Is it the Government's objective, if it loses the High Court appeal, to proceed to the Supreme Court and to the European Court of Justice?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As I have explained, the judgment affects not only Moore Street but all national monuments in my care and how they are managed on my behalf by the OPW. I am also advised that all development, including housing, schools, roads, pipelines and hospital projects, could be put at risk. This judgment was appealed because it was going to have a significant impact across the country on essential infrastructure projects. I brought a memorandum to Cabinet and got very clear advice that this decision needed to be appealed because it would affect many projects across the country.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: If the Government loses in the Supreme Court will it go to Europe?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: We have to await the outcome of this decision first.

Cistiúchán Roinne

3. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Ealaíon, Oidhreachta, Gnóthaí Réigiúnacha, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta cén laghdú atá tagtha ar an Meastachán don Ghaeilge, don Ghaeltacht agus do na hoileáin le haghaidh 2017 le hais 2016; cad é an fáth atá leis an laghdú seo; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [31238/16]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Mar is eol don Aire Stáit, tá laghdú €4.47 milliún ar an airgead a bheidh ar fáil aige an bhliain seo chugainn. Tá ráiteas soiléir sa chomhaontú muiníne agus soláthair idir Fianna Fáil agus Fine Gael agus, chomh maith leis sin, i gclár an Rialtais go mbeidh airgead breise ar fáil do chúrsaí Gaeilge. Clúdaíonn sé sin cúrsaí Gaeltachta. An bhféadfadh an tAire Stáit a mhíniú cén chaoi ar tharla sé nach méadú a bheidh i gceist an bhliain seo chugainn ach laghdú atá thar a bheith suntasach?

Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Seán Kyne): Tá suim bhreise de €2.25 milliún san iomlán curtha ar fáil i mbuiséad 2017 do chlár Gaeilge, Gaeltachta agus oileánda mo Roinne.

Maidir le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta, bhí €1 milliún breise i maoiniú caipitil aonuaire faighte mar chuid de Mheastacháin Athbhreithnithe 2016. Tá sé seo coinnithe don bhliain seo chugainn, rud a chiallaíonn gurb é €6.687 milliún an bunlíne nua caipitil i mbuiséad 2017 d'Údarás na Gaeltachta, €1 milliún níos airde ná an bunlíne i mbuiséad 2016. Anuas air sin, tá allúntas breise de €2.4 milliún i gcaipiteal á chur ar fáil agam don údarás in 2016. Leanfaidh mé orm ag lorg mhaoiniú caipitil breise don údarás sa tréimhse amach romhainn.

Maidir le caiteachas reatha de, cuirfidh an tsuim bhreise de €1.25 milliún a bheidh ar fáil don Ghaeilge agus Ghaeltacht faoi bhuiséad 2017 ar chumas mo Roinne tuilleadh acmhainní a chur i dtreo na straitéise 20 bliain don Ghaeilge, an próiseas pleanála teanga, na scéimeanna tacaíochta Gaeltachta ar nós scéim na bhfoghlaimoírí Gaeilge agus na grúpaí pobail atá á maoiniú ag Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Sna Meastacháin do 2017, a d'fhoilsigh an tAire Caiteachais Poiblí agus Athchóirithe le deireanas, tá leithdháileadh de €46.736 milliún ina iomláine don chlár Gaeilge, Gaeltachta agus oileán i gcomparáid le €51.21 milliún do 2016. Den chuid is mó, baineann an difríocht sa dá fhigiúr le laghdú ar an leithdháileadh caipitil le haghaidh 2017. Bhí leithdháileadh de €6 milliún ar fáil in 2016 d'oibreacha forbartha ar ché Inis Oírr - nach raibh réidh le tosú i mbliana - ach is suim €2 milliún atá curtha ar fáil do 2017. Táim sásta gur leor an leithdháileadh sin chun an tionscadal a bhrú ar aghaidh in 2017 agus, ar ndóigh, beidh leithdháileadh eile ar fáil don tionscadal in 2018. Chomh maith leis sin, bhí soláthar caipitil de €1.9 milliún curtha ar fáil i Meastacháin 2016 chun ionad chultúrtha an Phiarsaigh i Ros Muc a fhorbairt. Beidh an togra sin críochnaithe i mbliana agus níl gá le soláthar a dhéanamh ina leith in 2017.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: An bhféadfadh an tAire Stáit deimhniú dom, ag fágáil as an €1 milliún breise d'Údarás na Gaeltachta, go bhfuil laghdú de €5.9 milliún ar leithdháileadh caipitil na Roinne don bhliain seo chugainn? An bhféadfadh sé dearbhú mar sin nach bhfuil i gceist aige scéimeanna feabhsúcháin Gaeltachta agus oileánda ar oileáin agus ar an mórthír ar nós scéimeanna bóithre nó scéimeanna athnuachana na mbailte a chur ar ais? An bhféadfadh sé

dearbhu nach bhfuil i gceist aige brú ar aghaidh le forbairt na cé in Inis Meáin agus nach bhfuil aon sholáthar déanta dó, cé gur rud é atá ag teastáil go práinneach, mar is eol don Aire Stáit, agus a bheadh i líne leis an méid a dúirt sé liom i bhfreagra cheist Dála?

Maidir le caiteachas reatha, an bhféadfadh an tAire Stáit soiléiriú an bhfuil an ceart agam nach bhfuil aon sholáthar déanta do haird a thabhairt do na mná tí faoi scéim na bhfoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge an bhliain seo chugainn?

Deputy Seán Kyne: Ó thaobh ché an Chialaidh Mhóir de, táim oscailte don fhorbairt chun céim a trí a bhrú ar aghaidh agus na hacmhainní cuí a chur ar fáil chuige ón am seo amach. Beidh cruinniú agam le muintir ó Inis Meáin i gceann coicise chun é seo a phlé le na feidhmeannaigh sa Roinn agus sa chomhairle contae. Ag an am seo an bhliain seo caite, ní raibh airgead ar fáil againn sa Rialtas do ché Inis Oírr. Ní raibh sean-fhiacha de Chomhairle Contae na Gaillimhe réitithe idir an chomhairle contae agus mo Roinn. Tá an t-airgead sin faighte agam anois. Fuairéamar €6 milliún an bhliain seo caite don togra tábhachtach do Inis Oírr. Tá mé sásta go mbeidh an togra sin ag dul ar aghaidh an bhliain seo chugainn. Tá sean-fhiacha Chomhairle Contae na Gaillimhe réitithe anois againn leis an €6 milliún. Bhí an fhadhb sin againn ar feadh blianta ó 2010. Tá sé sin socraithe anois againn. Is céim mhór é sin in airgead caipitil do thograí agus rudaí mar sin ar na hoileáin.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Mar is eol don Aire Stáit, gealladh go mbeadh airgead mór ar fáil do Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge. Níl sé ann. Tá airgead an-bheag i gceist ó thaobh chúrsaí reatha de. Tá €1.4 milliún breise ann. An tuiscint atá agam ón méid a dúirt an tAire Stáit liom go dtí seo ná, in ainneoin an rud a dúirt sé le gairid liom i gceist Dála, go mbeidh sé in ann brú ar aghaidh le céibh Inis Oírr. Molaim é sin. Molaim, go deimhin, an chaoi a chaith an tAire Stáit an t-airgead i mbliana. Ceapaim go ndearna sé i gceart é, ach caithfidimid a bheith ag breathnú romhainn.

An bhfuil sé i gceist ag an Aire Stáit scéimeanna feabhais don Ghaeltacht agus do na hoileáin go ginearálta a chur chun cinn, taobh amuigh do na tograí móra? Agus é chomh gann ar airgead reatha do na pobail, mar shampla na bainisteoirí comharchumainn, cén fáth an bhfuil an Roinn ag tabhairt airgid do RTE, a bhfuil dualgas reachtúil air i leith na Gaeilge, agus €150 milliún d'airgead an cháinócóra le plean Gaeilge a chur chun cinn? B'fhéidir go bhféadfadh an tAire Stáit soiléiriú a thabhairt ar an gceist sin ina fhreagra freisin.

Deputy Seán Kyne: Nílím freagrach as RTE. Is ceist é sin don Aire.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: An rud a deireann sé anseo ná “RTE’s Irish language action plan”. Tá €250,000 roinnte idir ceithre rud faoi Straitéis 20 Bliain do Ghaeilge agus is é sin ceann dóibh. Ceann de na rudaí a deireann sé ná-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): An tAire Stáit.

Deputy Seán Kyne: Is ceist é sin don Aire Cumarsáide, Gníomhaithe ar son na hAeráide agus Comhshaoil, Teachta Denis Naughten.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Tagann sé seo ó ráiteas an Aire Stáit féin a d'eisigh sé ar 12 Deireadh Fómhair 2016 agus-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): An tAire Stáit. Tá an t-am thart.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: -----tuigtear dom go dtiocfadh cuid den €250,000 le haghaidh

RTE's Irish language action plan.

Deputy Seán Kyne: Chas feidhmeannaigh ó RTE leis an Aire, an Teachta Denis Naughten, coicís ó shin chun cúrsaí buiséid a phlé i mo Roinn eile, an Roinn Cumarsáide, Gníomhaithe ar son na hAeráide agus Comhshaoil. Táimid ag fanacht ar phleananna do chúrsaí Gaeltachta agus pleananna atá acu. B'fhéidir go bhféadfadh muid breis airgid a dháileadh ón Roinn sin.

Ó thaobh an bhuiséid reatha, tá sé pléite againn le príomhfheidhmeannach Údarás na Gaeltachta go mbeidh an t-údarás in ann cuid den airgead reatha breise atá curtha ar fáil a fháil. Táim ag fanacht ar mholadh ó Údarás na Gaeltachta maidir leis sin. Bheadh siad in ann é sin a úsáid do na heagraíochtaí Gaeltachta agus oileán ar fud na tíre. Chas mé le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta roimh an mbuiséad. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an tÚdarás faoi bhrú. Tá sé pléite agam leis an bpríomhfheidhmeannach chun na hacmhainní sin a chur ar fáil dó.

Leader Programmes

4. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the position regarding the roll-out of the Leader programme in west Cork; the reason the West Cork Development Partnership, which has successfully delivered Leader funding over the past 20 years, is not allowed to roll out the new programme; the person or bodies involved in deciding this; the person or bodies involved in the appeals process; and the person or bodies that will now be involved in the Leader programme in west Cork. [31334/16]

Deputy Michael Collins: I ask the Minister with responsibility for rural affairs the position regarding the roll-out of the Leader programme in west Cork; the reason the West Cork Development Partnership, which has successfully delivered the Leader funding for more than 20 years, is not now allowed to roll out the new programme; the person or bodies involved in dealing with that; the person or bodies involved in the appeals process; and the person or bodies who will now be delivering the Leader programme in west Cork. This is an astonishing set of events in west Cork. Most people believe it is the best kept secret, and it needs to be discussed openly.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I want to be very clear. There are no secrets in this regard. In 2015, expressions of interest were sought by the then Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government from groups that wished to develop a local development strategy for the delivery of Leader in each of the 28 designated sub-regional areas of the country. The process was open to any group that wished to develop a local development strategy and be considered as a local action group, LAG, in its particular area.

Applicants successful at this stage of the process were provided with funding and a comprehensive template to assist with developing their local development strategies. In a number of sub-regional areas, including west Cork, expressions of interest and subsequent local development strategies were submitted by more than one interested party.

An independent selection committee, chaired by Dr. Tommy Cooke, professor emeritus, Dublin Institute of Technology, was established for the purposes of selecting Leader local development strategies in each sub-regional area. The committee included representatives from my Department, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Bord Iascaigh Mhara, Limerick Institute of Technology, Teagasc, Enterprise Ireland and Fáilte Ireland. There was no

ministerial role or input into any of the decisions made by the committee.

Local development strategies for the implementation of Leader in west Cork were submitted by West Cork Development Partnership and by West Cork Local Community Development Committee, LCDC. The strategy submitted by West Cork LCDC was selected by the independent selection committee following a detailed assessment of both submissions.

This decision was appealed by West Cork Development Partnership and reviewed by an independent third party, Mr Chris O'Toole. He concluded in September last that the agreed procedures had been followed by the selection committee and that the appraisal and scoring criteria were also correctly followed. As a result, the original decision of the selection committee remained unchanged. West Cork Development Partnership was advised of the outcome on 22 September 2016.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Minister for her reply. First, I referred to a secret because if this was an open and transparent process, why is the EU now investigating this process? That is a very serious issue. I read in the *Southern Star* and in *The Irish Times*, which I presume are reputable newspapers, that there is an EU investigation into this decision. Second, the West Cork Development Partnership was the highest in terms of strategy in the previous Leader programme. It is incredible to think that someone who has not laid out a programme is now deemed to be even better than it. How is that possible?

I would like the Minister to answer both those questions because the people of Cork South-West, who suffered a great deal under the previous Government, require clarity on the matter. They continue to suffer under this Government when, astonishingly, they learn that their Leader company, which had delivered for them at the doorstep, has been told that it can no longer deliver a programme when it has done that for the past 25 years. Does the Minister believe there is a reason to investigate that matter, and will that delay the funding? What will happen in that regard?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I am aware that West Cork Development Company has brought a complaint to the European Commission regarding an alleged breach of state aid rules in Cork. I understand the Commission has not yet decided to launch a formal investigation. However, the Commission has written to my Department requesting additional information on this matter, and my Department will assist the Commission in obtaining any information or clarification required.

Deputy Michael Collins: That does not clarify whether that process will delay the roll-out of a programme in west Cork. Why is the EU looking into this matter in the first place? It would not look into it if the process was carried out properly. As I said, west Cork has been hit in recent years. We have lost our social welfare offices, Garda stations, banks and post offices. The one light in a very dark tunnel was our Leader programme, and that has been taken from us. I do not begrudge east Galway but will the Minister detail her plans for east Galway because a new process has been put in place by the Department and we need to find out if that process can be rolled out in west Cork also?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Leader programme for 2014-20 will now be delivered in the west Cork sub-regional area by West Cork LCDC in conjunction with its implementing partners, Avondhu Blackwater Partnership CLG, Comhar na nOileán Teoranta and South and East Cork Area Development Partnership Limited. A funding agreement has issued to West

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Cork LCDC and I expect that Leader funding will commence in west Cork from 1 November. The most important thing is that the funding goes into the communities and that the projects that need it get the funding. When this function was transferred into my Department I was very keen to get the contracts signed as quickly as possible, to get the money out to the communities which need it.

A complaint has been made and it is incumbent on the European Commission to look into any complaints it receives, as I would do in the same circumstances. I imagine that is why it is looking into the issue.

Deputy Michael Collins: I asked for clarity on the situation in east Galway.

Heritage Sites

5. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs her plans for the protection of the Georgian graving docks in the Grand Canal basin; and if she will make a commitment to safeguard and improve the site, with a particular focus on Georgian heritage conservation. [31308/16]

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The graving docks in the Grand Canal basin, near to here, are a very special place and arguably the most important point in the entire inland waterways system. All local representatives share real concerns over the plans of Inland Waterways Ireland to sell the lands to allow for development. This would be a fundamental mistake and would not just be throwing the baby out with the bathwater; it would be throwing the bath out. It is a highly sensitive location and while a huge amount of docklands development is right and necessary, we must maintain key open places that preserve a heritage which provides a local environment everybody can use. We will lose this opportunity if the land is sold and I ask if the Minister intends to intervene.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The graving docks in the Grand Canal basin are located in the site known as city block 19. I am advised by Waterways Ireland that this site is being considered for development in partnership with the private sector. Development will be in accordance with the North Lotts and Grand Canal dock strategic development zone, SDZ, planning scheme for the area.

The SDZ outlines the nature and extent of proposed developments permissible within this site with a use mix of 40% residential, 30% commercial and 30% community. Waterways Ireland believes there is an opportunity, in how the community element of the planning designation for the site is delivered, to celebrate and sustain the maritime and inland waterways heritage of the wider area and the graving docks.

The Waterways Ireland action plan for Grand Canal dock and Spencer dock sets out the body's proposals to ensure that both docks are developed to deliver their full potential to the city of Dublin and to the wider canal network. The plan is available on the Waterways Ireland website at <http://www.waterwaysireland.org/Pages/Product-Development-Studies.aspx>.

Waterways Ireland has recently appointed a programme manager to drive forward delivery of this action plan and is committed to delivering the Grand Canal and Spencer docks as amenities in the city, with the maximum recreational benefit to local people and visitors alike.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Do I take it that Inland Waterways will not sell these lands? They are three individual docks which originally were for people to work on canal boats. There is a small one, a medium-sized one and a large one about the size of this room and all three are threatened with sale. Is the Minister saying these Georgian pieces of infrastructure, built in the late 18th century, are to be preserved as part of the development plan for the area? Is she saying that Inland Waterways are going to start to treat this part of our infrastructure with some care? At the moment the locks beside this area are in a woeful state and the three docks themselves are in utter disrepair. They are in the middle of the busiest, most built-up area of the city and if they were in London, Paris or any other city they would be a centrepiece of urban development, an outdoor meeting place which treasured the Georgian heritage of the city. Instead, it has been left to go to rack and ruin. Is the Minister saying all three graving docks will be preserved under the Waterways Ireland plans or that only 30% of the area will be preserved?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Decisions on the future of the graving docks are a matter for the planning authority, in this case Dublin City Council and Waterways Ireland, which owns the site. The graving docks are located in the site known as city block 19 in the Grand Canal docks and are being considered for development in partnership with the private sector. Development will be in accordance with the North Lotts and Grand Canal dock strategic development zone and it is primarily a matter for Dublin City Council, and An Bord Pleanála as applicable, to make decisions relating to the strategic and sustainable development of the area, which includes the historic built environment. The SDZ outlines the nature and extent of proposed developments permissible within this site and any pending development proposals will be referred to my Department as a statutory consultee within the planning process.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I take it that this will be sold, because the SDZ allows for the development of the site. It seems that Waterways Ireland wants to spend the money in other parts of the network and does not care about the central core of the Georgian network in the centre of Dublin. Why will the Minister not intervene at this stage, rather than in the planning process? Why does she not listen to her representatives from the area who believe this is a terrible mistake and that we are losing value for a key piece of Georgian architecture? We are going back to the mistakes made in the 1960s and 1970s. The Minister has the ability, the power and the motive to have this Georgian architecture preserved rather than sold. If this is decided in the North, on account of the fact that Waterways Ireland is a North-South body, the Minister should go to the next meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council and tell them it is of strategic interest to the city of Dublin and we should not sell it. Why is she letting it proceed to sale when Fine Gael Deputies for the area are of a like mind to me in believing that this makes no sense. This is throwing away Dublin heritage and waterways heritage, and for what purpose?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Waterways Ireland is the owner of this property. It is a cross-Border body and it has many different priorities, all of which have to be balanced.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: If this House called for Belfast docks or other key infrastructure in the North to be taken out, I have no doubt the Stormont Assembly would stand up for the preservation of its heritage. Why does the Government not want to stand up for the preservation of heritage in the centre of Dublin, which would be of huge economic value to the city?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: There are a huge number of pressing priorities with which Waterways Ireland has to deal.

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Other Questions

National Spatial Strategy

6. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if she will be taking a role in the development of the new national spatial strategy. [31135/16]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This State is in a state of spatial crisis. Services are being closed down on the western side of our country and rebuilt on the eastern seaboard. There is an over-concentration of economic activity and limited resources in a small space on the east coast, which is depopulating much of the west coast and causing bottlenecks in infrastructure on the east coast. What will the Minister do, through the spatial strategy, to address this issue?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The development of a new national planning framework, NPF, is being led by my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government. A roadmap, approved by Government and published in December 2015, outlines the arrangements for the preparation of the NPF, which includes the establishment of a dedicated work team in the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, whose work will be overseen by a high-level cross-departmental steering group, supported by appropriate public consultation and stakeholder engagement arrangements. I understand that it is the Minister's intention that effective consultation will ensure the NPF is built from the ground up, while at the same time taking account of strategic realities at national level. As Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, I welcome this important initiative and I look forward to contributing to it, including by way of my Department's input as a member of the NPF cross-departmental steering group.

As a contributor to the development of a new NPF, my Department has many shared and complementary objectives that will be considered during the process as part of the whole-of-government approach being adopted.

Indeed, a number of high level initiatives are currently underway within my Department which are relevant to the development of the NPF and will provide significant cross-over potential. These include the development of programmes under my Department's new regional and rural development brief, the National Landscape Strategy for Ireland 2015-2025, my Department's built and natural heritage fiscal and capital investment programmes, the ongoing implementation of the Government policy on architecture and the proposed development of a new national heritage plan.

Finally, my understanding is that rural Ireland will be addressed as part of a NPF issues and options paper, which will include a section entitled "A place-based strategy for rural Ireland".

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I suppose when this Department was created there was a hope that it would be for real, that regional development and rural affairs would be taken seriously by this Department. It is clear this Department is a hollow husk, that in the end of the day the Department is almost an elaborate press statement to pretend to the people that the Government is doing something on this issue.

For example, the national broadband plan to provide broadband to rural areas for regional

development was won by the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten, in the interdepartmental battles. I also have a problem with the fact that in some parts of the west there are dozens of schools which have the same number of junior infants joining them at the start of the year as one school would have in the greater Dublin area meaning that schools are being closed in the west and rebuilt in the east at a cost to the State. For example, there was a bad accident on the M50 this morning at 8.30 a.m. - I hope everybody involved is okay. Six or seven miles into County Meath, there were commuters stuck in major traffic jams two hours later such is the crisis of infrastructural deficit on the east coast while much of the west is going fallow. A number of local authorities and a number of leadership organisations have told me that they have heard nothing about the national spatial plan. There is no ground-up grassroots element involved.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I understand. I am from rural Ireland, the same as Deputy Tóibín, as are the Ministers of State, Deputies Kyne and Ring. We are committed to rural Ireland and I can assure Deputy Tóibín of that. Rural Ireland will be addressed as part of an issues and option paper, which will include a section entitled, “A place-based strategy for rural Ireland”.

This comes back to the need for joined-up thinking and cross-Government co-operation on rural Ireland. In this regard, I will be bringing forward the action plan for rural development later this year. The action plan will cover the three-year period 2016 to 2019 and will be structured around the following themes: supporting sustainable communities, creating and sustaining enterprise and employment, fostering culture and creativity in rural Ireland, building on rural tourism and recreational opportunities and improving rural infrastructure and connectivity. The action plan will act as an overarching structure for the implementation of Government initiatives which have the potential to benefit rural Ireland.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: My heart goes out to the Minister to a certain extent. If Deputy Humphreys does not have the budget to deal with these issues, unfortunately, all the joined-up thinking in the world is not worth a damn.

The level of capital investment in this State is one of the lowest anywhere in Europe. With regards to the €6 billion that is going on roads between 2016 and 2021, 75% of that is going on maintenance only. Roads that are needed right across the west are just not going to be built. As far as the €3.6 billion earmarked for public transport is concerned, more than half of that will go on the extension of the DART railway. For example, the residents of Navan in County Meath will not see the railway being brought from Pace out to Navan or different railways being built around the country.

I ask the Minister to think seriously about disruptive investment. We have a particular trend happening which has been facilitated by a directionless spatial plan. To fix that, the Minister needs to ensure the spatial plan comes out by the end of the year and that it has the necessary funds to build the infrastructure so the people will stay in the western seaboard and others will go and join them.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I encourage the Minister to include in her contribution on the national planning framework a look at land use strategy. In that regard, the potential exists to meet the objectives the Minister set in terms of employment and sustainable communities, to look at radical proposals taking both Coillte lands and Bord na Móna lands at scale and managing them in a different way, separating the parks and wildlife functions within her Department so that we

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massively extend the definition of parks and how we use land in that way. It is a different role to the wildlife regulatory function. By taking such radical steps in terms of how we use land, we can develop tourism, food, energy and other industries in rural Ireland. We need that sort of radical land use change as part of this planning framework.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: To answer Deputy Tóibín's question, we have allocated funding within our budget to rural Ireland. We have a €12 million town and village enhancement programme. I am getting very positive feedback from local authorities and from individuals from communities right across the country. We launched €10 million in funding this year and they are working extremely hard to put together good applications to get funding to support projects that will make a difference in their rural communities. Deputy Tóibín will be aware, as I am, that there is nothing better than communities and those at local level making decisions that can impact beneficially on their area.

In relation to Deputy Eamon Ryan's question, there is an increasing recognition that the protection and presentation of our natural heritage is necessary for continued economic expansion, regional and rural development as well as for increasing quality of life.

I welcome the focus on the role of our natural resources and cultural assets proposed by the outline of a national planning framework, in particular, the proposed linkages to policies designed to protect and promote our built and natural heritage. Indeed, I accept what Deputy Eamon Ryan is saying, that we need to look at our landscape, and at our bogs. The bogs are a tremendous asset that is unique to this country. It is about developing those assets in a positive way.

Regional Development Initiatives

7. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the extent to which she has identified a deficiency in services in urban and rural areas throughout the country with particular reference to the need to ensure the availability of modern technology, banking, post offices, schools and other services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [31141/16]

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The next question is in the name of this Deputy, who, unfortunately, cannot raise any supplementaries. The Deputy would be happy, unless somebody else wants to raise a question on it, to take a reply.

Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Michael Ring): This is new politics at its best.

A Programme for a Partnership Government identifies a range of local services which are important to the sustainability of rural areas in particular. The programme contains a series of commitments relating to the protection of these services, including the provision of next-generation broadband coverage, addressing the renewal of the post office network, supporting local jobseekers and the provision of other services in areas such as education, health and security. These services fall under the remit of a number of Departments and agencies.

From my own perspective, I am progressing the programme for Government commitment to address the renewal of the post office network. I have established a post office hub working

group which is considering potential models under which the post offices could offer additional services, especially in rural areas. My officials are also examining the potential for the post offices to deliver services, such as motor tax payments and a basic payment account.

The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, has established a national taskforce on mobile phone and broadband access with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten, to identify practical measures which can be taken in the short term to improve broadband and mobile phone reception in rural areas. Two regional broadband action groups, involving all of the local authorities in the country, have also been established to accelerate the roll-out of the broadband network and ensure that there are no local barriers to the deployment when contracts under the national broadband plan are awarded in 2017.

3 o'clock

My Department is currently developing an action plan for rural development which will act as an overarching structure for the co-ordination and implementation of initiatives across Government which have the potential to benefit rural Ireland. The implementation of these initiatives will contribute significantly to the protection and enhancement of local services and will help generate increased economic activity in rural Ireland. The action plan will be published by the end of the year.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I will do my best to see if I can represent the Acting Chairman here. With regard to broadband, I have major concerns with the Government's broadband plan. We know from conversations we have had with the Minister previously that it is likely the due date for broadband right across the State will be broken. There is no Government confirmation that this due date will be achieved. In five or six years time, there will still be sectors of Irish society and enterprise that will be cut off from what is the road network of modern society. We also know there is a danger because of the fact that there are two contracts on the island, that we could have one contract with a certain speed and capacity level and another contract with a different speed and content level. That means villages a distance of five or six miles apart could be operating on two different levels.

Regarding the post office sector, I spoke to a postmaster recently, based in a medium-sized town which is by no means a village, and he was of the view that transactions were collapsing within post offices around the country, especially as a result of fewer people drawing social welfare. That is obviously a good thing, but the essential point is that his wages are derived on the basis of transactions and those transactions were not there for him. Also, the contracts between the State and post offices were not facilitating viability. Is it the Government's plan to close further post offices? My understanding is that a number of post offices will close in the future.

Deputy Michael Ring: With regard to broadband, as the Deputy is aware, our Department is dealing with the local authorities to make sure that when the contracts are awarded, there will be no hold-ups and the local authorities will have their ground work done. When people are appointed to deal with the contracts, we will be there and the local authorities will deal with the land issues and any other issues that arise. The Minister, Deputy Naughten's Department will deal with the licences and we will do our bit. The local authorities have all been written to and they have all responded. What we need to do now is to make sure that we can roll this out as quickly as possible.

Regarding rural post offices, we have a group that I am chairing and another group, the Post

Office Network Business Development Group, that Bobby Kerr is chairing. He is examining ways and means to see what we can do to give new services to post offices. I am engaged with the Irish postmasters' association in examining ways and means to see what we can do to save as many post offices as possible. The Deputy is correct that there are a number of categories of post offices, including big post offices, small post offices and rural post offices. I am working with those people to explore, for example, the possibility of having mobile post offices, community post offices and a combination of both to try to keep a service in an area. Bobby Kerr intends to have his group's report compiled in the next number of weeks. I will have my report compiled and we will then go to Government to see what we can do to support and assist rural post offices to the best of our ability.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister of State studiously avoided answering my question about the Government's plan to close further post offices in the next number of years. It does plan to close a number of post offices in rural areas in the next number of years.

Unfortunately, it is now too late to transfer the motor tax service to the post offices. If people were to go to a county council office to pay their motor tax, they would probably see weeds growing along the ground. Most people are dealing with their motor tax online. The transfer of driver licence renewal business to the post offices would have provided an opportunity to give viability back to post offices. That business was given to a private company, as such.

I understand that Bobby Kerr's report has been published. What elements of it have been implemented to date? The two questions to which I would love answers are how many offices will the Minister close in the future and what elements of that report have been implemented?

Deputy Michael Ring: I want to make it clear to the Deputy that I will not be closing any post offices. I do not have the authority or the power-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government does.

Deputy Michael Ring: The Government does not have it either. An Post runs the postal services. With regard to a number of post offices, people have given notice that they no longer want to be postmasters. There is nothing we can do about it if there are no people available to take up that service. An Post will make those decisions. There is a consultation process which will involve it determining if a post office is viable, but somebody has to take on the business of that post office.

We are doing the direct opposite to what the Deputy has said. We are trying to do something to save post offices by giving them new services, such as banking, to help bring them into the modern era and allow them to compete with the banks and the credit unions. We will try to save as many post offices as possible but I want to put on the record that I will not be closing any post office. That is not a decision for me or the Government. That will be a matter for An Post and the postmasters or postmistresses if they believe they are not in a position to continue on in their business. We are doing everything in our power to try to save post offices. I intend to bring a package to Government between now and the end of the year with the intention of trying to save as many post offices as possible, but not every post office is viable. Many people complain about the closure of post offices. I have attended public meetings where people said they do not want closures of post offices, but they are the very people who do not use their local post office. If people want them, they will have to use them. If they want to keep them, they will have to support their local post offices. I want as many post offices as possible to be

maintained and retained in rural Ireland.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We will proceed to Question No. 8 in the name of Deputy Mick Barry.

Deputy Michael Ring: Deputy Boyd Barrett would not know very much about rural post offices.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Excuse me, we have little village post offices.

Deputy Michael Ring: The Deputy was too privileged, so he would not know about them.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I call Deputy Mick Barry.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We have a little village post office in Dún Laoghaire as well.

Deputy Michael Ring: The Deputy would not know anything about rural Ireland.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Go away out of that. The Minister of State is a spoofer.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Is Deputy Boyd Barrett giving way to his colleague?

Arts Funding

8. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if the Government is committed to increasing the budget for the arts to at least the European Union average of 0.6% of gross domestic product; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [31142/16]

Deputy Mick Barry: Deputy Humphreys is the Minister with responsibility for the arts and she is the Minister who has cut the arts budget in terms of €188.5 million last year and €158.3 million last week, which is a cut of 16%. How does she account for herself? Let us not have any excuses about the 1916 centenary celebrations. The budget was cut, this Minister cut it and I ask her to account for it.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Deputy will be glad to hear that in budget 2017, I secured a series of funding increases across the arts and cultural bodies under my remit. These include an extra €5 million for the Arts Council, which is an 8% increase; €2 million extra for the film board; an extra €1 million for Culture Ireland; a significant additional allocation of €3.5 million for the national cultural institutions; and a new funding stream of €5 million for the implementation of a Culture 2025-Ireland 2016 legacy programme, details of which I will be announcing shortly.

These increases will have a positive and distinct impact on arts provision around the country. I am particularly pleased that I have retained the majority of the once-off current funding provided in 2016 for commemorations for investment in arts and culture and that these amounts are now included in my Department's baseline figures.

I understand that the source of the reference to 0.6% of GDP in the Deputy's question is a

Council of Europe research project and that many European countries, including ten EU member states, are not included in the data. I understand also that the data are not standardised and are not comparable across countries. For example, local authority expenditure on the arts, the artists' exemption tax relief, expenditure on public service broadcasting and the Irish language are not included in the figures for Ireland but comparable figures are included in the data for some other countries.

I have previously stated that further research on this issue is warranted and my Department is considering the matter at present. The issue of a definition of culture and of capturing public expenditure on culture is an element of the draft Culture 2025 framework policy, which was forwarded to the Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs for input in July last.

Deputy Mick Barry: I am blinded by the spin.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: There is no spin.

Deputy Mick Barry: I am absolutely blinded by the spin. Let us have a look at it. The Minister secured an extra €5 million for the Arts Council. Is she aware the Arts Council received €83 million in 2007 but this year is receiving €65 million, a cut of more than 20%? Is she aware it is only now at the level it was six years ago in 2011? She said the majority of the 1916 money had been retained. That is not correct. There was €48 million in that regard and only €18 million of it - only slightly more than a third - was retained. That is misinformation. The National Campaign for the Arts asked that all that money be retained for the arts sector. The Minister completely failed to deliver on that. I will make a point on the statistics in a moment.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy. I want to be very clear because these figures can become confusing. There was almost €49 million in once-off funding allocated to my Department for the Ireland 2016 centenary programme this year. It was a once-in-a-century event. The majority of that funding, €31 million, was spent on major capital projects such as the GPO visitors centre, which is a fine centre that I hope the Deputy gets a chance to visit; Richmond Barracks; and the Kevin Barry rooms in the National Concert Hall. They are all finished now. They are tremendous legacy projects of 2016. They are now complete and therefore that capital funding is not included in next year's budget because they are finished. We do not have to do them again.

Deputy Mick Barry: As I said, it is spin.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The remainder of the commemoration funding, €18 million, was in current funding to fund initiatives such as the major parade on Easter Sunday and events across the country. I have retained the vast majority of that funding for 2017 and I am reinvesting it back into the Arts Council, the Irish Film Board and cultural institutions. I gave the Deputy a breakdown earlier.

Deputy Mick Barry: Jo Mangan from the National Campaign for the Arts said, "There is strong disappointment coming from members" with regard to the budget. She said that her members' responses on social media were despair, anger and disbelief. That contrasts with the self-satisfied tone that emanates from the Minister in the House today. I am glad the Minister has accepted that the point I made about the 1916 money is correct. By her own mouth, the Minister has admitted in the House that there was €49 million last year and she secured €18

million of the €49 million.

Deputy Seán Kyne: Most of them have been opened.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: They are finished. They are all finished.

Deputy Mick Barry: It is spin. It is not the majority of the money; it is a tiny minority.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: No.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy, without interruption.

Deputy Mick Barry: By the Minister's own comments-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy is out of time.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Minister is condemned by her own comments. The Minister hides behind the fact that her Department has not yet produced a system for calculating the amount of GDP spent on the arts. The European average is 0.6% but it is 0.1% here. If the Minister wants to challenge that figure, she should produce statistics. We are waiting. When will we get them?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Deputy will be glad to hear that under Culture 2025 it is something we have highlighted. I accept we need to do some work on the statistics.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Minister does, indeed.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: It is something that is ongoing. We will do it because it is important we know how much funding is needed. I am delighted I was able to increase the funding to the arts. Guess what? The Arts Council, the Irish Film Board and Culture Ireland were also delighted. They are all happy they got an increase. I would love to give them more but we have managed to do very well this year. Will the Deputy please acknowledge it is an increase? He should remember where we were in 2008. Things have improved a lot. We have come through an economic crisis and there have been cuts across the board. I am very pleased and I want to build on the increases I got this year. We can see the huge benefit there is in investing in the arts.

Arts Funding

9. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if she will restore the budget for the arts for 2017 to the level agreed for 2016; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [31153/16]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will continue on the same theme. There were many retrograde aspects to the austerity cuts that began in 2008. They were begun by Fianna Fáil when it started to cut the arts budget. It was cut by €30 million. If ever there was a misguided set of cuts it was in this area. The point of our questions and the disappointment expressed by the arts community about this budget is that there is no recognition that we need, at the very minimum, the full restoration of the cuts that were imposed and to move towards a reasonable level of overall arts expenditure.

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Deputy Heather Humphreys: I am glad to report, as in my reply to Deputy Barry, that I have retained the majority of the €18 million current funding which was provided for the 2016 commemorations for reallocation to arts and cultural purposes within my Department's Vote. It will, therefore, become part of the baseline figures for my Department, meaning it will be carried forward into future years. As I previously outlined, budget 2017 will include an additional €5 million for the Arts Council, an 8% increase in its annual budget; increased funding for all the national cultural institutions; an increase of €2 million for the Irish Film Board and €1 million for Culture Ireland; and an additional €1 million for the Heritage Council. I have also secured a new funding stream of €5 million for the implementation of a Culture 2025-Ireland 2016 legacy programme, which will allow me to build on the positive legacy of the Ireland 2016 commemorations. I will be announcing details of this new initiative shortly.

All of this represents real and substantial funding increases across the arts and cultural area and has been welcomed across the sector. It also reaffirms the commitment of the Government to increase funding for the arts progressively as the economy improves, as set out in A Programme for a Partnership Government.

It should be noted that the majority of the €49 million allocation to my Department for this year's Ireland 2016 centenary programme was capital funding that went towards a series of permanent reminder projects, including the witness history visitor centre at the GPO, the refurbishment of Richmond Barracks and the Kevin Barry rooms at the National Concert Hall. As a result of the completion of the various permanent reminder projects, the capital funding provided for them will not be required in 2017. The projects will continue to be a positive and lasting legacy for the people of Ireland.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Poverty of vision was a fairly apt description of the budget as a whole. It was just scraps here and there. Nowhere is that phrase more apt than in the area of arts, which is about vision. It is true there was a small increase in the allocations for certain agencies and institutions over and above last year. That has been welcomed by those institutions. We had a lengthy debate in here. The Minister knows that the National Campaign for the Arts has asked for much more than that. It asked specifically that the €50 million - not €18 million - that was provided on a once-off basis be retained in full to begin to move us even in a small way in the direction of European average levels of spending in the area of arts. We have a pitifully low level in a country whose revolutionary tradition was infused with the vision of artists who would turn in their graves if they thought the celebration of that cultural tradition was a once-off event. It should be about seriously ramping up the investment in our artists, not just in some institutions but in the artists and the arts generally.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy. I will be clear. The investment in our artists, which is the most important thing, is €18 million in current expenditure. That investment will go into a number of different areas. The Arts Council will get an extra €5 million. People are getting confused between capital and current expenditure. The point is that we have built those projects. They are completed, which is good news. There is also other good news. There is a €3 million capital investment programme for arts centres throughout the country. The applications have come to my Department and they will be assessed shortly, so I will be able to distribute funding for capital projects across the country. The point is that there is €18 million available, which certainly is not scraps in my book. It is a lot of money and I am glad we have it for the arts and culture sector.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The vast majority of artists in this country live in absolute

poverty. Let us start with that reality. Garry Hynes put it well when she said:

I hate that the arts are so underfunded ... How proud we are of our artists but we're not proud enough to make the lives of the people who work in the industry better.

That is the reality. This level of funding simply will not impact on that in any significant way. To fail to acknowledge that the overall level of funding is still well short of what it was in 2008, when the arts were wrongly assaulted for an economic crisis they did not cause, shows a complete poverty of vision. That is my point. The minimum ask is that the entire €50 million, not a portion of it, should be retained. That would not even bring us to 0.6% from the abysmal 0.1%. It is retrograde. I have not even mentioned the 9% cut for the Irish language, which is unbelievably retrograde. It is a philistine failure to recognise the importance of this sector.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Garry Hynes runs the very successful Druid Theatre Company in Galway. I do not know when that comment was made but I am sure she, like other organisations, will welcome the increase. I have been very clear that as the economy continues to improve I wish to see more money invested in the arts. I have achieved that since 2014. Every year has seen an increase in investment in the arts. It is my view that 2016 has been a wonderful year. I repeat that €18 million is going directly to the arts and culture budget in my Department. The remainder was for capital projects and those projects are finished. I do not have to do them again.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister could not keep the €50 million.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Capital money is for building. It is for bricks on mortar.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I can provide the Minister with a few arts capital projects.

Arts in Education Charter

10. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the steps her Department will take to remove barriers to cultural activity for young persons in view of an ESRI and Arts Council report launched recently which states that families of young children with disabilities are highly engaged in cultural activities but that there are barriers to participation at ages nine to 13, with fewer children with special needs participating in structured cultural activities. [31136/16]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I presume that when organisations are starving they are usually pleased to see a few extra crumbs from the table. With regard to this question, the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, recently published a document concerning the arts and the cultural participation of children and young people. It highlighted the benefits children get from cultural engagements, including confidence in learning and expression and better coping skills with studies. However, it also highlighted that a number of sectors of Irish society are not getting those benefits. How do we equality proof access to the arts for everybody in society?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The programme for a partnership Government commits to the implementation of the arts in education charter. This is a partnership between my Department, the Department of Education and Skills and the Arts Council.

Under the Arts Act 2003, primary responsibility for the promotion of the arts at all levels

throughout the country is devolved to the Arts Council, which is the main channel of State current expenditure on the arts. The council's ten year strategy, Making Great Art Work, places specific emphasis on the need to plan and provide for children and young people. The strategy also commits to working to achieve full implementation of the arts in education charter. The council also contributes funding to a number of organisations to assist in the delivery of arts in education projects in schools.

I welcome this joint landmark Arts Council and ESRI study and its findings that Irish children who participate in artistic and cultural activities cope better with schoolwork and have more positive attitudes towards school later on than those who are less engaged. Of particular interest is the identified difference in participation rates across communities and the fact that families of young children with disabilities are highly engaged in cultural activities. As Minister, I am firmly committed to continuing the work of the ongoing partnership between the Department of Education and Skills, my Department and the Arts Council, in line with the arts in education charter.

I am pleased, therefore, that in the 2017 budget I have secured an additional €5 million for the Arts Council, an 8% increase in its annual budget. This additional funding will allow the council to continue to enhance support to artists and arts organisations around the country on both a small and large scale, including its very valuable work in progressing arts in education initiatives and ongoing research, as referred to by the Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister and I agree on the fact that there are major benefits for young children from access to the arts in that sphere of their lives. The report indicates that children from working-class backgrounds have less access to the arts and those benefits. Children with disabilities, especially in their younger years, have good access to the arts, but when they reach nine to 13 years of age that falls off considerably, those benefits recede as far as they are concerned. We also know that children with disabilities from working class backgrounds fare worse with regard to access. Children with disabilities from working class areas who do not live in the cities are at the bottom of the pile in terms of access. In many respects, they comprise a section of our society that is being denied these benefits. Why does the Minister not lock the spending of money in the arts to equality proofing? Why should it not be the case that one of the key performance indicators for every euro spent is that every section of Irish society gets a benefit?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I agree that there are huge benefits for children who are exposed to the arts. My Department supports Music Network by way of the music capital scheme, whereby instruments can be bought for children. Funding of €210,000 was provided under the scheme in 2016. In many cases, young people and groups might not have the necessary funding to purchase musical instruments and this scheme assists them with the cost. The arts in education charter is very good in that it facilitates artists going into schools. The Deputy is correct. I am anxious that all citizens and young people should obtain access to the arts because there are huge benefits in that. I am aware of that from when I worked in the credit union movement, which runs the well known annual Credit Union Art Competition. It had a special category for children with disabilities. Perhaps that is something we could examine in arts funding. I agree that it must be equality proofed and I will take that up with the Arts Council.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: In any debate the Government can always point to a number of programmes which are good, no matter what we discuss. However, the point is that the general situation is not good. If one examines the sector in its entirety, there is not a positive delivery to

different sectors, particularly disadvantaged sectors. The Minister has given a nebulous promise that at some time in the future the Government might focus on this issue but that is not good enough. Arts & Disability Ireland, ADI, has pointed to the massive challenges that exist with regard to improving programmes within the sector and to the fact that there is no continuity in policy direction and implementation related to including people with disabilities in the arts, despite the thorough documentation available. In line with Article 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, will the Minister not take the opportunity to state that by the end of 2017, every euro spent by the Government on the arts will be equality-proofed in order that nobody will be left behind, regardless of whether he or she is from working class or rural areas or has disabilities? Will she give that commitment today?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I know the Minister has been very supportive of the arts in education charter and, specifically, the local arts in education partnership. As the Minister is aware, we had a very good model in Cavan-Monaghan. There is an opportunity for equality proofing, getting into the heart of primary school children and giving them the opportunity to engage in and access arts and cultural activities. That partnership is intended for local authorities and education and training boards, which are at the heart of education. I know the Arts Council is very supportive of that notion as well. Dr. Katie Sweeney is the national director for the integration of the arts at the Department of Education and Skills. In terms of the Minister's budget and plans for 2017, is there anything specific for the development of local arts in education partnerships where the measure referred to by Deputy Tóibín could be rolled out?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: We fund the arts in education charter. We increased the funding last year. I am very committed to it. It relates to young children accessing the arts and getting the opportunity to get involved in them at an early age. It is about doing this in schools. Targeting schools is the best opportunity to access all of the children, including children in disadvantaged areas. We need to get into all the schools. This is the best way to get young people involved in the arts.

In 2015, support from my Department totalled €129,000 for the arts in education. This included a payment of €60,000 to the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals for its work in arts in education. The Arts Council provides funding to a number of organisations to assist in the delivery of arts in education projects in schools. To be fair to the Arts Council, it does a lot of work in this area and provides support to Poetry Ireland's Writers in Schools scheme, which involves writers and storytellers visiting primary and post-primary schools. This is in addition to the Bringing to Book Artist-in-Residence scheme, which is a Children's Books Ireland project.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Is there any specific plan for the roll out of local arts in education partnerships? I accept what she said about the funding of €60,000 provided to the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals whose Creative Engagement scheme has been ongoing for years. Are there specific plans in the 2017 budget for the development or roll out of local arts in education partnerships nationally?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: We continue to work with the Department of Education and Skills because two Departments are involved. We will continue to work on that and to develop the arts in education partnership. We need to support it more. I am certainly very conscious of it and will work on it.

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Rural Development Plan

11. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the status of the action plan for rural development; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [31139/16]

Deputy Peter Burke: I welcome the announcement in A Programme for a Partnership Government of a new Department with the Minister at the helm that will have a renewed focus on making rural Ireland more sustainable. It is very important to mirror the action plan for jobs and have a number of key targets set out clearly with clear timelines for implementation. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide an update in respect of the action plan for rural development.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Supporting rural development is a key priority for this Government. The programme for a partnership Government contains a series of commitments for delivery across a range of Departments and State agencies to revitalise rural Ireland and ensure that the benefits of economic recovery are felt in all regions. The action plan for rural development will act as an overarching structure for the co-ordination and implementation of initiatives across Government that will benefit rural Ireland and help to generate increased economic activity in rural areas.

Progress is now well under way on the development of the action plan. In September, I wrote to my Cabinet colleagues seeking inputs to the plan. I took the opportunity to brief Members on 29 September on the approach being taken in the development of the action plan and I invited Members to offer practical suggestions for measures that could support economic and social development in rural Ireland. I also invited the Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to provide an input to the development of the plan.

Over the last few weeks, my Department conducted an extensive consultation process through a series of workshops around the country, to seek the views of people living and working in rural Ireland on potential measures for inclusion in the action plan. My Department has also held a series of bilateral meetings with key stakeholder groups. My officials are currently working through the many suggestions received arising from the consultation process and my objective is to publish the action plan for rural development before the end of the year.

Deputy Peter Burke: I would be grateful if the Minister would set out how much funding will be available for the action plan for rural development. I note that there has been significant investment in greenways and sustainable projects in my constituency of Longford-Westmeath. The Minister of State, Deputy Ring, will be aware of our sports capital grants. It is very important that we continue this but in a more co-ordinated fashion through sustainable targets and that we ensure these targets are met. Significant work has been done to provide a roadmap to an exceptional town in Westmeath called Moate. This town has faced significant challenges because the further west you go, the greater the challenges. It set up its own group and developed a number of sustainable projects within the town. It is very important for the Government to meet people like this. It would be very worthwhile to see that. I would be grateful if the Minister could advise on the budget for it.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Funding for rural development programmes within my Department's Estimate for 2017 will amount to €79.27 million. This represents an increase of €18 million or 29% compared to the 2016 baseline of €61.2 million. This will allow for in-

creased activity on key rural development schemes administered by the Department and will also complement the broader work of the Department, much of which has a positive impact on rural Ireland. For example, we have trebled the funding for the town and village regeneration scheme. The figure for 2017 is €12 million. We have secured an additional €8 million for the rural development scheme, including €5 million for the recently re-opened Clár programme. There will be €40 million for the delivery of the Leader rural development programme. I have increased the funding for the preparation for the roll-out of broadband across rural Ireland and I should also mention the increase in funding for the Heritage Council which will benefit communities in rural Ireland. Some schemes are running at the moment, including the town and village regeneration scheme. Applications are being examined. There is a total of €10 million in that scheme. Applications to the €5 million rural economic development zone programme will close at the end of this month. A total of €4.5 million has been provided in rural recreation funding.

Deputy Peter Burke: I welcome the response. I think we are approaching this in the correct manner in having an action plan. Finea in County Westmeath has faced huge challenges. The huge Mr. Crumb factory is located there and cannot get sufficient broadband, which is a huge challenge for it. We need to do the things we spoke about such as a co-ordinated plan to ensure we encourage sustainable employment in the region and in turn revitalise the region. It is very important that we continue on that path. I also welcome the town and village regeneration scheme which tries to promote good sustainable projects. We went through a very tough time but the Minister is co-ordinating it well and I encourage her to keep going on this path. Hopefully, we can learn the lessons of the past and ensure that we have renewed investment in rural Ireland.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: This action plan for rural development is about joined-up thinking at a higher level and getting Departments to “rural proof” their policies and positively discriminate in favour of rural Ireland. I have said this on a number of occasions and they will have to focus on rural Ireland. The Deputy mentioned the village of Moate, and I will be happy to visit. It is great to see communities coming together and coming up with their own ideas. The town and village enhancement scheme allows communities to develop local solutions for local issues.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Unfortunately, the time has elapsed. The clocks were not functioning for much of the debate due to an electronic error. It was no fault of the Deputies or Ministers.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Beaten by the bell. I will get the written answer.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Topical Issue Debate

School Patronage

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for choosing this item for debate. It is very important to families living in Limerick city. Limerick city is unique in that it has a

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central application system for entry to post-primary schools. It does not apply in other parts of the country. One of the nine schools that is to be announced in the near future is in the south-western side of Limerick and is due to open in 2017. Therefore, it needs to be on the list of schools to which parents can apply for their children to attend from September 2017. The Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Bruton, will know I have been raising the issue by way of parliamentary questions, and I have a written answer to a question from 5 October which causes me concern.

I am a former Minister for Education of Skills and the timetable, as I understood it when I left office, was that the patronage of the new schools was to be announced in the second week of September. The Department was well aware of the urgency of the issue, particularly regarding the Limerick school, given that the central application system does not apply in other parts of the country. This is the third week of October and we still do not have an announcement of the patronage of the schools. The written answer I received was as follows:

Applications received are currently being assessed by my Department... The final assessment reports will be forwarded for the consideration of the new schools establishment group, NSEG, which will submit a report with recommendations to me for consideration and final decision.

I am concerned about this given that I would have thought that at this stage the recommendations would have gone from the NSEG to the Minister for a decision. Schools in Limerick are holding their open days. Parents are attending these open days and will very soon have to fill in a school application form in which they will rank their preferences from one to nine, usually. This is a very important decision for parents. On the south side of the city, there is one large school which is always oversubscribed. Therefore, parents will have to decide whether they will put the school down as their first choice, knowing they may not get it. If they do not get this school, they may end up with the choice at the very bottom of their list, given that most of the schools they may have put down as their second or subsequent choices will already be filled by parents who have made those schools their first choice.

People in the House who do not live in Limerick do not deal with the system. It is a very specific system that applies in Limerick, and this is why it is so urgent we know the patronage of the school very quickly. If the Minister is not ready to announce the patronage of all nine schools, I urge him to at least announce this one, given that it is the most urgent. The other school that will open in Limerick is to be on the eastern side of the city. Given that it will not open until 2018, there is no particular urgency about it, although parents would like to know who the patron will be, as do parents in the other seven parts of the country where new schools are to be opened in 2017 or 2018. Obviously, the schools are needed, and would not be coming on stream if the demographic pressures did not exist in those parts of the country. From my knowledge of Limerick, I know there is real stress on parents who are worried their children will not get a place anywhere near where they live. In this part of Limerick, parents are sending their children out into the country on buses or across to the other side of the city, given that the one school in the area is so oversubscribed. The same is true of the other side of the city, which is due to get a new school in 2018. I urge the Minister to make a decision on the patronage of the school now.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): I thank the Deputy for raising the question, which gives me the opportunity to set out the process by which it is decided who will operate a new school. Since 2011, new schools are established

only in areas of demographic growth. My Department uses a geographical information system to identify the areas under increased demographic pressure nationwide. The system uses a range of data sources in carrying out nationwide demographic exercises to determine whether additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary levels. As the Deputy will recall, the outcome of such demographic analyses was the November 2015 announcement that four new primary schools and nine new post-primary schools would open in 2017 and 2018 to cater for increased demographic needs.

When it is decided that a new school is required to meet demographic needs in an area, the Department runs a separate patronage process to decide who will operate the school. It is open to all patrons and prospective patrons to apply for patronage of a school under this process. The criteria used in relation to patronage of a new school place a particular emphasis on parental demand for plurality and diversity of patronage. Parental preferences for each patron, together with the extent of diversity available in the area, are key to decisions in relation to the outcome of the process.

In April 2016, applications were invited for the patronage of the nine new post-primary schools to be established in 2017 and 2018, including the new post-primary school to serve the Limerick city and environs in the south-west area. The closing date for receipt of applications for this process was 8 June 2016. Patrons submitted with their application a parental preference template in which parents had been requested to declare their preference for their child to be educated through that patron's school model and also their preference with regard to education through the medium of English or Irish. The assessment process is at a very advanced stage in the Department. As the Deputy will appreciate, the process is detailed and rigorous, and numerous applications have been received in respect of each of the nine proposed new schools. The new schools establishment group is an external independent advisory group set up to oversee the process. The new schools establishment group is meeting next week and a report with its recommendations should be submitted to the Minister, Deputy Richard Bruton, shortly thereafter for his consideration and final decision, and I will also receive it. He will then announce who is the successful patron of each school.

In the context of the common applications system which operates in Limerick, the Department has been liaising with the Limerick Education Centre in this matter and understands that post-primary school opening days and nights are ongoing. The assessment reports and recommendations of the NSEG will be available on the Department's website following the announcement. I will look into the particular school and if the Deputy would like to meet me, it would be no bother. I would be delighted to sit down with her and see if we can push it forward as soon as possible. I understand the necessity of it.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State for his reply and for his offer at the end of his contribution. At least there is some progress and some definite information in that the NSEG is meeting next week. I assume it will make decisions at the meeting and immediately send its recommendations to the Minister, and that the Minister, as is the norm, will go along with the recommendations. I hope we will have news by the end of next week. If, by any chance, the NSEG is not in a position to make a decision on all the nine schools, I urge that it make a decision on the school in question, given that it is the most urgent one. I ask the Minister of State to convey this to the Minister, Deputy Richard Bruton, and the Department.

The Minister of State can imagine what it is like for parents. Every year, when they have to fill in these forms, public representatives in the area have very stressed parents coming into

our offices. These parents say they do not know what to do, given that if they put down a certain school as their first choice they may not get it and their children may have to travel long distances to school. Given that a new school is coming on stream, pressure will be eased in the part of the city that has been under the most pressure. Knowing that the school is coming on stream is a help in itself, but parents also need to know its patronage before it can be placed on their lists. We do not know what it will be, but some parents have certain preferences and its patronage will colour their decisions of whether to put the school first on their lists.

An urgent decision is needed. I welcome the Minister of State's positive response. I hope that he will convey the situation's urgency to his colleagues in the Department and to the Minister, Deputy Bruton.

Deputy John Halligan: The Deputy has my word on that. The Minister or I will revert to her immediately once the decision is made. I will do my utmost to have an answer for her about the school. We will revert to her within a week. Is that fair enough?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State.

Film Industry

Deputy Pat Casey: I am grateful for the opportunity to raise what is a serious issue for Wicklow. Yesterday, we received by e-mail the announcement that Ardmore Studios were being placed for sale on the open market. This raises serious questions for Enterprise Ireland and the Government about the development of the film industry in Wicklow, given the industry's significant jobs potential for our county.

As most people are aware, Ardmore Studios are the birthplace and foundation of the Irish film industry. Ardmore is an amazing success story that should be built on, not sold. The 18-acre site is crucial to the development of the film industry in Wicklow and, indeed, the nation. Productions at Ardmore have won 14 Oscars and many BAFTA, Golden Globe and Emmy awards, including for such well-known films as "Braveheart", "My Left Foot" and "Excalibur" and, in the modern television era, "Moone Boy", "The Tudors" and "Penny Dreadful".

The film industry is key to the economic development of Ireland, with up to 500 jobs associated with Ardmore when it is at full capacity. It has been at full capacity for the past two years, earning profits of €1.5 million and €1.6 million, respectively. Significant public investment by successive Governments and Wicklow County Council has been made in the site for decades and the industry has grown through section 481 tax measures.

The Government, through Enterprise Ireland, has a 32% shareholding in the site according to yesterday's RTE business news. What is the reason behind the Government's sale of the site? The announcement of the sale as a going concern is worrying because there is a substantial risk that it will be sold to the highest bidder, who could be a developer and have nothing to do with the film industry. Will the Government confirm that the sale is conditional and Ardmore will be retained as a film production centre, with no ifs or buts about it? I just want a simple confirmation that the site will remain for the film industry. Film production is a national strategic industry and the Government, through Enterprise Ireland, should retain a direct shareholding interest in it via Ardmore.

Following the civil war and at the beginning of the determined efforts by Seán Lemass to modernise the Irish economy, Emmet Dalton, friend and comrade of Michael Collins, convinced his old civil war enemy, Seán Lemass, to invest in the film industry and build a studio at Ardmore on a 37-acre site, which opened in 1958. If Seán Lemass could be convinced by Emmet Dalton that the State should be involved in the film industry, it is ironic that a Fine Gael-led Government could be about to see that dramatic partnership end.

As a representative of a key shareholder, will the Minister of State confirm that the sale of the studios will be conditional on its continuance as a centre for film production?

Deputy John Halligan: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. Clearly, my thoughts are with the workers and families affected by the announcement. I hope that all employment rights will be adhered to if it comes to the closure or sale of the studios.

The sale of Ardmore Studios is a commercial decision by the owners of the studios. In this regard, Enterprise Ireland only has a minority stake in Ardmore Studios, which is a legacy issue as a result of an equity investment and a loan by NADCORP, a predecessor State agency. The balance is owned by a company that is owned by its shareholders. This means that the Government holds only a minority share. It is worth noting that a significant part of the site being sold is zoned for film production purposes only. This is the information that we received recently.

Enterprise Ireland supports certain types of companies in the creative sector in areas such as animation and digital content. It provides these companies with a range of supports appropriate to their stage of business and is committed to supporting them to internationalise.

Today, the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Fitzgerald, concluded a two-day Enterprise Ireland trade visit to Cannes and the Cote d'Azur region of France. Twenty-three Irish companies were represented and travelled to France to build business relationships with their current and prospective counterparts in four key sectors in the region. Seventeen companies from the Irish film sector were part of this group and included companies such as Soho Moon, Bandit Films, Irish TV and Treehouse Republic. Building on its commitment to this sector, Enterprise Ireland was supportive of the establishment of Animation Ireland, a trade association for the leading Irish animation studios working together to promote Ireland's world class sector internationally.

Wicklow has been home to Ardmore Studios since 1958 and the recent establishment of another state-of-the-art studio, Ashford Studios, demonstrates the region's suitability as hub for the indigenous and international film industry. The regional presence of the Wicklow Film Commission is an additional support for film makers exploring options for filming in the area.

The mid-east regional Action Plan for Jobs has a number of actions to support the film sector. These include a feasibility study and business plan for the development of a film industry cluster in the county; activating a film industry network to contribute towards the development of an audiovisual cluster; piloting a one-day workshop in film industry-related training; building on the success of the film sector by providing supports and incentives and developing ancillary services; and the provision of film industry-related training programmes in partnership with third level institutions in the area. In this regard, Wicklow County Council, education and training providers and the film industry development group are working with the Wicklow local enterprise office to progress these actions.

I must apologise to the Deputy, as I am taking this question and the information has been

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given to me quickly. According to it, the decision was a commercial one. Enterprise Ireland only has a minority shareholding. I do not know the exact figure and will not pretend to know, but either the Minister, Deputy Mitchell O'Connor, or I will revert to the Deputy on this matter. It is being investigated and we are in contact with whoever needs to be contacted because this has unquestionably been a blow to the area. I am unsure as to the Government's involvement, given that this is a commercial decision and Enterprise Ireland only has a minority stake.

Deputy Pat Casey: I thank the Minister of State for taking this question.

4 o'clock

However, the response I have had is very disappointing on a personal level. I was asked to defer this question from yesterday to today so that the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Deputy Heather Humphreys, would be here to answer it. As we all can see, she is not in the Chamber. This raises more suspicion, which is not a word I use lightly, as to what is going on. The State does not have a small shareholding in this industry; it has a 32% stake. I fully agree with the Minister of State in regard to the Action Plan for Jobs. There is reference, on pages 5 and 7 of that document, to the unique opportunity Wicklow offers to develop and build on the film industry, with a specific reference to the two studios involved. The State is selling its shareholding in the largest film studio in the country with absolutely no conditions attached. That is totally unacceptable.

In my capacity as a Member of Dáil Éireann for Wicklow, I contacted IBI Corporate Finance yesterday to request a copy of the prospectus of sale in order to study it. My request was refused point blank and I was told to contact Ardmore Studios directly. I then spoke to the CEO of Ardmore Studios, who likewise denied me a copy of the prospectus. What is going on here? I have serious reservations about the Government's role in this sale. It is disappointing and unacceptable that members of the Government do not know what is happening with the State's stake. As I said, I am annoyed that I was asked yesterday to defer this matter on the basis that the Minister would be here today, only to find her absent. There is no appreciation of how important this industry is to Wicklow. The Ardmore site must be maintained as a film studio into the future.

Deputy John Halligan: I can only agree with what the Deputy has said. I will not defend the indefensible and I agree that if Ardmore Studios is closing, we need to know why. I was not aware the State has a 32% stake in it. The policy issues concerning the film industry are matters for my colleague, the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. I assure the Deputy I will contact her as soon as I can and request that she make contact with the Deputy and see where we can go from here. I am informed that planning issues generally are a matter for the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government but it is the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs who is dealing with this particular matter. I will do my best in the coming days to ensure any information the Deputy needs regarding what is happening to Ardmore Studios is imparted to him by whichever is the relevant Department. It is not acceptable that the Deputy, who represents the area in question, should not have all the relevant information. If I can gather the information on what is happening with Enterprise Ireland and the Government's role in the sale, I give the Deputy my word I will get it for him. If not, I will contact the relevant Department and request that the Minister contact the Deputy in the coming days.

Health Services Staff

Deputy Imelda Munster: I am disappointed that the Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, is not in the Chamber to be accountable in respect of the serious issue I wish to raise. Is the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, aware of plans by the Health Service Executive to cut primary care services in the Louth-Meath area? The HSE has instructed management in the health service to save €1.5 million by way of staffing cuts between now and the end of the year. These measures will lead to serious cutbacks in services provided by occupational therapists, physiotherapists, public health nurses and, in particular, home help support staff. Is the Minister of State aware that last Friday week, the HSE called a meeting at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Louth at which it informed management there that the contracts of nine full-time clerical and administrative staff and one part-time clerical worker were to be terminated with immediate effect?

It beggars belief that at a time when we are seeing services, especially primary care services, cut to the bone, further cuts are being made just as we come into the winter months. I know of many elderly people throughout Louth and east Meath, people who are sick and frail and have serious mobility issues, who are currently receiving only 15 minutes of home help twice a week, if they are lucky. These are people who need help to get out of bed and get washed and dressed every morning. Now the service will be further cut. That is totally unacceptable and amounts to neglect of patient care.

The sacking of nine full-time clerical and administrative staff and one part-time worker at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda will have an adverse effect on patients. If there are insufficient numbers of clerical and administrative staff, there will be delays in patients getting notice of appointments, receiving referrals and obtaining doctors' and consultants' letters. It beggars belief that this is being done. Moreover, Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital is one of the worst in the country for overcrowding, being often top of the list in this regard. Yesterday, for instance, 29 patients were on trolleys there. I am calling on the Minister to reverse those cuts as we approach the winter.

The situation is compounded by the fact that 18 beds assigned to services for the elderly in Louth have been closed and lie empty because of nursing staff shortages. I realise there is an overall nursing recruitment plan in place but a significant part of the problem in my constituency is the serious delays by the HSE management nationally, not locally, in approving the filling of staff vacancies. It was known for months before the 18 beds were closed that there was a need to recruit staff. Those approvals were left on a desk or shelf gathering dust in the full knowledge of the crisis we were facing. It was only when it was brought into the public domain several weeks ago that the beds were closed that there was an undertaking to fill the roles. Will the Minister implement a fast-tracking process to fill these vacancies? The delay in so doing is compounding the problems in the Louth-Meath area.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): I am taking this issue on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, who apologises for having to attend another engagement. The HSE has advised that Louth primary care services have not applied staffing cuts during 2016. Department officials have, however, been advised by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, RCSI, hospital group that its cost containment plan for the Louth hospital group, which comprises Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital and Louth County Hospital, included the release of 9.5 agency staff from various administrative and clerical roles

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within the two hospitals. Senior management in the hospitals sought to retain two of those agency staff for a short period to facilitate an efficient transition of work duties to other staff within the hospitals. At this time, 7.5 agency staff have been released, with the final two to follow at a later stage.

The HSE has advised that community health organisation area 8, which includes Louth and Meath, is projected to run €1.5 million in excess of available funds for primary care services for 2016. This overspend is across the six counties of the CHO. Each service manager has been tasked with exploring ways in which efficiencies and savings can be achieved. As I have already advised the Deputy, Louth primary care has not applied staffing cuts during 2016. The HSE has advised that where vacancies arise, applications are made by individual service departments to fill them.

Significant additional resources have been invested in recent years in primary care and disabled services with a view to enhancing therapy service provision. In particular, additional funding of €20 million was provided in 2013 to strengthen primary care services and to support the recruitment for prioritised front-line posts. Over 260 additional posts for primary care teams have been filled as part of this initiative.

More recently, €4 million was provided under the HSE's national service plan 2016 to focus specifically on addressing speech and language therapy waiting lists in primary care and social care for children up to 18 years. This funding is facilitating the HSE to appoint 83 new full-time and recurring posts in primary care to address waiting lists, prioritising the longest-waiting children. I am advised that three posts have been allocated to Louth under this initiative.

Alongside services provided through primary care teams and networks, Louth has a Community Intervention Team, CIT, in place to facilitate early discharge from hospital. The 2016-17 winter initiative provides for the expansion of CIT services in Louth and Meath with the potential to support additional patients through the winter and during 2017.

I also understand that there has been increased investment in addiction services across the Louth and Meath area during 2016, with three additional clinical posts coming on stream. Additionally, there have been improvements in podiatry and dietetics services as part of chronic disease management. Furthermore, budget 2017 provides additional funding of €18.5 million for the further development of primary care services. This funding will support the Government's commitment to a shift towards primary care so that we can provide better care close to home for communities around the country.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The first question I asked was whether the Minister for Health would reverse the €1.5 million in cuts to primary care services. I did not get a response to that question. The Minister of State said that 9.5 clerical and administrative staff were "released" from their posts. That is a first. I have never heard of anybody who had a contract terminated with immediate effect going home to his or her family and saying, "I was released from work today". They were sacked.

I will go back to the questions and hopefully the Minister of State will give me an answer this time and not just the usual HSE spiel. Does the Minister intend to implement a fast-tracking process for the filling of nursing vacancies within the HSE? The filling of those vacancies was not approved by senior HSE management which has resulted in the closure of 18 beds in the elderly services in County Louth. Will the Minister give a commitment to introduce a fast-

tracking process?

On the issue of recruitment more generally, is there any forward planning at all? Does the HSE put any thought into the age profile of its staff and planned retirements? Is there any sort of planning at all? This crisis was allowed to develop due to inaction by HSE senior management at national level and, as a result, the patients and the staff suffer. The staff suffer greatly. I know there is a problem with the recruitment of nurses nationally but that stems from the deliberate running down of our public health service. Nurses are leaving in their droves due to the stressful working conditions. I read recently of nurses who have moved abroad-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Imelda Munster: -----who have found again the love that they had for their profession because they are respected in the countries in which they are now working. They have a proper, decent working environment.

Again, I ask the Minister of State to answer my question about fast-tracking the approval process for the filling of vacancies. I also ask her to answer the question about reversing the €1.5 million in cuts to vital primary care services.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Thank you, Deputy. We are way over time.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I understand that the Deputy is very frustrated with my reply. Unfortunately, I cannot give her any assurance that the €1.5 million in cuts will be reversed. I cannot answer that particular question because I do not have the details in front of me. However, I will pursue the matter with the Minister for Health on Deputy Munster's behalf.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That was part of the question I tabled.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I appreciate that but the Minister of State is only standing in for the Minister for Health. I do not want to interrupt the Deputy but there is a procedure whereby the questioner has four minutes, the Minister four minutes and then each has a further two minutes.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: The second part of the Deputy's question related to the 18 beds that were closed in Louth. Unfortunately, I do not have any information on that either. However, I will come back to the Deputy on it. I will make a commitment to the Deputy to revert to her on it because I do not have the relevant information in front of me now.

In the reply I have in front of me, it is made very clear that the €1.6 million was actually an overspend within the Louth area. That is now being rectified through the various hospitals. The Minister is committed to supporting those in Louth and Meath to make the changes as quickly as possible. There is nothing in what I said to suggest that nurses would not be recruited. There is a definite response to the effect that additional staff will be employed but that it will take time.

Unfortunately, I do not have the specific answers to the Deputy's questions. However, I have taken down in detail what she has said and I will speak to the Minister for Health about it and ask him to reply to her in person.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Deputy Byrne is a woman of her word and I am sure she will revert to Deputy Munster. I apologise to Deputy Munster for cutting her short but I need to stick to the time table. She raised an issue which is of concern throughout

the country.

Ambulance Service Accommodation

Deputy Pat Deering: I thank the Ceann Comhairle's office for selecting this very important issue which relates to the ambulance base in Carlow town. Carlow town has a population of approximately 23,500. The total population of the county is around 55,000. The ambulance base has been located in the grounds of the former mental hospital in Carlow, St. Dymphna's, for the past few years. It has 15 rostered paramedics, five advanced and ten ordinary. The base is one of the busiest in the south east. The structure itself is a prefabricated building which has been in place for the past 15 years. In the past while, however, the structure has become totally outdated. There are issues with sewage and vermin, there is no running hot water and there is no place for the paramedics to make a cup of tea. The base is used 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but is totally unsuitable. Paramedics who are on a shift from 7 a.m to 7 p.m., for example, and who are back at the base in Carlow, cannot even make a cup of tea. If they get soiled while on duty, there is nowhere for them to have a shower or change their clothes.

Last October, I was given a written guarantee by the authorities regarding the base. In a letter from the HSE, I was assured that a logistics and estates manager was involved in ongoing discussions with the HSE's estates section with the aim of identifying a suitable alternative site or suitable accommodation within the St. Dymphna's campus as a matter of priority. The campus at St. Dymphna's is huge with a lot of available space. However, as and from Monday morning next, the paramedics who work out of the Carlow base are being moved to Kilkenny. It is totally unacceptable to expect paramedics in a town the size of Carlow to work out of Kilkenny. There should be an alternative site in Carlow made available to them. I was also told that work was ongoing to provide an alternative and upgrade the existing structure. If this work is going to be done, why not move the personnel to another part of the Carlow base?

I have two questions for the Minister of State, whom I thank for being here. Can she assure me that the base in Carlow will be maintained after this work has been completed? It is essential that the Carlow base is maintained and I want an assurance to that effect. There are serious concerns about the effect the decision to move these paramedics to the base at St. Luke's hospital in Kilkenny, which is at least 40 minutes from Carlow town and the north Carlow area, will have on patient care and welfare in the Carlow ambulance service area. Can the Minister of State give me an assurance that this move will not have a knock-on effect on the care and welfare of patients in County Carlow? I will repeat my two questions. Can the Minister of State tell me whether the base in Carlow town will be maintained indefinitely? Can she comment on the effect this move will have on the welfare and care of patients in the Carlow area?

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I thank Deputy Deering. I am responding to this matter on behalf of the Minister.

The National Ambulance Service, NAS, has confirmed that following a health and safety audit, an issue was identified in the shower and changing facilities used by staff at the Carlow ambulance station. Works are planned to take place to rectify the issue concerned and this is being treated as a priority by the NAS. Discussions are under way with staff with a view to addressing how services in the Carlow area can best be provided while the planned works are under way. Patient safety will be the overriding priority in these discussions. The director of the NAS has assured me that services in the Carlow area will not be compromised during this

period.

The NAS has undergone a significant process of modernisation in recent years. A number of significant service innovations and developments have taken place, including: the establishment of the national emergency operations centre; the delivery of enhanced technology to improve response times; the development of an intermediate care service to provide lower-acuity hospital transfers, thereby freeing up more emergency ambulances for more urgent calls; and the establishment of a permanent emergency aeromedical support service. We are looking at alternatives to the current care model, which requires every patient to be brought to an emergency department. These alternatives include providing clinical advice over the phone to callers and referring them to other care pathways as appropriate.

This reform programme is taking place against the backdrop of the HIQA review of ambulance services, which was published in late 2014, and the NAS capacity review, which was published earlier this year. The capacity review, which was undertaken by a UK-based consultancy firm, Lightfoot Solutions, examined overall ambulance resource levels and distribution against demand and activity. The review found that the NAS faces a major challenge compared to ambulance services elsewhere because population density in Ireland differs significantly from that in many other countries. The population outside the greater Dublin area is widely dispersed, with a relatively large number of people living in rural areas. This means response time targets are much more difficult to achieve because of longer driving distances. The report endorses the existing policy of dynamic deployment, whereby vehicles are strategically located where they are most likely to be required, rather than statically deployed and located at a particular station.

The implementation of the recommendations of the capacity review will require a multi-annual programme of phased investment in ambulance manpower, vehicles and technology. In that regard, the Deputy can be assured that increased funding will be available to the NAS for 2017. The detail of the improvements to be funded will be provided in the HSE's national service plan for 2017. Officials in the Department of Health will work closely with their counterparts in the HSE and the NAS in the coming weeks to agree priorities for the 2017 allocations.

Deputy Pat Deering: I thank the Minister of State for her reply. I appreciate her point that this is a priority issue. It was a priority issue last October but 12 months have passed. When does a priority issue become a genuine priority? I am very disappointed that this issue has not been addressed over the past 12 months. We are not talking about huge sums of money.

The members of these ambulance crews, who could be out on a call for a large part of the day, have nowhere to make cups of tea or wash their hands. They are based in conditions that are at a Third-World level. It is not acceptable in 2016 that there are vermin issues and sewage is building up. This issue needs to be addressed as soon as possible. While I accept that services in Carlow will not be compromised, I am not convinced in other respects. I did not hear much in the Minister of State's reply to suggest that the ambulance base in Carlow will be maintained there in the future. This is the key issue.

There must be an ambulance base to cater for Carlow town's population of 23,000 or 24,000 people. Ambulance personnel have to be able to get to the people of Carlow as soon as issues arise. I appreciate that the demographics of our society are changing. We need to be able to get to incidents within a specific period of time. The ambulance staff in Carlow want a base in the town to serve the local population of 23,000 or 24,000 people. They need a place where they can make cups of tea, wash their hands and change their clothes when the situation arises. I ask

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the Minister of State for confirmation that this will become a priority issue as we move forward. The ambulance base in Carlow must be maintained. The alternative accommodation that the local ambulance personnel want must be provided for them as soon as possible.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I understand where Deputy Deering is coming from. It is unacceptable that the staff of a service that helps people have to work in conditions in which they cannot do normal things like wash their hands and use the bathroom. All I can give the Deputy is the answer I have in front of me. I cannot specifically say to him where the base will end up. I will raise the matter with the Minister, Deputy Harris. Having spoken to the Minister, I can assure Deputy Deering that the HSE will be prioritising the facility for the people who are part of the emergency service in Carlow. I will continue to pursue this matter with the Minister on behalf of the Deputy over the next day or two.

It is not acceptable that the Deputy has had to raise this matter again after 12 months of promises that something will happen. I will make it my personal business to go back to the Minister and speak to him at length, just as I have done every time I have responded to Topical Issues raised by Government and Opposition Deputies. I will come back to Deputy Deering with some kind of a formulated answer if that is acceptable.

Deputy Pat Deering: I thank the Minister of State.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): I thank the Minister of State and Deputy Deering for their co-operation. It is much appreciated.

Syrian Conflict: Statements

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): This debate on the conflict in Syria will focus in particular on the horrific crisis in Aleppo, which is troubling Deputies on all sides of the House and many people in this country and throughout the world.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I would like to share time with Deputy Griffin.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I thank the House for agreeing to hold this important debate. I note that just two of the 158 Members of the House are present. I have put my views on Syria on the record of this House on several occasions, most recently this morning at an Oireachtas committee meeting. It is important for all Members be given time to reflect on the widespread concern expressed by Irish citizens about the situation in Syria, particularly the siege and bombardment of Aleppo. The harrowing images on our television screens and in our print and digital media, especially the reports from Aleppo, have rightly created a sense of outrage inside the Oireachtas and across Ireland. It is important to be absolutely clear that what is happening in Syria is a direct continuation of the events taking place there since March 2011. Assad's response to the emergence of a protest movement was to resort to the mass murder of his people. Schools, hospitals, food markets and bakeries have all been targeted for air and artillery strikes. The regime slogan was clear. The call was to side with Assad or the regime would burn the country. I do not doubt the determination of those involved. Their actions have made clear that they want to run the country or leave no country left to run. This is a regime which the United

Nations commission of inquiry has accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity. This is a regime which has used and continues to use chemical weapons against its people. This is a regime that the UN Secretary General said was responsible for countless killings and the maiming of children as well as for the arrest, arbitrary detention, ill-treatment and torture of children. This is a regime that has consistently undermined the efforts of the UN and the international community to end the conflict.

Ireland has been supportive throughout of a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led solution to the conflict. The Syrian people must have the freedom to exercise their rights, including the democratic right to choose their national leaders. These principles were set out clearly in Geneva in 2012 and have guided my interventions on Syria in Brussels and at the UN in New York, including for my address to the general assembly and at bilateral meetings with our international partners.

One regrettable aspect of the conflict is the manner in which terrorists and extremists, sometimes with support from regional actors, have coalesced and used the chaos and instability to promote their radical ideologies. The conflict has attracted violent extremists affiliated with militant groups, including Daesh, Jabhat Al-Nusra, Hezbollah and many others. On a recent visit to the Golan Heights, I was able to see clearly the parts of Syria now held by some of these Islamist factions.

In addition to Syria's long-standing divisions, we are seeing wider regional tensions being played out. Irrespective of which group is perpetrating the violence, it is the people of Syria who continue to suffer. It is appalling to see what is happening to the ordinary civilians of that country as this conflict continues to worsen. The only way to end the scourge of terrorism and extremism is by resolving the conflict through a political process and restoring the legitimacy and authority of the Syrian state across all of Syria.

I know that many Irish people are outraged at Russia's actions in Syria and its support of the Assad regime. I share this disquiet. Russia has vetoed resolutions at the UN Security Council to restrain this conflict, end the regime's illegal restrictions on humanitarian access, support efforts at a political resolution and provide legal accountability for the victims of the Syrian conflict on five occasions. Use of the Russian veto has protected the Assad regime, while repeatedly denying the Syrian people the legal protections provided under international law. I deplore this abuse of the authority which Russia enjoys at the United Nations.

The military intervention by Russia since September 2015 has been a self-declared mission to defeat terrorism. However, all the evidence is that Russia has adopted the same view of terrorism as the Assad regime, namely, that opposition to the regime amounts to terrorism. Russia has claimed that it is attacking terrorists in Aleppo. The UN special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, has said that there may be between 800 and 900 fighters in eastern Aleppo out of an estimated total population of 275,000. There is no logic in the massive attacks we have all been witnessing if the aim is to target a handful of terrorists. Hundreds of civilians in Aleppo have died. All the hospitals in eastern Aleppo have been repeatedly hit by military attacks, as have the civilian rescue services.

I do not even understand what Russia hopes to gain from the survival in power of an ally who has destroyed his country. Syria will need many years and immense funding to recover from this conflict. Russian support to Syrians other than Bashar Al-Assad has been sadly limited. The actions go far beyond what might be judged as errors or collateral damage and ap-

pear to be either reckless or deliberate and in violation of the rules of war. It is a matter of the gravest concern to me that a permanent member of the UN Security Council with a duty to the United Nations to uphold international law and the principles of the UN Charter could condone or engage in the bombardment on Aleppo. As the EU stated on Monday, this bombardment may amount to a war crime.

I wish to set out what I believe can be done to resolve this conflict and bring the agony of the Syrian people to an end. First, all sides must act immediately to restore the cessation of hostilities. Russia must use its influence on Assad to compel him to end his violence against the Syrian people. The illegal and systematic denial of humanitarian access must end. All sides must engage meaningfully in negotiations to achieve a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led political resolution based on the formation of a sovereign unity government. Finally, there must be accountability for victims of this barbarous conflict.

We count on Russia to fulfil the vital role it has chosen as a member of the international Syria support group to de-escalate the conflict and renew the political process. Today's brief pause in the bombing of Aleppo is simply not enough. Ireland stands ready to play a positive role. My EU colleagues and I spoke on Monday with the UN special envoy, Mr. de Mistura, underlining our continuing and strong support for his efforts to stem the destruction of Syria and her people. Today, the Taoiseach will be discussing the response of the European Union to the crisis and the EU approach to Russia to end this horrific violence at the European Council. I continue to press for accountability in order to provide the victims with the hope of redress and in the hope that it will deter those involved from worse atrocities. This approach has been behind our interventions at the UN in New York and Geneva. We will not let these crimes be forgotten.

There will need to be continued European and Irish support in Syria for many years to come. Ireland's response to the Syrian crisis and the plight of the Syrian people over the past five years has been unprecedented, providing more than €62 million in humanitarian assistance to Syria and the region to date. This support has been channelled through a range of partners, including NGOs, UN organisations and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, which are best placed to respond, often by linking with local civil society organisations to get aid to those most in need.

We have resettled hundreds of Syrians across Ireland, including in my home town, some of whom are survivors of torture by the Assad regime. We will accept thousands more. Together with our EU partners, we remain engaged through the EU in the international Syria support group. As I stated in my address to the United Nations last month, Ireland remains strongly committed to supporting the efforts of the United Nations to achieve both an end to the crisis and a sustainable peaceful resolution. We will reinforce this point in a debate on Aleppo at the UN General Assembly in New York today. The Syrian people continue to face great hardship and danger. Their struggle for liberty and dignity is far from over, but they can continue to count on the support of Ireland.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the Minister for his remarks. I welcome this debate and I thank the Whip's office, the Business Committee and the Ceann Comhairle's office for answering my call for a debate on Syria to which all Members might contribute. It is important that all Members get an opportunity to express their complete outrage and revulsion at what is happening in Syria and the depravity unleashed on the people of that country, especially on those in eastern Aleppo, during the past five years.

This conflict has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives since the beginning of 2011. Millions have been displaced. That was a long time ago. March 2011 was when the previous Dáil was formed. For people to be living in a state of war for that long and under such horrific condition is unthinkable. Unfortunately, the savagery reported from Syria probably rivals anything in the history of human conflict. My principal fear is that, like so many other conflicts in human history, it is perhaps only afterwards that the total story will emerge. In the cases of Rwanda, Yugoslavia and the Holocaust, it was only afterwards that the full picture emerged. I truly believe that when historians look back at this decade, the conflict in Syria will be the glaring stain on this decade and era.

As a small country, sometimes our impact and influence on international events is limited. Regardless, we have a duty to do what we can do. Our obligation, as Members, is to ensure that the country is working at optimum level in this regard and that we are doing what we can do. We have a proud record of punching well above our weight on the international scene. We need to continue that. I welcome the sentiments expressed in the Minister's statement and his efforts to date. I know he feels deeply about this matter, as do the citizens of this country. This has shocked and appalled people. We need to do what we can. I welcome the fact that we have allocated over €60 million in aid to assist victims of the conflict in and around Syria. That figure might surprise many people. It is a large sum of money and it is going to some of the most desperate people in the world. I welcome the recent allocation of additional aid that the Minister described to me in this House a week ago.

Another way to help is to make our voices and protestations heard as clearly as possible on the global stage. The role of Russia in Aleppo needs to be questioned. I welcome the fact that the Russian ambassador was called in but it is time for him to be called in again to explain what he has done since the first meeting. The Minister must demand that there be an immediate cessation of the aerial bombardment of eastern Aleppo, not for eight or 11 hours over the next four days, as reported in the news today, but permanently. The weakest, most vulnerable people, children, toddlers, babies, old people, the sick and those with disabilities are the victims of the actions of the Syrian regime and Russia in eastern Aleppo. We cannot stay silent on this. I welcome our moves and actions to date but we need to continue making our voice heard.

In a response to a recent letter from Senator Ray Butler, the ambassador seemed to say that our concerns are part of a western mass media agenda. That does not appear to be the response of an ambassador who shares the concerns of the Irish people. What is the point of having an ambassador here who does not take the concerns, outrage and revulsion of the Irish Government, the people and the Dáil seriously, no matter where he comes from? Expulsion of ambassadors from countries which are complicit in war crimes should be part of our foreign policy.

I welcome the debate and look forward to hearing the views of other Members. I call on the Minister to keep up his efforts and to continue to do everything he can to help in this desperate situation, which will be viewed as a stain on this era.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I wish to share time with Deputy Lahart.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I welcome the opportunity to debate the situation in Syria. I welcome the Minister's statement, to which I listened intently. It is a damning and trenchant statement. It would be appropriate for him to put his views and those of the Government to the

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Russian ambassador face to face. I met the Russian ambassador yesterday to put to him the concerns of my party and my constituents about the actions in Syria. I spent almost an hour and a half at the Russian embassy. It would be worthwhile for the Minister to do likewise. I accept that he has made public statements about the opportunities he has used to raise the concerns of the Government and the Irish people.

We have to consider the scale of what is happening in Syria. Since March 2011 over 250,000 Syrians have died in this conflict and over 1 million have been injured. Almost 5 million are displaced within the country and a further 13.5 million - among them 6 million children - are displaced outside it. It is difficult to grasp this scale, particularly in the modern era when we can see on television, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter what, for example, the doctors and the Syrian citizens in Aleppo are putting up with. To those who say we are overly critical of Russia, I say over 90% of the fatalities in Syria come from aerial bombardment. The only people who have planes in this conflict are the Syrian Government and the Russian airforce. The standing down of the Iraqi army after the second Iraq war led to the creation of Islamic State, IS, and brought about its militant views, increasing the number of Islamic terrorists in the region. The current Syrian problem happened when, after the Arab spring in 2011, a 13 year old boy was tortured, butchered and his body mutilated and returned to his family for daring to spray-paint protests about the Assad regime on a wall in Syria. Hundreds and thousands of people came onto the streets demonstrating against the brutality of the Assad regime. IS saw an opportunity and moved from Iraq to Syria where it created its caliphate. Ireland is not neutral in the fight against IS. No one could even remotely understand the level of brutality and barbarism it inflicts on innocent people, minorities and Christians. It is a disgusting group. I would not even call its members human - they are subhuman.

I agree with the Minister that our priority has got to be to do everything we can to bring about an immediate ceasefire. My party circulated to all parties a motion which it intends to move in the next week or two in Private Members' time looking for cross-party support to call for an immediate ceasefire and a condemnation of the Syrian regime and the Russian military. Others may not sign that because they do not believe it is as critical as it should be of America. The country with the most influence over the Assad regime is Russia. Assad will listen to Russia, which is hand in glove with his regime. Those on the far left and in Sinn Féin who believe our motion is too critical of Russia are missing the point. It aims to talk to the people who can influence Assad.

The eight-hour ceasefire yesterday was a start. The Russian ambassador informed me that six corridors for civilians to leave Aleppo would be opened and managed by the Russians. Two further corridors would be opened to allow what is termed the terrorists to leave. Within the group the Russians refer to as "terrorists" is the Free Syrian Army and those whom we would see as moderates and a genuine opposition to the Assad regime. We are not talking about the Al-Nusra Front or Islamic State. We are talking about people who have taken up arms against a brutal regime. That is what we are talking about.

This debate is important. People one talks to on the streets will say that Ireland has an influence in this area. The Minister knows that. He is our Minister. We have got to work with the people as best we can to stop this horrendous humanitarian crisis, which is probably the worst in modern times. I remember the former Yugoslavia. I remember Srebrenica as a younger person. On the scale of things, this conflict is a much greater crisis and all pressure must be brought to bear to ensure it is ended as swiftly as possible. The problem is that, time and again, the Russians have used their veto at the United Nations. Zeid al-Hussein, the UN High Com-

missioner for Human Rights, stated that the UN Security Council should, without further delay, adopt criteria to restrain members from using the veto when there are serious concerns that war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide have been committed. I agree with that statement. Russia has hidden behind this veto to allow what is happening on a daily basis in Syria, and it cannot be allowed to continue.

In ten, 20 or 50 years from now, how will the United Nations explain to people looking back on this the reason we stood by and allowed this conflict to happen? The roots of the problem go a long way back. I refer to the Arab Spring and everything that happened from that, and in regard to Islamic State. This is not about Islamic State. This is not about trying to topple Bashar al-Assad either. This is about trying to stop the murders of innocent men, women and children and the deliberate targeting of hospitals, schools, bakeries, medical centres and infrastructure with the heaviest weaponry, and the best and newest technology being used to inflict massive damage and to wipe Aleppo off the map. That is what is happening. They are doing that to take the pressure off the Damascus regime and ensure that Assad remains in place, but that is a debate for another day.

I appeal to the Russians, as I did yesterday when I met the ambassador, to take on board the view that the Irish Government, the Irish Parliament, the Dáil and the Seanad find this action unacceptable and that Russia can and should use the influence it has with Assad to ensure an immediate ceasefire takes place and that humanitarian aid and medical supplies can get into Aleppo.

I thank the Government for allowing this debate. I look forward to a further debate on the issue by way of a Fianna Fáil motion, which we will move within the next two weeks.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank my colleague, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, for sharing time. He referred to the intention to wipe Aleppo off the map, a point I will take up in my contribution because, as many people know, Aleppo is an ancient city. It is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. In that regard, the tragedy taking place in Aleppo is even more poignant.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien outlined some of the statistics with regard to the conflict but they are worth repeating. Before the brutal war in Syria the population was approximately 22 million, but the picture is very different now after four years of that brutal civil war. Twelve million people have been forced from their homes: that is more than half the population. Since March 2011, more than 250,000 Syrians have been killed, and more than 1 million have been injured. A total of 4.8 million Syrians have been forced to leave their country and 6.5 million are internally displaced, making Syria the largest displacement crisis globally. This year, an estimated 13.5 million people, including 6 million children, are in need of humanitarian assistance. Of those, 5.47 million are estimated to be in difficult-to-reach areas, including close to 600,000 people in 18 besieged areas. According to current figures, 11.5 million Syrians require health care, 13.5 million need protection support, 12.1 million require water and sanitation, and 5.7 million children need education support, including 2.7 million who are out of school in Syria and across the wider region. Approximately 2.48 million people are food insecure, while more than 1.5 million need shelter and household goods. That is a litany of appalling statistics.

Our own aid agency, Trócaire, has said that the reality in Aleppo is relentless bombing, dwindling supplies, including medical supplies and doctors and nurses, starvation and fear. Besiegement is not a necessary consequence of conflict, but in this case it is a deliberate policy

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to exhaust every coping mechanism. The Syrian Government, with Russian support, is using this brutal siege to force the surrender of fighters in eastern Aleppo by any means necessary.

The siege of Aleppo has caused an international outcry, with a number of countries and groups accusing both Syria and Russia of war crimes in connection with attacks on medical facilities and aid convoys. Syrian President Assad spoke in the past week of the need to clean Aleppo. In July this year, *The Guardian* of London, in an editorial article, stated:

The Syrian government and its Russian allies are resorting to a tactic of siege and starvation that has been used before in Syria, but they are now doing it on a much larger scale, and openly. Their announcement of “humanitarian corridors”, [which Deputy O’Brien spoke about] for civilians and rebels who would want to flee the area must be exposed as a cynical ruse. It is no surprise that Aleppo’s population is not rushing towards these exit corridors, which have not in any case materialised on the ground. The Assad regime’s promises are incredible. The Syrian government has demonstrated time and again how little it cares for international humanitarian law. Its machine of repression makes no distinction whatsoever between armed combatants and civilians.

In these last months, the people of Aleppo are being subjected to what, by any fair definition, must be described as a war crime. Some days ago, my party leader stated:

Civilians are not being killed accidentally because of a conflict - they are being deliberately and repeatedly targeted. This death and destruction is no accident. It is the primary strategy of the Syrian Government and the Russian military.

Posted on the Al Jazeera website some time ago were images of Aleppo taken in July 2010, and again in December 2014. In the words of a recent headline in *The Irish Times*, this historical city is about to disappear.

Kheder Khaddour, a senior researcher at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, stated:

Aleppo is not a goal in itself, but territorial gains are limited to the aim of fragmenting the opposition forces before any political settlement is reached. The regime and its allies know that it would be impossible to defeat the armed oppositions and reclaim all the Syrian territory. They have opted for a strategy which isolates rebel-held areas from one another. By consigning the opposition to “islands” - isolated pockets of rebel-held territory surrounded by regime-held territory - the regime makes opposition forces vulnerable to repression and siege and dependent on regime allies to access further humanitarian supplies.

Clearly, Aleppo has no strategic significance of itself, but it has been targeted for splintering and division for political purposes by the ruling regime and its allies.

The question we must ask in this House is whether we will say to Russia in particular that the barbarism it is facilitating is unacceptable. The Syrian war has become one of the worst modern day humanitarian crises. Everyone here is appalled by the conflict in Syria, and in particular in Aleppo. Realistically, what can we do? To date, only 500 refugees have been admitted to this State under the resettlement programme and under relocation, and to date we have taken just one unaccompanied minor from Syria. The slow pace is unacceptable, and the Government must step up and do more. We must honour our commitment and ensure that we provide the safest haven for those fleeing the ravages of this almighty war and conflict.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Like other speakers, I welcome the fact that two hours was set aside to allow us discuss the deteriorating situation in Syria. I want to make it clear at the outset that I am not a pacifist. Consistent with the principles of international law, I believe the use of force can be necessary sometimes as a last resort to prevent the deaths of others or the oppression of a people.

5 o'clock

I am aware the Syrian people are extremely divided at the moment and we cannot accurately speak on behalf of the Syrian people. We also cannot fully understand the extent of the violence and destruction they are facing. We know of the conflict in our own country but what is happening in Syria is unspeakable. It is surely one of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent times. There are a lot of domestic and international political forces at play and it is important at the outset to recognise that. Instead of getting bogged down in pontificating our own world view, attempting to smear other Deputies and parties and somehow questioning their humanity, I hope that in this debate, we speak as one to condemn the violence and destruction and that, as a group of Irish parliamentarians, we can in some small way help in the humanitarian response and ultimately aid and assist efforts to find a negotiated solution to the conflict.

This savage war has left approximately 8 million people displaced people inside Syria, 4.5 million refugees beyond Syrian borders, over 1 million people injured and more than 400,000 people killed. As Sinn Féin's spokesperson on foreign affairs since 2012, the war in Syria has been to forefront of my work. From the very outset of the war I have condemned the brutal reaction of the Syrian regime to the democratic protests that ultimately led to the outbreak of this conflict and I condemned the foreign interference, which has bankrolled armed groups and elongated the conflict. Long before Deputy Micheál Martin began using the suffering and violence in Syria as a political football in an attempt to smear Opposition parties, I was speaking out against Turkey and Saudi Arabia's funding, arming and support of extremist jihadist groups in Syria. I was speaking out against Russia and Iran's military support of the Syrian army and instead called on them to use their influence to broker a ceasefire and initiate a peace process. Their current actions in Aleppo and the use of barrel bombs and bunker-busting bombs on heavily populated civilian areas, including hospitals and food markets, are criminal.

When I visited Iran in January 2014 with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, I personally raised the case of the besieged Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk. I appealed to the Iranian foreign affairs Minister to use his influence to lift the Syrian army's siege of this camp and to open humanitarian corridors so that aid could reach those desperately in need of it. I have also strongly criticised the USA's decision to directly and indirectly intervene in the war. Sinn Féin also opposed the lifting of the EU arms embargo on Syria at the end of May 2013. We opposed it because we felt that flooding the country with more weapons of destruction would only cause more violence and bloodshed and not bring peace. Our political analysis has, unfortunately, stood the test of time and was correct.

So let us be clear: Sinn Féin stands in complete opposition to this war. We oppose all forms of imperialism. The aerial bombardments in Syria need to stop, as do the shootings, the mortar attacks and the tank shelling. This includes the Syrian and Russian bombardment of Aleppo and the Turkish and NATO aerial bombing of other areas of Syria, including Turkey's invasion of Syria. I cautiously welcome the pause in the bombing in Aleppo and the opening of exit corridors, though we have information today that it has broken down. While this brief respite is welcome, I echo the UN's frustration that aid has not been allowed into besieged areas. The

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UN has rightly stated that unilateral ceasefires after long sieges can be truly helpful only if they are combined with humanitarian access for those who do not want to leave.

I also want to strongly condemn the intensification of Turkey's military attacks and bombardment of Kurdish areas in northern Syria. Turkish jets and artillery have been bombarding areas north of Aleppo since Wednesday in a blatant attempt to attack and provoke Kurdish forces and civilians. These are the same Kurdish forces who took on and bravely fought Daesh and liberated vast areas that Daesh and its offshoots had occupied. Rather strangely, I have not heard a single EU member state condemn Turkey's attacks on these areas or on Kurdish fighters, which continue as we speak. It seems the second biggest army in NATO is beyond criticism from European capitals and European leaders.

I echo the UN's condemnation of the complete lack of adherence to the norms of international law by the warring parties in Syria. Syrians, like people all over the world, have a right to live in peace free from fear, attack, foreign mercenaries and outside interference. They also have a right to democracy and the highest standards of human rights. The real and only way to stop the conflict is through inclusive dialogue and round-table peace talks that have the potential and credibility to lead to a real peace process. World leaders need to use their influence and diplomacy to secure a ceasefire and bring all sides in this civil war to the table for discussions on a peace process with credible outcomes. World leaders should be rational and smart enough to know their bombs will not bring peace to Syria. They cannot bomb Syria into peace. Their military interventions will not help establish democracy and respect for human rights in the country. Darkness cannot drive out darkness - only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate - only love can do that. These were the words of Martin Luther King.

The images and videos that we have all seen are truly disturbing and heartbreaking. Two of the most powerful images have been of Omran Daqneesh and Alan Kurdi. Omran, a five year old boy from Aleppo, was photographed sitting in an ambulance, shocked and bleeding after an air strike from Syrian or Russian planes hit his family home. His ten-year old brother died from injuries he sustained in this brutal attack. It deeply showed the human price of this brutal war. There are many more like him stuck in Syria today, scared, frightened and praying for an end to this brutal war that has robbed them of their childhood.

Alan Kurdi was a three-year-old Syrian Kurd who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as he tried to escape this same violence and destruction and find sanctuary in Europe. The image of his lifeless body, washed up on the beach, brought immediate mass outpourings of grief and shame in Europe, but how has the EU handled the refugee situation since that awful death? Many of the countries that have been most opposed to taking in refugees, which have put up fences and razor wire, are the same countries which are directly involved in this war. Some are the main providers of weapons and are making huge profits from providing this death and destruction. That is the shame of Europe. We know that when there are huge increases in aerial bombardments there will be huge increases in those fleeing these areas and seeking protection in Europe. The countries that have supplied the weapons that have forced these people to flee are the same ones telling them they are not welcome and to go back to their destroyed country.

Ireland should be a leader in its response to the refugee situation. We should be a leader in assisting the humanitarian response in Syria and neighbouring countries but we should also be opening our country to the vulnerable and desperate refugees that are fleeing Syria.

Only 69 Syrians have come to Ireland from Greece, and no Syrians have arrived here from

Italy. That is embarrassing, shameful and wrong. I believe we can do more. We have the support of the vast majority of Irish people, but they want to know how we will manage these refugees. It is important that we explain to the people how we will do that. We have had significant amounts of incredibly generous support from the Irish public to house and support refugees. The Government needs to be up-front about how it is responding to the refugee crisis, and involving communities and NGOs, not hiding refugees in hotels or direct provision centres on the outskirts of towns.

Ireland has a part to play in increasing international pressure to end the war, but we also have humanitarian and moral responsibilities to be a leader in responding to the refugee crisis, and this is where we can make a real difference.

In September 2015, the Government committed to taking a total of 4,000 displaced persons by way of resettlement, particularly from Lebanon, and relocation from the front-line states, Greece and Italy, through the Irish Refugee Protection Programme, IRPP, and yet by the end of September 2016 only 486 refugees had been resettled and only 69 had been relocated. I asked today for a note of explanation from the Minister because people are asking us what the problem is. The system is broken but we cannot explain. I have listened to Ministers and others try to explain, but we are not getting those answers.

The International Organization for Migration, IOM, has reported that the number of refugees arriving in Europe has fallen sharply this year but routes have grown more deadly. From January to the end of September 3,501 refugees died trying to enter Europe. That is nearly a 20% increase on the same period last year.

Four adults and a child were found inside a container in Rosslare port on Sunday night. Thankfully, it is reported that they are healthy and are not seriously harmed from their harrowing journey. They are apparently Kurds from Iraq who were fleeing persecution and have requested asylum in Ireland. This shows the stark and urgent need to implement safe and legal routes for refugees to get protection in Ireland. Sadly, under the Dublin regulations, they probably will not be allowed stay in Ireland. The asylum system is broken and must be urgently fixed. That is the note I will end on in relation to Syria - our system for helping many of those who are fleeing the conflict in Syria is broken and we need to fix it.

Deputy Joan Burton: The now six year old conflict in Syria is the world's gravest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. The numbers are easy to throw out but difficult to grasp: 8 million displaced people inside Syria, 4.5 million people under siege or inaccessible, 4.5 million refugees beyond the Syrian borders, 1.5 million people injured and 250,000 people killed.

Syria has become a free-for-all, in an open house. Parties involved in the war there have received political, military and operational support from Russia, Iran, North Korea, Algeria, Iraq, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and others. We have seen the Syrian Administration's barbaric treatment of its own population. We are seeing large-scale breaches of international humanitarian and human rights law. In particular, we see civilian populations exposed to indiscriminate attack, loss of life and the destruction of essential infrastructure services and basic medical care. This breaches all of the rules established well over 100 years ago by the Red Cross and Red Crescent. It breaches all of the basic rules of humanity's treatment and what we know about these kinds of situations and how to help, in particular, the civilians caught in this war.

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The Labour Party joins other parties in the Dáil in calling, at a minimum, for compliance with the humanitarian rules of warfare and for aid agencies to be allowed reach civilians in desperate need of help in Aleppo. There has been some progress with the announcement from Russia to the United Nations that it will stop bombing eastern Aleppo for 11 hours a day for four days, but that is not nearly enough. There needs to be time and space to organise a full-scale medical evacuation and the provision of medical support, and a deal is needed to permit UN aid convoys to move from western Aleppo and from Turkey, to get food into the besieged zones.

Syria is rightly understood as being one of the cradles of human civilisation, particularly in the western world, the known world and the pre-Christian world. One is talking about a country with a great ancient civilisation reduced to rubble and laid low.

Apart from the immediate humanitarian aspects of this crisis, it has another dimension I want to mention because it touches us all in Europe. I refer to the fact that the mounting tensions between the US and Russia have stymied United Nations and other efforts to broker a ceasefire. Worse, even if the US and Russia are not on the brink of direct conflict over Syria, the world seems to be well on the way towards entering a new Cold War. Indeed, relations between Russia and the United States have not been so bad in a generation, since the end of the Cold War. Both countries now have a vital role in resolving the Syrian conflict, but they are at odds in their analysis and they profoundly mistrust each other's motives and intentions. There can be no dialogue between them without some basic level of trust and understanding.

In truth, the dispute between them has little enough to do with Syria. Russia believes that it has been treated unfairly since the 1990s, that, unlike its smaller neighbours, it was never welcomed into a new community of nations but remained instead the principal focus of Western distrust. One can put it down to US over-reach and insensitivity, to Russian nostalgia for Soviet greatness or, most likely, to a mixture of both. Russia still claims Washington betrayed a promise when German unity was being negotiated that NATO would not take advantage of this opportunity and expand eastwards. We know that the West Germans made such a promise to Gorbachev, and that when President George H. Bush heard about this, he said, "To hell with that!", and "We prevailed, they didn't. We can't let the Soviets clutch victory from the jaws of defeat."

Whatever about who promised what, the facts are that NATO has added 12 eastern European countries since then, in three rounds of enlargement. In 1999, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined against strong Russian opposition. Then came Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The three new Baltic states had formerly been part of the USSR itself. Most recently, Albania and Croatia signed up to NATO membership. NATO has also officially recognised four aspiring members: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Macedonia and Montenegro.

This incorporation into NATO of countries formerly in the eastern bloc has been a major cause of increased tension between East and West, as we knew it would be back in 1990.

Arguably, the subsequent aggression against Georgia and Ukraine, and now Syria, was fuelled at least in part by ongoing resentment about continuing NATO expansion to the very borders of Russia. Although Russia was left on the periphery of a post-Cold War Europe, it has fought its way back. For a time it retreated from the world stage, but now it is back with a vengeance, and eager to restore a global role. It is extraordinarily knowledgeable and has very deep ties with countries like Syria and the whole region. On the other hand, the West prefers to

focus on current Russian revanchism, on the stance of Mr. Putin, who described the collapse of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the 20th century.

I quoted earlier the analysis of George H. Bush, whose reputation is as one of the more thoughtful members of his family, and the quality of analysis deteriorated subsequently. The “end of history” people, on both sides of the US congressional aisle, trumpeted the victory of western ideology and economics - they seemed incapable of distinguishing between the two. There was the simplistic notion that, when it came to the Middle East, all the West had to do was to guide the aims and goals of the Arab Spring, directing it towards an inevitable western style liberal democracy. That analysis has proven to be totally disastrous. Looking at Syria, it is a country very rich in resources, with an enormously well-educated population, as we know from the stories that have been recounted of the different refugees. I am sure all of us have met people from Syria, many of whom now live in my constituency. We can also look at Iraq, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

At this stage there is not much point in allocating blame between the initial strategic errors of the West and Moscow’s more recent aggression in Georgia, Syria and Ukraine. At this stage people are displaced, disappearing and dying in their tens of thousands. It seems clear that Russia can and will use its role to shape a variety of conflict zones around the world.

I would like to be able to assert with some confidence that the leadership in Russia and in Syria will some day be called to account for their war crimes against civilians but in an increasing bipolar world is there any point in claiming such a thing when the United States has yet to submit to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court?

In a world where all onlookers are again being herded into taking sides in the conflict between these two superpowers and where many in the EU are again stressing their connections to NATO, our function as a neutral country is to remain unaligned and to insist that the EU’s foreign and security policy is framed and acted on in a genuinely independent way, highlighting the shared values of European countries and of European civilisation historically with all the countries of the Near and Middle East and rejecting any siren call to become involved in the struggle between two hegemonies for global dominance. We must use all available diplomatic means and forums to raise this issue. We have to co-operate with like-minded states in the European Union and in the UN. We have to work towards an end to aerial bombardment, a genuine cessation of violence, an internationally enforced no-fly zone and humanitarian aid access throughout that country.

I worked in many post-conflict zones long before I became a Deputy. I worked with people who worked in refugee camps, particularly in Africa, following what happened in the Horn of Africa 20 and 30 years ago and what happened in Rwanda. Ireland has played, and is playing, a very significant role and is being of significant help in designing humanitarian relief that will bring relief to the people who need it. We are doing that quite proudly as a non-aligned, neutral country, being neutral militarily but a member of the European Union. Neutrality does not mean we are indifferent but it puts us in a fairly powerful position to be an influencer for the good in what is truly a dreadful situation, notwithstanding the fact Ireland is a small country.

I was very happy that the previous Government, of which I was a member, reached agreement with the Taoiseach last year - he has confirmed and upheld this on a number of occasions - that over a few years Ireland would receive approximately 4,000 people who have been driven out of their country and have become refugees as a consequence of the conflict. I reiterate

something the people often do not understand. Almost all the people who are refugees from a war zone want to go back home, provided they have a home to return to. It takes time to pick up the pieces in a post-conflict situation but most people go home, provided they have some place to return to.

In offering protection and shelter to 4,000 people, I said at the time, and I say it again now, we should offer assistance to families with children, in particular. Children are very vulnerable. A great number of people are living in tents along various borders in different parts of Europe. We have taken on a responsibility in regard to people in Italy and in Greece. Through various agencies, such as Goal, Trócaire and other development agencies with a strong presence in Ireland, a good deal of work is being done but, clearly, it is not nearly enough.

In fairness to the Ministers involved, they have been working to identify the people who will come to Ireland but what is wrong that it is not possible to identify these people who are facing into a very cold winter? Many people have walked hundreds of miles. They are not in good shape. Members with medical backgrounds will know it is not a great recipe for avoiding pneumonia, whether among small children, older people, pregnant women or people who have previously been ill. Just as we have seen the Naval Service reach out in the Mediterranean and do a job of which we are all very proud, we can encourage the people in the EU in this regard. The bureaucracy appears to most right-thinking people to be pretty monstrous. There is much politicking involved in that bureaucracy but it is our job to try to solve it.

It is possible to expand the aid budget further. I am sure the Minister would be willing to do that. There was only a very minor change in the budget but if we can identify and bring some of the people out of the difficulties they are in, in turn many of those people will return home when this conflict has ended to rebuild what we all hope to see, a new and peaceful Syria.

Deputy Bríd Smith: When I proposed that we would have this debate in the absence of the Bill from Fianna Fáil, I did so in order to allow this House to reflect on what the people and the Government can do in terms of intervening in a conflict that is utterly horrendous. Words fail me in describing the barbarity of what has gone, and continues to go, on in Syria on a daily basis. I was disgusted by the response of the leader of Fianna Fáil in accusing us of being Russian apologists. In one way it was slightly amusing because we are normally accused of being Trotskyites, which is supposed to be an even dirtier word than Russian apologist. Trotsky was the one person who stood out and led a movement against Stalin and the barbarism of the Soviet Union in its heyday, and he ended up with an ice pick through his head for his efforts. It is ironic that we are accused of that on the one hand and called Russian apologists on the other.

In his opening statement, the Minister, Deputy Charles Flanagan, said, “We have resettled hundreds of [refugees] ... We will accept thousands more.” I have to ask the Minister the obvious question. When will this happen? This conflict has gone on for five years. The Mediterranean has been turned into an open graveyard. Many of the Deputies in this House have visited various refugee camps. I was in refugee camps in Athens during the summer. I met people from Aleppo who would have a huge amount to offer this country. They are mathematicians, scientists, teachers, nurses and all sorts of people with their children who would love to come to Ireland but were not asked to come. They were asked to fill out forms according to European Union regulations and were given options of various countries. Most of them had never heard of Ireland. Nobody from Ireland is going around asking them if they would like to come to our country except for the odd visitor like me. Most of them are being asked if they will go to Germany, Turkey and elsewhere. We have to make a concerted effort to open our doors to those

refugees. That is all I will say on that issue. We should probably revisit it again.

I direct my comments on this to the question of clarity and what is happening in Syria. I have had history lessons and heard a lot of different opinions in this House. Deputy Darragh O'Brien said the only people with planes and bombs in this conflict are the Assad regime and Russia. That should be put to bed straight away. In July, 140 civilians, including children, were killed by American and French bombs from the sky in a town called Toukhan Al-Kubra. It was not the first time and it probably will not be the last that French and US military were used to bomb civilians in this conflict. The emphasis is rightly on Aleppo now. Nobody is more appalled by the treatment of the people of Aleppo than those of us on this side of the House who started out at the beginning of the Arab Spring by declaring our complete support for that uprising. We have consistently continued to do so. The uprisings in Syria, Tunisia and Egypt, which spread like wildfire through the Arab populations, gave us hope for the first time in over a century that somehow the Middle East could regain its respect and decency on the planet. It has been used as a football by every regime from America, Britain, France, Germany, Turkey and Israel. It has been used as a political, strategic and economic football which has culminated in the conflict in Syria. It goes right back to the division of the region after the First World War but, most important, it started with the invasion of Iraq by George W. Bush which hundreds of thousands of people in this country and millions across the planet protested against. We were called over the top and hysterical when we said this would not stop at Iraq, that it would spread the conflict, increase sectarianism and give an excuse for regional powers and strategic interests to invade and infest many countries with their rotten murderous machines. This is what is being played out in Syria. It is the military intervention of imperialist powers who are conducting a proxy war in the Syrian region. It is the people of that region who are suffering very dearly for it. We should be telling the international community to stop selling arms to Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the rotten, despotic regimes arming groups engaging in the conflict internally, to stop the bombing on all sides by the US and France and to stop lying.

This is not just about Russia and Russia's role in it. It is about international imperialist interference in the situation. They should cease fire, get the hell out and leave the Syrian people to sort out their own issues. If they had done that in the first place, we may have had a chance to support ideologically, from the outside and with humanitarian aid, those who were prepared to stand up to the Assad regime and those who engaged in the Arab Spring. We are now in the horrors of a really desperate conflict which is continuing. The Minister should be doing three fundamental things: calling for a halt to the sale of arms, opening the doors to the refugees, and stopping the use of Shannon Airport for military planes and personnel to land and refuel, which assists them in carrying out whatever functions they carry out, whether in Mosul, Syria or beyond. It has to stop. It has been a demand of the population of this country in maintaining our neutrality. Neutrality is not just a word; it is also actions. Our actions in continuing to allow the use of Shannon Airport in such a way fly in the face of neutrality.

If we remember the enthusiasm of David Cameron to roll into Syria and bomb the bejesus out of it when the conflict started, this will be a reminder that it is not just about Russia but about the imperial interest of the West which it has always had in the region and which it continues to have. It is about influence, power and the dynamism of the big powers of this world. The one power we have something to say about and could influence is that of Saudi Arabia, which is engaged in a terrible conflict in Yemen. It is not that long ago that we flew the flag at half mast for the Saudi king when he died. Let us fly the flag at half mast for the Syrians who are being butchered every day. Let us open the borders, let them in and let them work, live and

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contribute to this society. As was said by the previous Deputy, some day they will be able to go home to a country they love which was once beautiful and peaceful. Until we do that, we are talking through both sides of our mouth.

Deputy Paul Murphy: What is happening daily in Aleppo can only be described as an on-going atrocity. Four hundred people were killed in September, which amounts to 13 people a day. It is an atrocity being carried out by Russia and the Putin regime with the aim of prolonging the existence of a brutal dictatorship that does not have the support of the majority of the population. This is the aim of the Russian intervention in general and it is having some success. What is happening is horrific and has to be condemned.

Aleppo is emblematic of the nightmare facing the Syrian people in general. Its people are torn apart with three different levels of conflict playing out on the ground. There is a sectarian conflict that exists across the Middle East and is fuelled by imperialist intervention going back to 2003 and slightly before. There is a battle of different regional powers - Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Yemen all intervening with their own mechanism to do so. There is also conflict between major imperialist powers on a world scale - Russia, the US, France and other European powers. On the one hand, there is Russia backing the Assad regime and on the other hand, western powers are backing and indirectly funding what are often jihadist groups dressed up as moderate groups because they know that is what has to be done to access funding.

The victims in all of this, as always in war, are the ordinary people. It is incredible that 470,000 people have been killed in the past five years in Syria. The number of internally displaced people is between 7 million and 11 million out of a population of 22 million. It is the destruction of a country and society by this conflict. It is people who are always the victims.

I will take a moment to deal with an accusation that has been made twice and in a more muted form today, particularly by Deputy Micheál Martin, that Anti-Austerity Alliance-People Before Profit Deputies are Russian apologists and are soft on Russia. If Deputy Martin knew anything about our position on Syria, he would know that does not hold any water. We have been very clear from the start about our opposition to the Assad regime, our support for those rising up against Assad and our opposition and condemnation of Russian imperialism and intervention. The only explanation is that it is an utterly hypocritical intervention and a cheap attempt to score political points against his opponents on the left. I looked up the number of times I spoke about Russia and condemned Putin in the European Parliament when I was a Member thereof. In December 2011, I spoke about the mass protests in Russia against rigged elections, referencing my comrades in Russia who are dealing with extremely difficult and repressive circumstances in fighting against the Putin regime. In September 2012, I condemned the imprisonment of the members of Pussy Riot and in October 2013 I condemned the detention of the Arctic 30 Greenpeace activists in Russia. In December 2013, I spoke out on the Russian intervention in Ukraine and in February 2014 I spoke on the repression of LGBT people in Russia. Also in that month I spoke out against what was happening at the Winter Olympics in Sochi, as well as the homophobia and exploitation that takes place in Russia. I also checked the number of times Fianna Fáil MEPs spoke out on what was happening in Russia during that period. The total was zero.

Members of Fianna Fáil discovered this issue recently in order to make cheap political points against people on the left. Why are they doing this? It might be that they just do not know these things and Deputy Martin does not know what our political position is. That is possible but I do not believe it is likely. There are two issues here. One is that Deputy Martin - who

was a member of a Government that was closely aligned with US imperialism and that facilitated the use of Shannon Airport for the invasion of Iraq - is offended by the fact that not only do we oppose what is happening in and condemn the bombardment of Aleppo, the acts of Russian imperialism and the fact that 13 people are dying there each day, we also oppose what is happening in Yemen, where 13 people per day are dying as a result of Saudi Arabian airstrikes. Saudi Arabia is one of the main recipients of US aid, including military aid, and is clearly an ally of the US. It is given at least the implicit support of the US in those actions. We also oppose the aerial bombardment of Mosul, in Iraq, that is currently taking place. The problem is that we do not accept that just because one opposes Russian imperialism, one must take the side of western imperialism. It is possible to say that one is opposed to all the different imperialist forces and take the side of ordinary people, be they Kurds, Palestinians or the ordinary people in Syria who are struggling for democratic rights.

The other striking issue is that, for whatever reason - and this is dangerous because his party could be in government at some time - Deputy Martin has taken the decision to hitch Fianna Fáil to the bandwagon of rising tension and conflict between the west and Russia. That tension is occurring globally. There is talk, some of it overblown, of the prospect of a new Cold War, but clearly tensions are rising significantly. They are rising not because western powers care about the humanitarian actions of Putin or his lack of democracy but for geopolitical interests or reasons. The Deputy has decided to do that in line with the Tory party in Britain, and it is extremely dangerous to try to contribute to that rising conflict.

The fundamental problem here is imperialism. It is correct to state that it is due to all the different imperialist interventions, post-11 September 2001, in Afghanistan and Iraq and the nightmare that has been created in the Middle East as a result, in which the Irish Government at that time, including Fianna Fáil, was complicit. However, one can go back further to the Sykes-Picot agreement and the drawing of lines in the Middle East to create artificial states deliberately containing national and ethnic minorities, in order to play the game of divide and rule for the benefit of western imperialist powers in terms of access to oil and resources. Over and over again, it is ordinary people who have suffered. There is an alternative. It involves an end to imperialist intervention, landlordism and capitalism in the region, and using the resources that exist for the benefit of ordinary people.

Deputy Mick Wallace: It would have been very difficult for Ireland to play a role in Syria. However, most independent neutrals would say that we could do two positive things. First, we could help those fleeing the conflict and, second, we could stay neutral. Sadly, we perform poorly in both areas. We have been more reluctant than other European countries to take in refugees. We have been slower, we do not appear to have an appetite for it and we put very little energy into it, given the results. Only one unaccompanied minor has arrived in this country in two years. It beggars belief.

With regard to staying neutral, in 2001 we facilitated the American invasion of Afghanistan by giving its forces the use of Shannon Airport for military purposes. We also gave America the use of that airport for military purposes in Iraq in 2003. There were problems in Afghanistan before the Americans invaded, but they became 100 times worse when they did. There were also problems in Iraq before the Americans invaded, but they also became 100 times worse after that. It is estimated that over 2 million civilians have died in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001. Almost 400,000 have been killed in Syria, which is nothing short of horrific. Libya had problems before the western powers decided to invade, bomb the living daylights out of it and make it far worse.

We all agree that what Assad has done is horrific and what Russia is doing at present is horrific. However, where was the outcry when the US, France and Britain decided to arm the so-called moderate rebels in Syria? Where was the outcry when the same countries decided to start bombing Syria in September 2014? Did we have to wait for the Russians to start bombing it in September 2015 before we got angry? At one stage 15 countries were bombing Syria - Australia, Bahrain, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Jordan, Canada, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UK, the US and Russia. Iran was also involved. What was it for? The western forces have played a huge role in flooding Syria with arms.

Where is the outcry about Yemen today? A total of 3,500 civilians have been killed in Aleppo recently by Assad's forces and the Russians. It is unthinkable. However, 10,000 civilians have died in Yemen in the last year. It is a mad war. The US is supporting Saudi Arabia in a mad war, but I have not heard Fianna Fáil give out about it yet. I am surprised. What is wrong with its members?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy has not been listening.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The US has delivered cluster bombs to Saudi Arabia, some of them through Shannon Airport, to be used in Yemen. The bombs are still legal in the US, but it has different laws. There is international law and American law and they are very different.

When will we take a neutral position? We cannot stay silent when one side is doing something bad and wait until the other side does something bad. Let us be straight. Let us stop using Shannon Airport, a civilian airport, as a military airport. Let us stop being complicit in the murder of civilians and in the creation of refugees. When arms, munitions and troops go through Shannon Airport, some of the munitions are bombs which are dropped on people's homes, making them flee their land and communities and end up in Europe as refugees. We then do not want to let them in, even though we let the Americans in to use Shannon Airport in the first place.

This is a small nation. We could play a positive role as a neutral country. We could say "No" to what the Americans or Russians are doing. What about Palestine and Israel? How can we be so silent about the destruction of Palestine and the genocide that is taking place there? That is what it is. There is so much silence in here from the established parties on it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is not true.

Deputy Mick Wallace: It is horrific. Who was calling for a boycott of Israel? Was anyone giving out about the Americans supplying extra arms to Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia? Al-Nusra is becoming a more powerful force than ISIS and is being armed by Saudi Arabia, which is being armed by the Americans. Al-Nusra is using American weapons. Maybe the Government should talk to them about it.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have no hesitation in saying on the record that I condemn the atrocities that are happening in Syria perpetrated by the Syrian Governments and the Russians. However, the comments made by the leader of Fianna Fáil are both infantile and dangerous. He said that we do not want to condemn Russia or to say that this has arisen from one particular source. That is to simplify matters in a most dangerous way. As a woman, I am outraged by the killing of people, including women and children, in Syria. I believe every person in this Chamber is outraged but there is an onus on us to question and lead. I agree with the comments by Deputy Wallace and others in respect of acting as a neutral country, using our moral power

to call for a ceasefire and not taking sides but condemning the violence on both sides. The US is in there funding and arming what are known as the rebels.

I agree with some of the Minister's speech. He pointed out that Syria is a sovereign country and should have the right to make its own decisions and I fully agree with him on that. However, there is no sense of urgency in this Chamber or in Europe. I understand that this is the first time that Syria has been discussed despite the fact that the war is in its sixth year. Once again, we have been forced by the people of Ireland who want us to lead and stand up and who say in the e-mails we have received that they want a ceasefire and for us to do everything in our power to help bring it about and then hold the Government to account for the 4,000 refugees at a minimum that we promised to take in. The Minister has not explained to us why we have not taken those 4,000 refugees. He referred in general terms to hundreds of refugees being taken in. We promised to take in 4,000. As I speak, our Taoiseach and the other leaders of Europe are having dinner in Brussels tonight and will discuss, among other topics, the slaughter in Syria from the point of view of what to do about Russia and without recognising the complicit role played by Europe and the US, particularly the invasion of Iraq. I was one of the 100,000 people who went onto the streets and begged the Government to listen but it did not.

Deputy Joan Collins: It is indisputable that all sides of the House condemn the role of the Assad regime. Before the war, that regime ruled by terror, brutality, torture and murder. The regime's response to peaceful demonstrations was a declaration of war on a significant section of its own people. Aleppo is a city that has been totally laid to the ground and is like Ground Zero in New York. It will be gone by Christmas. Putin's gangster capitalist regime stands indicted. The indiscriminate bombing, bunker bombs in civilian areas, deliberate targeting of infrastructure to destroy water supplies, deliberately targeting of hospitals and siege tactics to disrupt and deny food, water and medical facilities to civilians are all war crimes. Other parties indicted include Daesh or ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front who are also guilty of war crimes. They are forces that want to take society back to the Middle Ages. Where they have succeeded in taking territory, particularly Daesh, they have unleashed barbaric horror on the civilian population. Those using this conflict to fight a proxy war for influence and domination in the wider Middle East are also indicted. These parties include Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and, of course, the old reliables still playing Great Power politics - Great Britain, France, Russia and the US.

It is easy to stand up in this Chamber and condemn those involved in the conflict but what can we do to deal with them? We have to be neutral. That is the message coming out of this Chamber and the Minister should take that on board. All sides in the conflict should abide by international human rights law and put an end to all forms of bombing in Syria. The Irish Government should formally make known to all governments that have engaged in the bombing of Syria the Irish people's revulsion at their actions. The Irish Government should support the call from Prince Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, for the UN Security Council to adopt without further delay criteria to restrain members from using the veto when there are serious concerns that war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide may have been committed. The situation in Syria should be referred to the International Criminal Court. We must stop the use of Shannon Airport as a military airport and stop arms being sold to these countries.

I have one point to make about the 4,000 refugees we have committed to taking in. We have taken in only ten members of a family under that EU relocation programme. This must be moved on very quickly and we must nail our colours to the mast and take those women, chil-

dren and families into this country who want to come here. We must actively engage in that.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: We used to have a reputation around the world as a country that small nations suffering oppression would look to be a voice on their behalf in the UN. That was a very proud record. Over the past ten or 15 years, we have decided to undo that record and undo the esteem in which we have been held by small countries around the world. We have done that by allowing Shannon Airport to be used as a military air base, by signing up to a common European defence and foreign policy and by making ourselves subservient to the dominant European decisions made by France, Germany and the UK and saying it is a common policy to which we all sign up. Where has our independence gone? Where is our independent stance in the world in terms of what is right and wrong?

There is no doubt that what Russia and the Syrian Government are doing to the Syrian people is wrong and appalling but, as has been said by other Members here, 15 countries have been involved in bombing Syria but it is only after Russia and the Syrian Government get involved that we get on our high horses and get indignant about it. This is a sad reflection on the state of this country and our so-called foreign policy. It is as if it is okay when the good guys do the killing but it is not okay when someone we do not like or someone the US tells us we do not like does it as well. That is the impression created here. I do not think we should all preface our remarks by saying that we condemn what Russia and Assad are doing because we all do but we also condemn what is being done in our names by 15 other countries that have bombed civilians across Syria.

Since June, 164 civilians and 44 children have been killed in coalition bombing raids. There has not been an ounce of condemnation by the Government or Fianna Fáil here about that. A couple of weeks ago, the Saudi Arabian Government killed 140 people by bombing a funeral in Sana'a in Yemen but that was an accident so that is okay. When the Americans bomb hospitals in Kabul, that is an accident and that is okay as well, even though Médecins Sans Frontières staff in the hospitals were in contact with the Americans telling them they were bombing civilian targets, yet they continued to bomb them. That, too, is okay and not a word is heard from our Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade or our Government.

That is the problem with this motion tonight. We are taking sides in this conflict. We should be neutral and standing up for the defenceless countries. It is what we had a history of doing until we became a proxy military base for the US.

6 o'clock

Deputy Michael Harty: The civil war in Syria has developed into an humanitarian crisis and a catastrophic situation for the civilian population. This is most apparent in Aleppo. This conflict has become a theatre of war in which Russia and other states are sponsoring and supplying either side. Some of the sponsors are also being supplied with US military equipment. The area has become a regional and international theatre of war. How can this be? Some of the EU states are half-hearted in their condemnation of Russia and Russian-sponsored bombing in support of Bashar al-Assad's regime. The US and EU sanctions must be strengthened. We must make greater efforts to put pressure on Russia and other international players to stop the conflict.

I will address the medical and humanitarian aspects of the conflict. The bombing of Aleppo is disproportionate and indiscriminate. Hospitals, medical personnel, schools and residential

areas are all being targeted. It is unheard of in war and is completely unacceptable. To attack non-combatants, medical and civilian, must amount to a war crime. Last week, 14 members of the same family, including eight children, were killed in an air strike. Syria is the seat of civilisation. It was the seat of language, science, astronomy and art. Yet, it has been subjected to a completely unacceptable and savage war. The carnage in Aleppo is all the more unbelievable when one considers that Bashar al-Assad is a medical doctor, trained in Damascus and London less than 30 years ago. This is a blight on the medical profession, given the ethical and moral values which doctors receive during their training. The principle of all medical practice is first, do no harm, *primum non nocere*. Doctors have been involved in other very serious war crimes. Radovan Karadžić, a psychiatrist, was responsible for the massacre of 8,000 men and boys in Srebrenica on 11 July 1995. Dr. Josef Mengele and 350 of his colleagues were involved in medical experimentation which was part of the holocaust to exterminate Jews. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad and his allies are bombing fellow doctors and their facilities in Aleppo. It is shocking to the point of disbelief.

Every war ends some time and in every conflict there are winners and losers. However, in every conflict the civilians are the losers either by collateral damage or, as in Aleppo, because they are specifically targeted, along with medical personnel. It is completely unacceptable. Mosul may become the new Aleppo. Every conflict ends in exhaustion, common sense or crippling hardship for the defeated. Unfortunately, it looks like Aleppo will end with the latter. All sides claim to have their god on their side, yet no god could condone what is happening in Aleppo.

Although Ireland has no economic or military power, it is a peacekeeping nation without a colonial past. It has respected moral and diplomatic standing among the nations of the world, and we must bring this important leverage to bear on ending the conflict to bring the genocide to an end. We must use our diplomatic expertise, which we have earned since the foundation of the State, to end the conflict. We must also accept, as rapidly as possible, refugees from Syria. We must take them to a place of safety so they can return to their nation when the conflict is over. We need to take them from the area of conflict, bring them in, keep them safe, look after them and return them to their country at the end of the conflict. It is extremely important.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. We could say we should have had the debate some time ago. We have taken our time in raising it in the House. It is not before time that people have the opportunity to give their views. The most urgent thing we need to do is to demonstrate Ireland's strong support for the people of Syria and to condemn unreservedly the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force by the Russian air force and Syrian army on the citizens of Aleppo. Over the past five years, there have been 17 major peace initiatives aimed at addressing the violence in Syria. The result is close to 5 million refugees, 8 million internally displaced people and 400,000 dead. Efforts to achieve a sustainable peace must continue and be redoubled and the international community must accept its share of the responsibility for the ongoing conflict. Ireland must also play our part in pushing for such a road map to peace, particularly at EU level.

If we have learned anything from Northern Ireland it is that building peace is not an easy process and requires great patience and compromise. It requires ongoing effort. Our Government, on behalf of the country, must be much more vocal. We must begin a dialogue internationally on the responsibility to protect and the role we would play in such a principle. The security of vulnerable regions of the world cannot be solely in the lap of Russia and the United States. Yet, with each new report of the atrocities occurring within Syria, and particularly the

humanitarian crisis which has taken hold in Aleppo, it is clear that these are primarily academic discussions, removed from the immediate reality of the impact of this conflict on so many people's lives. If future peace initiatives continue to face the same challenges which have hindered previous attempts, the international community's response must be focused on securing the conditions necessary for an effective humanitarian response to take place. In the immediate term, the greatest contribution Ireland can make is to focus our efforts on alleviating the suffering of the civilian populations, both inside Syria and among those who have fled.

One of the greatest failings in the history of our State was our indifference to the refugee crisis that resulted from the Second World War. We cannot allow ourselves to repeat the mistakes of our past by standing by as a crisis of the same scale continues to unfold and simply say that something should be done. Every support must be given to the Irish refugee protection programme to ensure that, at a minimum, we meet our target of accepting 4,000 refugees into the State by the end of the year. There was a commitment to do it, but progress has been extremely slow. It is shameful and embarrassing that we have not delivered on the commitment. There is a groundswell of opinion in the House, expressed today. Members of the public are seeing the scenes in Aleppo and Mosul on their television screens every night and they feel helpless and disappointed that the international community has not been capable of responding adequately to the crisis. At a minimum, they expect us to deliver on the commitments we have made on taking refugees, which are minor. We should not drag our heels any longer.

It must be remembered that there are still approximately 57,000 people living in camps in Greece, many of whom are Syrians. Recent reports suggest that the number of refugees and migrants making the journey across the Aegean Sea is increasing once more due to the recent instability in Turkey. According to reports in *Der Spiegel*, however, there are only nine officers making decisions about the applications of 6,000 people on Lesbos. Despite the EU's announcement that it would send hundreds of asylum experts to Greece, only three dozen officials have arrived on the islands according to the Greek Government. What are we doing about this? What attempts have been made to raise this matter at European level? Why are we not more vocal on it?

In September, more refugees arrived on the Greek islands each day than migrants were deported in the entire month. In light of this, we must review the number of refugees whom we are accepting to ensure we are doing our part. There is a significant number of Syrians in Ireland. Many of them have contacted their public representatives, including Deputies. They are at their wits' end concerning family members. They cannot understand why we are not taking more immediate action and doing our part to support refugees.

I remain deeply concerned about the current arrangement with Turkey, particularly in light of recent events in that region. We must work with our European partners to achieve a sustainable alternative in the processing of displaced people. We may not be able to end the Syrian conflict, but it is surely within our grasp to raise this issue at every opportunity at European level, accept our share as a developed and relatively wealthy country and provide a safe haven for the many refugees who desperately need it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is deeply disturbing that, more than 100 years since the start of the First World War, nothing seems to have changed. The big game still plays out. There are different views of history, but Britain's fear of Russia moving south to cut off the former's access to the east was one of the factors that created the conditions that led to the lunacy of the First World War. Russia is again extending south, this time into Syria, and carrying out what

can only be described as war crimes in the city of Aleppo. I read that, ironically, Ms Theresa May, the British Prime Minister, called today for European unity at the European Council in response. I am unsure as to what response can be made militarily. The problem with western and Russian intervention in the Middle East for the past 100 years has been that we have resorted to military means. Throughout that period, this was done in American, Russian, French and British interests rather than in the interests of the region's Arab people.

Most historians assess, and we in Ireland are in a unique position to do this, the seeds of the problem as having stemmed from the period after the First World War when the promise of Arab national rule, similar to the promise of Home Rule that we were given, was dashed with the creation of the Sykes-Picot agreement. It divvied up the region, with France getting Syria and Britain getting Iraq. Britain wanted the oil. The French only realised afterwards that they had done a bad deal and the British had got the better wells. This sounds trite and simple, but it is the underlining problem with how the region has been dealt with - that is the only way to put it - over the past 100 years.

With the increased importance of oil in the 20th century and the ability of oil reserves to fund armaments and military development, the likelihood of Britain, America and elsewhere going to war in places such as Iraq to protect their oil interests is an underlying factor in what has destabilised and destroyed the country and people of Syria. It is the deepest tragedy. Although there are complex issues in Syria in terms of the civil war and the various factions, there is an underlying truth in that the West is looking after its interests in the region over a protracted period has laid the foundations for the tragedy we are seeing today.

What are we to do? In fairness to the Army, we are in the Golan Heights on a difficult mission. When other countries pulled out, we were willing to place ourselves on the front line of peacekeeping. We should commend our soldiers and continue with the work that we have done over the years in terms of trying to provide that neutral United Nations presence on the ground. However, we must go further. As other Deputies have mentioned, we are increasingly looking over our shoulders in terms of our own economic interests, for example, instead of looking back to our country's roots and traditions and to a time when we had a sense of affinity with Arab nationalism, be it expressed in Ba'athist nationalism or as an Islamic movement.

Given our history, our tendency is generally to remain neutral in this most complex of areas. In some instances, however, we must stand up for certain rights while being neutral. We must stand up for the rights of those in Palestine, the Gaza Strip and, in particular, the West Bank who are being treated in the most despicable manner and who need friends, allies and recognition. We should sometimes be willing to risk our short-term economic interests by saying the brave and difficult thing in support of the Palestinian people.

We should step up to the plate and accept refugees from Syria in larger numbers and with greater urgency. Friends of mine have visited the refugee camps in Greece. They are pulling their hair out in despair wondering why they can walk down a pier in Piraeus and meet the finest people one could meet, people who would be a significant addition to this country and who are clearly declaring that they would like to move here, have good reasons for doing so, can speak English and can be of benefit to the country, yet those people are not being allocated places here or being processed in due time. One can only suspect that a lesson is being meted out to refugees in Syria to the effect that they should not come across the Aegean Sea or else they will be stuck on a pier living in a tent for a year, two years or three years. Lord knows how long it will take us to get those people out of that horrible situation. We should be standing up for our

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tradition. We should be Samaritans in this moment and be willing to accept refugees far more quickly than we have been doing heretofore.

We should remain neutral and not equate Islam with terrorism, which so many other countries seem willing to do. I am glad that we have not gone down the French route. My God, but they have a tradition of many years in the context of the Syrian crisis. For them to make this equation because of their burkini and hijab disputes is a fundamental mistake and we should avoid making such an error. It would not be fair. Islam has good and peaceful exponents as well as people who follow a terrorist path. We have shown our own ability to act as terrorists over the years. We are not exactly as white as the driven snow when it comes to setting off bombs around the world.

We must stand up for Irish citizens in Egyptian prisons. We need to be willing to talk trade, give up trade or use whatever leverage we have to say, for example, that it is not right for a 17 year old boy to be in prison for three years. This should be the case regardless of whether he is an Irish citizen, but because he is an Irish citizen, we have all the more an obligation to stand up for basic rights. We should not take positions on the Arab Spring fight one way or the other. We should just stand up for what is proper and what every legal court, including an Egyptian one, would agree, namely, that someone should not be kept in prison for two, three or four years without a fair trial. We should stand up for such people. All parties and countries would recognise that as justice.

We should send aid and do whatever we can to support those in Aleppo. Our aid agencies have a proud record. Some have run into controversies in recent times, especially in Syria, but we should continue our support and increase our overseas aid. The dramatic ongoing reduction in overseas aid as a percentage of GDP does not reflect where we should be placing ourselves on this matter. If we are serious about helping people in Aleppo, we must be willing to give the necessary moneys for that purpose. We are not doing that, however, and it was not done in the budget. That needs to change.

Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Seán Kyne): I commend the Business Committee on facilitating these statements. I acknowledge the calls by my colleague, Deputy Griffin, since 2012, for a debate on the situation in Syria. He has raised the matter in the Dáil on at least three occasions, each time seeking a debate.

I add my voice of condemnation to those of my colleagues in regard to the tragedy that has been unfolding for some years in Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria. I call for an end to the bombing campaign by various nations, particularly the atrocities being enacted by the Russian state. I commend Government efforts to accommodate refugees from Syria and ask the Minister to expedite their reception so that we can meet our humanitarian targets. I acknowledge the funding of €62 million over the past five years in humanitarian aid to Syria. That provision is a positive statement of support from this country. It is not fair for anybody in Ireland, a neutral state, to suggest that any other country should send troops to Syria, but I acknowledge the need for a cessation of the bombings and atrocities and the need for peacekeepers if and when such a ceasefire takes place. We in Europe were criticised for our response to the Balkan crisis in the 1990s. Today, the destruction of Aleppo is a stain on the world and everything must be done by the United Nations and European Union to secure an end to the conflict.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I have listened

carefully to all the contributions this evening. I thank my colleagues for their frankness and their passion in this important debate. It is clear, having regard to the number of telephone calls, letters and e-mails received by my Department and my constituency office in recent weeks, that this is an issue that is deeply troubling to the Irish public. The exchanges we have had this afternoon provide an important opportunity to address those concerns and to outline Ireland's position and the efforts we are making to support the Syrian people. The use of violence by the Assad regime, its allies and other regional actors against civilians in Syria has been excessive, disproportionate and indiscriminate.

The city of Aleppo has faced the brunt of that violence in recent weeks. The pause today in the bombing offers a small reprieve for the citizens of that beleaguered city. It is clear, however, the pause will soon come to an end and the people of Aleppo will once again sit in silence and fear awaiting the all too familiar sound of aircraft overhead. The threat to the defenceless civilian population is unacceptable. I again call on the regime and its allies to extend the pause and put in place a lasting cessation of hostilities. I strongly emphasise that the end of the pause can never be an excuse for the Assad regime and its allies to justify renewing its totally unacceptable bombardment of the ancient city of Aleppo. These atrocities must end and must be accounted for.

I will try in the time available to me to address some of the specific concerns raised by colleagues. I will, of course, get the note Deputy Crowe requested. It is being drawn up as we speak and the Deputy will have it very early next week at the latest. We have agreed to accept 4,000 refugees and asylum seekers from Syria. I share the concern of many in this House that the process of bringing them here has not been as rapid as we would have expected. I hope those numbers can now be facilitated. I have no doubt the Syrian people who come here will be warmly welcomed by everybody in this House and by the public. I am in regular contact with my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality, to advance the reception programme.

I am asked on a daily basis what people can do to help the Syrian people other than supporting the refugee programme. The Minister of State, Deputy Kyne, referred to the humanitarian support we provide. Some 13.5 million people remain inside Syria and are in need of critical humanitarian assistance. Ireland's response to their plight in recent years has been unprecedented, with more than €62 million in humanitarian assistance allocated to Syria and the region. That support will continue. More than 2 million Syrian children have been forced out of school. The conflict is now in its sixth year, which is the entire span of second level education here in Ireland. Young people in Syria and those who are displaced in the region are on the verge of becoming a lost generation. We will continue to direct our humanitarian aid to those most in need.

I have repeatedly expressed my concern at the failure of the UN, particularly the Security Council, to act to protect the Syrian population. The Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, has made clear his own frustration at the failure to uphold international humanitarian law and the impunity under international law for those committing crimes in Syria. That action undermines the UN as well as weakening international law and fundamental rights. Several speakers referred to what is being done in Syria as war crimes. In particular, the attack on the humanitarian convoy was an act of barbarism.

I look forward to opportunities for further discussion on this issue. I told the Taoiseach two weeks ago that I am available at any time to participate in debates such as this and to inform the House as to what we are doing. I will be in the Chamber for Question Time next Tuesday, which will afford us an opportunity to resume deliberations on these important issues.

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The Dáil adjourned at 6.30 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 25 October 2016.