



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 6 Márta 2018

Tuesday, 6 March 2018

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call the leaders, I wish to bring to the attention of the House that, under Standing Order 29, the time limits for Leaders' Questions are ordered by the House. There are three minutes per question and three minutes for supplementary questions. We have not been adhering to that for quite some time. I put it to Members that if the leaders do not adhere to the orders and are regularly in breach of them, it is, in fact, disorder. If the leaders cannot be orderly, it is very hard to expect the followers to be orderly. I appeal to the leaders to adhere to the time limits laid down. I call Deputy Micheál Martin.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Last week, the Taoiseach was in full denial in regard to the activities of the strategic communications unit and the party-political nature of the advertisements related to the national development plan. I subsequently wrote to the Secretary General of the Taoiseach's Department outlining my concerns and complaints, and particularly what I believe to be a breach of the Civil Service code and the blurring of lines between the independence of the Civil Service and the promotion of a political party. Subsequently, at the end of the week, the Taoiseach indicated he had also contacted the Secretary General in respect of a review. However, the revelations in *The Sunday Business Post* concerning the origins and intentions of the strategic communications unit have revealed far more detail than anybody knew about and than the Dáil itself knew about. It is interesting that the Taoiseach's Department resisted every attempt to release this information. It was released only on the instructions of the Information Commissioner. What did the Taoiseach have to hide? Why did he resist the release of this information? Is it because it revealed too much and gave the lie to the idea advanced by him on many occasions that the unit was at arm's length from him and the Government? We now know from the emails that it was anything but and that three weeks after Deputy Varadkar was elected as Taoiseach, he had a meeting with the Secretary General, the now assistant secretary, Mr. Concannon, and his adviser, Mr. Brian Murphy, concerning the establishment of the strategic communications unit. It was his idea and he appointed a head. An audit began immediately of all Government expenditure and a memo was sent out by the assistant secretary, Mr. Concannon. The emails and issues discussed were quite revealing in terms of the level of activity that

was ongoing.

What no one realised from the beginning was the idea that the Government or Taoiseach's office would seek to centralise and control up to €180 million in communications expenditure across agencies and Departments, channelling it all through the Taoiseach's office. That represents enormous purchasing power and enormous leverage for the Taoiseach's office with the media industry. It also represents the politicisation of established agencies, such as Bord Bia, IDA Ireland and the Revenue Commissioners, which are separate for a reason.

An Ceann Comhairle: Has the Deputy a question?

Deputy Micheál Martin: My question for the Taoiseach is whether, given his recent comments, he now accepts that the strategic communications unit should be stood down and abolished. Will he ensure that the independence of the Civil Service is ring-fenced from party-political promotion given what has happened over recent weeks? Will he agree to release all information pertaining to the establishment of the strategic communications unit and its relationships with third parties and the media industry itself?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Will the Taoiseach ensure that the work of Behaviour & Attitudes in the context of research and insight be published forthwith?

The Taoiseach: We have just gone through the worst snowstorm in 35 years and, perhaps, 70 years. As I speak, there are still 23,000 households without water.

Deputy Robert Troy: That is the fault of Irish Water.

The Taoiseach: Some parts of the country remain inaccessible by road and we have 20 Irish Water crews around the country trying to reconnect people to the water supply. The Leader of the Opposition's priority is the strategic communications unit.

Deputy Finian McGrath: It is disgraceful.

The Taoiseach: Does it not say a lot about the misplaced priorities of both the Leader of the Opposition and the main Opposition party that when people all over the country-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Order, please.

The Taoiseach: -----are working hard in their jobs or as volunteers to deal with the national crisis, this is the only thing in which they are interested?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Answer the question.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Answer the question.

The Taoiseach: If I am not shouted down for a change, I will answer the questions. I will answer as many as I can in the time available.

Deputy Michael Creed: It shows their priorities.

The Taoiseach: It does show their priorities. It really shows why it is a good thing that the party that I lead and the Government that I lead, with the Independent Alliance and other Independents, is in office and not a party that is obsessed with spin and other people's communications.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Taoiseach is a Taoiseach, not a plumber. He should answer the question.

The Taoiseach: If I am not shouted down, I would like to answer some of the questions.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

The Taoiseach: If I am not shouted down, I would like to answer some of the questions.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Get on with it. There is a minute and a half left.

The Taoiseach: It is interesting that people who demand answers to questions will never allow one to answer them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

The Taoiseach: The decision to establish a strategic communications unit in the Department of the Taoiseach to modernise, professionalise and streamline Government communications was made by the Global Irish Forum in 2011. The decision to do so was first announced to the Dáil in February 2013 by the former Deputy and then Tánaiste, Eamon Gilmore. It was not followed through on at that point. However, I took it as part of my job when I became Taoiseach to follow through on that. It remains a good idea. In my view, Government communications are fragmented, siloed and expensive. It has been pointed out that €180 million was spent by Government Departments, agencies and semi-States on communications annually. There are 700 press officers and information officers across the public service, many of whom are not trained to do the job they are asked to do. They go from processing employment permits one week to being press officer the next to doing a policy job a couple of months later.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: A bit like the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: As a result, there are hundreds of external consultancies and these are very expensive. There are too many websites, logos and little empires. Ireland is an outlier when compared to other European countries in this regard. The idea was to streamline things; that is all. It was not to centralise everything in the Department of the Taoiseach. There was no proposal that specialist promotional agencies such as Tourism Ireland, IDA Ireland or Bord Bia should be controlled by the Department of the Taoiseach. That is absurd and a political charge. That was never intended, nor was it ever intended that it would apply to semi-State bodies, which are State-owned enterprises.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Rather, the intention was to collapse dozens of websites into one, namely, *gov.ie*, to train up a dedicated press corps across the public service, to develop a single identity for the Government, which is the Government of Ireland, to run cross-Government information

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campaigns - such as Healthy Ireland, the campaign relating to the self-employed and others - and to empower the Government to communicate directly with the public.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up, please.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate that the unit that I set up to better explain how Government works and what it does has now become a distraction from the work of the Government. I appreciate that mistakes were made, that controls were too loose and as a result, problems arose. For that reason, the unit is under review. The Secretary General is undertaking that review and will conclude before Easter.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Micheál Martin has one minute.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There is nothing as grave or as fundamental as the independence of our Civil Service. That is something that will outlive any particular storm at any particular time. I will decide what I raise and when I raise it. I have plenty of opportunities to do so. There is nothing more fundamental in a parliamentary democracy. This is a parliamentary democracy system of Government, not a presidential system of Government.

I do not accept the rationale behind the audit of the strategic communications unit. Bord Bia has been the most successful food promotion board that we have had. IDA Ireland has been very successful. They have discrete, important communications agendas. The vast bulk of the €180 million in spending is with the agencies. However, let us look at the Departments. It took a long time to establish the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, particularly in terms of acceptance of the idea that a Department should have responsibility for children. The Taoiseach's first initiative was to grab the good news regarding the child care subsidy; that it must come through his Department. That is what happened.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. Has he a question?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I wish to put a key point to the Taoiseach. There was a party-political dimension to the promotion of the plan. The strategic communications unit was about political promotion and not the provision of hard information.

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

Deputy Micheál Martin: Four marginal constituencies - Limerick City, Limerick West, Roscommon and Longford-Westmeath - all just happen to have Fine Gael candidates emblazoned across advertisements that have been paid for by the taxpayers' money. The utilising of taxpayers' money for a political spin machine-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----orchestrated by your good self from beginning to end of the enterprise: that is what is over the top.

The Taoiseach: In our political system every constituency is a marginal constituency. The last seat, if not the last two seats, in every constituency are marginal. The Deputy has his conspiracy theories about that. I have my conspiracy theory about the fact that two of the four controversial advertisements appeared in particular papers. The Deputy has a lot-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: Under Standing Orders that remark should be withdrawn.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: There is no seat though.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is slurring of a citizen of the State.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has had a lot to say. I think I should be given extra time, in general, because I am constantly being shouted down.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputies.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Taoiseach is slurring an individual who is a citizen of the State.

The Taoiseach: Let us talk about slurs. I want to talk about slurs actually.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I would have just named the papers.

The Taoiseach: There have been a lot of slurs bandied around. A lot of what the Leader of the Opposition has said has been personalised, it has been vituperative and it has even been venomous towards me and my staff and towards some people in the Civil Service. I regret this is the tone that he has adopted, but he has. Deputy Martin has made a lot of allegations, based largely on innuendo and conspiracy theories. The Deputy has presented scant evidence to back these theories up. He has alleged that I and members of my staff pressurised newspaper editors. What is Deputy Martin's evidence of that? All I see are anonymous claims from a third party, an agency that did not even have a contract with the Government-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Did the Taoiseach apologise to Ellen Coyne?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up, please.

The Taoiseach: How can the Deputy stand over such allegations?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Did the Taoiseach apologise to Ellen Coyne?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has nothing on which to base these allegations. He has made a lot out of an email that has appeared in the newspapers with an instruction that content should be laid out as normal editorial. This email is from August 2017, which predates the establishment of the strategic communications unit and it relates to Creative Ireland, an arts and culture promotional campaign.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I did not mention that at all.

The Taoiseach: If this is so, why has the Leader of the Opposition consistently misrepresented that again and again, as though it came from the strategic communications unit-----

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Maybe the Taoiseach wants to break up the Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----and as though it related to Project Ireland 2040? I will sit down but I need to say one last sentence.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: The Taoiseach does not need to say it.

The Taoiseach: The principal charge made against me by the Leader of the Opposition is

that I have somehow blurred the lines between the Civil Service and politics.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: Because he has.

The Taoiseach: Let us listen to what Deputy Martin said about freedom of information yesterday on “The Last Word”.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: Maybe it suits the Taoiseach to break up the Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach is way over time.

The Taoiseach: He said they were refused first. He said that it was interesting that the Taoiseach had concealed a lot of information and it was interesting that there was opposition to revealing information that was contained in a freedom of information request that *The Sunday Business Post* received. They were first refused and then they went to the information commissioner for the reasons why the Government refused to release it. The Deputy asked why did the Government hide and why would the Government refuse to release this material.

The Deputy opposite has been a Member of this House for longer than most people have been alive. He knows how the Freedom of Information Act works. There is a deciding officer and a civil servant decides what is released and what is not. They are not allowed to ask a politician about it. A politician is not allowed to direct them on what they should or should not release. One minute Deputy Martin accuses me of politicising the Civil Service and in the next minute he makes a bogus, false assertion and says that I should. He should withdraw that. The Deputy should apologise and withdraw that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There is nothing-----

Deputy Eugene Murphy: When it suits the Taoiseach to break up the Government-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Taoiseach has hidden the truth and slurred a journalist.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please. Whatever about strategic communications I do not know what the public looking in here thinks that this House is communicating to them. If the leaders in this House are incapable of adhering to the rules of the House then the Members must change the rules if they do not like them. As they are the rules, please do not continue to show the disrespect we have seen here today.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I believe that the Taoiseach doth protest too much on this matter. I am not entirely clear what is his assertion of his own personal conspiracy theory. I am not entirely impressed with the Taoiseach’s political priorities. In budget 2018 the strategic communications unit was allocated €5 million. I will put this in context. This is one third of the additional money that was promised for mental health - so much for the Taoiseach’s political priorities. This communications unit is now mired in scandal. The Taoiseach can rant and rave, he can point the finger and he can talk about conspiracy theories but that is now where it is at. He said in October that there would be no political advertising or promotion of political parties and that the Civil Service and public sector code would continue to apply in respect of this unit, and this has clearly not been the case. That was a piece of spin in and of itself. The Taoiseach’s spin unit has followed a strategy to promote Fine Gael in newspapers in a very underhand and unprincipled way by directing editors to present paid-for political advertising as regular news articles. He referred to the email courtesy of Ellen Coyne, who is not on these benches but on the media bench above. The email stated: “Part of our deal is that we don’t have any moniker

such as “Advertorial” or “special feature” or anything like that - it simply runs as normal editorial.” The Taoiseach is right - this referred to the Creative Ireland campaign. However, the Taoiseach also knows that this was very explicitly the template to be used for all other adverts and that this strategy was explicitly articulated. In this email, the words I have just put on the record were followed by the words, “I do hope your editorial team understands this”. I am very sure editorial teams fully understood it. This strategy is underhand and clearly designed for party-political promotion. It was carried out using not just public money, but the resources of the Civil Service. As the Taoiseach knows, the Civil Service is prohibited from being used to advance the party-political objectives of whomsoever is in government. This unit was not about informing citizens-----

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, Deputy, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----but about promoting the Taoiseach’s party. It was not about news, but about propaganda. It was not done to benefit the people, but to benefit Fine Gael. The Taoiseach now says he has ordered a review of the unit-----

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----and has asked Martin Fraser, a person for whom I have the utmost regard, to carry out that review. However, the Taoiseach can hardly ask any of us to treat this as a credible proposition because, while I mean no disrespect to Mr. Fraser, was he not the person responsible for the oversight of the Taoiseach’s spin unit in the first place-----

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----and central to its establishment? In no way could he be considered an independent assessor. It is, therefore, now time-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Regina Doherty: The Deputy is bang out of order.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----for the Taoiseach to wind down his strategic communications unit and I would go further-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputy wind down as well?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yes. The rules must be applied or misapplied in an even-handed manner, I am sure the Ceann Comhairle will agree.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, and at this point Deputy Martin was 42 seconds over time, whereas Deputy McDonald is 50 seconds over time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: If the Ceann Comhairle does not mind, I will further put it to the Taoiseach that not alone should this unit be stood down, but he and any other relevant officials should go before the Committee of Public Accounts to give a full account-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

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Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----of what was spent and how. These were, after all, public moneys and not Fine Gael moneys.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: One minute and 19 seconds.

The Taoiseach: To state some facts, the budget for mental health this year is approximately €900 million. It has increased by €150 million or €200 million in recent years. One can argue about how much the increase was but it was certainly a lot more than €5 million. It was probably closer to €35 million.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It was €15 million.

The Taoiseach: Therefore, I am not sure whether Deputy McDonald's assertions count as fake news or spin but they are certainly untrue. The €5 million budget came out of my Department's administrative allocation. My Department is one of the few Departments that had their budgets reduced for 2018, and I imagine that €5 million budget will be reduced further, if not eliminated altogether, depending on how the review goes.

The Deputy asserted that I or someone in my office directed editors to present advertorials as news. She should present evidence to back this up. The only evidence I have seen is that a company did that, a company that was a subcontractor-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Which the Taoiseach's Department paid.

The Taoiseach: -----to the company with which the SCU had a contract.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: The Taoiseach is responsible.

The Taoiseach: It is, therefore, the subcontractor, it is alleged, that did this, yet the assertion that Deputy McDonald is trying to make, the slur, the spin, the twist-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Taoiseach is accountable for the money spent by his Department.

An Ceann Comhairle: Let the Taoiseach answer.

The Taoiseach: -----that she is trying to put across is that someone in my office or the communications unit, or perhaps me personally, did this. If she has any evidence for this, let her present it.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: He does not even know his job.

The Taoiseach: Before somebody answers a charge one is actually supposed to present some evidence to back up the charge and then the person can respond to it.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Taking photographs. That is all he knows.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy has any evidence to that effect I ask her to present it. She quoted some correspondence between Media Force and an unknown media organisation. What she did not say was that was an email that predated the establishment of the SCU. She implies it came from the SCU.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: More of this to come.

The Taoiseach: What she did not say is it related to Creative Ireland, which was an arts campaign - and a relatively uncontroversial arts campaign - that had no connection with Project Ireland 2040. If that is not spin and innuendo what is spin and innuendo? To present something that predated the SCU that was about a different campaign as somehow being the same as Project Ireland 2040 and as somehow being from the SCU-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It was testing the water.

The Taoiseach: -----and to make allegations about a fourth party, a subcontractor, and somehow imply that what was done by a subcontractor must have been done by officials in my Department is pure spin. That is pure conjecture. It is also a slur, in my opinion.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I was very clear in my use of figures. I said it was a third of the additional moneys allocated for mental health.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: Wrong.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Five by three is 15. Those were the additional moneys. That is a very clear demonstration of the Taoiseach's political priorities. This unit, by his choice and by design, resides within his Department. It is simply not an explanation for him to say that agencies at an arm's length are the accountable ones in terms of the use or misuse of public moneys. It does not work that way. The Taoiseach is in charge, the unit is in his Department and he is answerable for the ethical and proper use and spending of those moneys. That is why I have made the point that the Taoiseach and the officials associated with the unit need now to give a full and transparent account of what was spent and how it was spent.

Let me make this point also.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy, your time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In the midst of all of this has been a very clear tactic on the Taoiseach's part, or officials or agencies on his behalf, to exploit the financial situation of regional media. That is not lost on people either.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, the time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The approach has been cynical. It has been underhand. The Taoiseach needs to stand this unit down and answer also the issue I raised with him on the Secretary General of his party - or of his Department, a Freudian slip perhaps - actually carrying out this independent review.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can I put it to the Deputy-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is certainly not independent in that regard.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please, you should not make an inference in respect of a respected public servant and align him with any political position. Please do not do that.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Withdraw.

An Ceann Comhairle: You should withdraw it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Martin Fraser, as I said earlier, is a person I know well and

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for whom I have great respect. Let me say this.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Withdraw that remark.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is not me who has acted to compromise the position of a senior civil servant. That has been the action of the Government and the Taoiseach himself.

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

The Taoiseach: I would really rue the day when I was respected by Deputy McDonald. We see what she means by respect-----

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: -----when she speaks about a public servant in that way. It is not that long ago that Deputy McDonald stood up in this Chamber and accused any number of people of having Ansbacher accounts and offshore accounts and they did not have them. She has yet to apologise for having done that. Once again, she has stood up here in this Chamber and maligned people who are not in this Chamber and I think that is wrong. It is not respectful. It is disrespectful. It is very wrong.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Answer the question.

The Taoiseach: I understand in relation to this matter a complaint has been made to the Standards in Public Office Commission. It is chaired by a High Court judge. It is independent. It is the guardian of the standards Acts, the ethics Acts and also the electoral Acts. That is the best body in my view to carry out any independent investigation. I am happy to answer any case that needs to be answered if there is a case to be made there.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Taoiseach. Time is up.

The Taoiseach: In relation to committees, I believe there are three committees looking for me to go before them. The committee I will go before is the one on finance, public expenditure and reform and Taoiseach. That is the one for my Department which, of course, covers the Estimates.

I understand the kind of thing that is going on here, which is try to inflict political damage on me and on the Government. It is a real shame that decent hard-working independent civil servants, not just the Secretary General of my Department-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: And journalists. Business people in Longford were slurred too.

The Taoiseach: -----but also the 15 people working in that unit, are having allegations made against them and are having their reputations questioned but yet no evidence whatsoever is presented to back that up. All there is to it is a series of claims about an agency with which the Government did not even have a direct contract. That is the truth of it.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The last six days have seen an heroic effort in those areas affected by Storm Emma and the blizzard caused by the so-called beast from the east. That effort continues now. The impact on the east coast was extraordinary. The first official day of spring began with a number of counties blanketed in snow and ice. Communities have pulled, pushed and shovelled together, in a powerful display of the old Irish concept of meitheal, that is, working together to help our friends and our neighbours. Stories of the snow will not be forgotten

for decades. I instanced one myself this morning on RTÉ, that of Mr. Declan Cunningham, an advanced paramedic with the National Ambulance Service based in Wexford General Hospital, and Corporal Steve Holloway of the Defence Forces. In the middle of one of the worst snowstorms in living memory, Declan and Steve were tasked to attend to an extremely sick child whose home was inaccessible. They trekked 2.8 km through snowdrifts to reach the boy, and then carried him 2.8 km back on foot to their Army ambulance. Every community, in my county and in many other counties, can tell stories like this. It shows the best of us in the worst of circumstances. We have been served incredibly well during the last week by a range of public services. I refer to our health services, our emergency services, our local authority workers working to the point of exhaustion and all who worked in those terrible conditions, from the ESB to Irish Water, from teachers to public servants, from Met Éireann to the Office of Emergency Planning. Our systems worked to make sure that we were warned in a timely fashion and thankfully, there were no fatalities.

However, this is the second red alert in the space of five months. The impact of climate change is far too real, and our country has to be prepared for stronger and more damaging storms and weather events. The first time a status red weather warning was issued was in advance of Storm Ophelia, during which, sadly, three individuals died. At the time, I raised this with the Taoiseach. When events like this occur, we need to know what specifically is expected of employers and employees in the event of a declaration of a status red warning. SIPTU has called for clear protocols to be put in place. A review was to take place after Storm Ophelia, and a report was to be prepared and submitted to the Government task force on emergency planning. Members were told this would happen in January 2018. Can the Taoiseach tell Members whether the responsible Minister, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, has submitted that report? Moreover, will the Government now prepare clear guidance and protocols to employers and employees who are affected by a red alert warning in the future in order that we can have absolute clarity across our country?

The Taoiseach: At the outset, I join Deputy Howlin in showing my appreciation, respect and gratitude to our emergency services and the work they have done in the past several days. I was in the ambulance base in Wexford on Friday and met that paramedic, and he told me the story of how he trekked across the snow.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Taoiseach did not invite us to go.

The Taoiseach: Sorry?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Taoiseach did not invite the other Deputies to meet him there.

The Taoiseach: I probably-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It was all Fine Gael.

The Taoiseach: I probably did not, because it was the last thing on my mind.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I wonder why Fine Gael was not.

The Taoiseach: Upsetting the egos of politicians really has not been on my mind for the last couple of days.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: That is shocking.

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The Taoiseach: I have been far too busy dealing with a national emergency and matters of state such as Brexit to organise invitations to Deputies personally in order that they felt included but I do genuinely apologise to the Deputy if his dignity was offended-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is not about dignity. The Taoiseach should not be churlish.

The Taoiseach: -----in any way by not being invited along to an ambulance base in his own constituency, a few metres from where his office is.

Deputy John Lahart: They are public representatives.

The Taoiseach: In regard to the red weather alert warning, which was the question asked, this was an issue that was highlighted in the aftermath of Storm Ophelia. The review of the policy response to Storm Ophelia is approaching conclusion but has not been submitted to Cabinet. It will now be informed by the experience of the past week. As people will appreciate, the individuals involved in the National Emergency Co-ordination Group over the past week are the same people responsible for the review of Storm Ophelia, and their priority focus has obviously been to deal with the current weather challenges.

Our weather warning is divided into three categories - yellow, orange and red. Yellow means to be aware, orange means to be prepared and red means to take action. The issue of the red level severe warning is a comparatively rare event and implies that the recipients take action to protect themselves and-or their properties. Since this red warning system was put in place in 2013 there have been only six alerts, with only two having been issued at a national level, but those two have happened in the past six months. It is important to recognise that weather warnings issued for snow, high winds, rain and so on are quite different in their implications and, as a result, giving a one-size-fits-all answer on weather warnings simply will not work. Furthermore, it may result in services that are essential but not normally categorised as emergencies being closed down, creating greater problems.

For example, we would have had major issues over the past week if our hotels closed down. What would have happened to all the tourists who had booked in and to all the people stranded in the country? We would have had thousands of people on the streets if we told all businesses to close. That is why, while there will be further guidance, it will not be as simple as one-size-fits-all. It will depend on the circumstances, the location and the nature of the warning.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Taoiseach finds it very difficult to answer any question without some personal slur. Red weather alerts are a matter of life and death. I am looking for clarity in regard to this. I am here a long time too, like Deputy Micheál Martin. Whenever there is a briefing on an issue like this for the Taoiseach, it is normal, and a matter of courtesy, to invite key local representatives and others to attend. That is all I am saying on this.

In terms of the net point, in the middle of the crisis the Minister for Health had to tweet a response countermanding a HSE memo on workers using annual leave to cover absences. What we need is clarity. These are no longer once-in-a-generation events and we have had two in five months. If, as the Taoiseach told me last October, there was to be a review and it was to be presented in January, where is the review and what is the policy? Let us debate it so we can have clarity for all these brave, heroic public sector workers the next time we face a red alert, and there will be a next time.

The Taoiseach: I understand the Minister for Health did clarify the situation using Twitter.

It is a very succinct and quick way to get a message across and I noted that, within a few minutes, there were tweets from the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation and the Irish Medical Organisation welcoming the Minister for Health's tweet clarifying the matter. Perhaps it is actually a good way to communicate directly.

The Government's role in this is to give the greatest level of clarity to employers as to the threats posed and the actions they should take themselves. I believe that, over the past week, the advice was clear and unambiguous. However, the final decision must be left to employers themselves, who know their own business best and who, in the vast majority of instances, will take the best decision that is in the interests of their staff.

With regard to compelling employers to pay wages for staff over the days the employer had to close or where staff could not make it into work, I would be reluctant to propose a one-size-fits-all approach. The vast majority of employers are responsible and want a good relationship with their staff, and *vice versa*.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Was there a report?

The Taoiseach: Local accommodations will be found which will, in the majority of cases, work for employers and employees alike. I do not believe the solution is legislation.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Was there a report?

The Taoiseach: I answered that. What I said in the first section of my initial answer is that the report is not ready yet. It is the same group of people who are doing the report who are dealing with the emergencies, and it has not been prepared yet.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It was to be in January.

The Taoiseach: The events of last week overtook that but it will be ready. I have asked the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to continue to work together to review the guidance.

From practical experience of having been through this in the past couple of weeks, it is not as simple as offering a blanket instruction to employers. Employers need to take into account the nature of the work they do, where their employees are coming from and whether they can get home. With a blanket ban saying, for example, that all hotels should have closed, we can imagine the effect that would have had in the past couple of days, when everyone would have been thrown out of hotels onto the street. It is not as simple as a blanket ban. Think of the power stations, for example.

Deputy Noel Grealish: Last week the Rural Independent Group brought a motion before the House regarding the high costs of motor insurance and today I raise an issue of equal importance, namely, the spiralling cost of business insurance.

While Brexit is probably the number one issue of concern at the moment, the cost of insurance affects every single Irish business from a small shopkeeper to a large exporter. Many small business owners tell me this is the number one issue that is likely to force the closure of their business in the next two years, affecting their viability and ability to grow and expand. While I welcome the establishment of the cost of insurance working group and the publication of its report, action is not happening quickly enough and many businesses will close before there is a real reduction in insurance premiums, unless the Government takes decisive action

now. Last week I listened to Michael Magner, owner of the Vienna Woods Hotel in Cork, who is also chairman of the insurance committee of the Irish Hotels Federation. While being interviewed on the “Today with Sean O’Rourke” show, he stated his own insurance costs had risen from €10,000 in 2006 to €86,000 in 2016 and to a staggering €156,000 last year. In my own constituency, McCambridge’s of Galway, which is one of the longest-established businesses in Galway city, has seen its total insurance bill rocket from €20,000 in 2015 to €50,000 in 2016 and then to €102,000 in 2017. These are just two examples, I could list hundreds of horror stories. No business can sustain this.

Such is the concern that after a decade and a half, the Alliance for Insurance Reform was relaunched in January to represent businesses, community and voluntary organisations amid concerns that the spiralling cost of cover is causing firms like shops and pubs to go out of business. This group is headed up by Pat McDonagh of Supermac’s, who has long been critical of the compensation culture that is to blame for much of the rising cost. He has used closed-circuit television, CCTV, in his business to try to reduce the number of fraudulent claims but he is still frustrated by the fact that claims are often settled by insurance companies without consultation, which in turn encourages others.

The number and diversity of businesses and voluntary organisations that have joined the Alliance for Insurance Reform since it relaunched is a clear indication of the level of concern among business owners about this issue. The alliance is calling for an urgent response from the Government to address the level of awards and the effective bypassing of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board as a means for dealing with claims. It wants to prevent exaggerated and misleading claims being pursued and settled and real transparency on how premiums are calculated, including information on how and why claims are settled.

Can the Taoiseach outline exactly what clear and decisive action is being taken right now by the Government to address this issue, which is affecting the viability of so many businesses and voluntary groups across the country?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am very conscious of the impact of the rising cost of insurance and its enormous cost burden on individuals and in particular on businesses around the country. In recognition of the increased cost of insurance for motorists and businesses in recent years, a cost of insurance working group was established under the chairmanship of the Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Deputy D’Arcy. It examined the factors that led to increases in the costs of motor insurance and insurance for business. In respect of businesses specifically, the working group examined employer liability and public liability insurance areas as these represent significant business lines that have been identified by a range of business sectors as having increased disproportionately in cost in recent years. Work to implement the recommendations of these reports is now advanced and is well under way. It is hoped that the implementation of the recommendations will lead to greater stability in the pricing of insurance for both motorists and businesses.

We must remember, however, that neither the Minister for Finance nor the Central Bank can interfere in the pricing of insurance products. This is a private market and as these matters are of a commercial nature and are determined by insurance companies, they must be based on an assessment of the risks they are willing to accept.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I thank the Taoiseach for his response. The Alliance for Insurance Reform, relaunched in January, brings together 20 civic and business organisations from across

Ireland. It represents 35,000 members, more than 600,000 employees and 41,300 volunteers. This time around, it is much more broadly based than in the past, taking in charities, festivals and sports organisations, as well as small and medium enterprises. The alliance issued a statement today calling for the establishment, on a statutory basis, of a financial conduct authority to oversee the insurance industry on the back of the insurance companies having announced massive profits. For example, last week, FBD Insurance announced profits of €45 million and RSA Insurance Ireland announced profits of €10 million. Directors of the alliance, Mr. Peter Boland and Mr. Eoin McCambridge, have called for the establishment of this authority as there has been no meaningful reform of the insurance industry despite the establishment more than 18 months ago of the insurance working group.

Will the Taoiseach commit to the establishment of a financial conduct authority to protect the interests of policyholders and revert to this House with a clear, meaningful change on insurance costs for businesses?

The Taoiseach: I cannot give a commitment that I will set up a new authority. It is often the solution in Ireland to set up a new authority but it does not always solve the underlying problem. The people referenced by the Deputy are a serious group of people and we will take their proposals on board. The Minister of State, Deputy D'Arcy, who is taking the lead on behalf of the Government in regard to reducing the cost of insurance for individuals, homeowners, motorists and business, has invited them to meet him to discuss their proposals. I welcome that the Deputy has raised this issue. As I said, the Minister of State, Deputy D'Arcy, is keen to meet the group and to examine its proposals with a view to making some progress on them.

Order of Business

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Is é gnó na Máirt na Uimh. 8, tairiscint maidir leis an 18ú Tuarascáil ón gCoiste Roghnóireachta; Uimh. 29, an Bille Sláinte Poiblí (Alcól), 2015 [*Seanad*] - an Dara Céim (atógáil); agus Uimh. 30, ráitis maidir leis an nGaeilge. Is é Gnó Comhaltaí Príobháideacha Uimh. 180, tairiscint maidir le tithíocht phoiblí ar cíós costais, arna roghnú ag Grúpa na nDaonlathaithe Sóisialta agus an Chomhaontais Ghlais; agus Uimh. 52, an Bille um Chosaint Tomhaltóirí (Gnólachta Seirbhísithe Creidmheasa a Rialáil) (Leasú), 2018 - Dara Céim.

Is é gnó na Céadaoin ná Uimh. 29, an Bille Sláinte Poiblí (Alcól), 2015 [*Seanad*] - an Dara Céim, atógáil, mura mbeidh sí críochnaithe roimhe sin; Uimh. 31, ráitis maidir leis an Tríú Tuarascáil Eatramhach ón gCoimisiún Imscrúdúcháin um Árais Mháithreacha agus Naíonán (atógáil); Uimh. 29, an Bille Sláinte Poiblí (Alcól), 2015 [*Seanad*] - an Dara Céim, atógáil, mura mbeidh sí críochnaithe roimhe sin; Uimh. 30, ráitis maidir leis an nGaeilge, atógáil, mura mbeidh sí críochnaithe roimhe sin; Uimh. 31, ráitis maidir leis an Tríú Tuarascáil Eatramhach ón gCoimisiún Imscrúdúcháin i dtaobh Árais Mháithreacha agus Naíonán (atógáil); Uimh. 9, tairiscint maidir le hÉire do dhaingniú Choinbhinsiún na Náisiún Aontaithe ar Chearta Daoine faoi Mhíchumas; agus Uimh. 32, ráitis maidir le Tuaisceart Éireann. Is é Gnó Comhaltaí Príobháideacha Uimh. 181, tairiscint maidir le cearta bainte feamainne a chaomhnú, arna roghnú ag Neamhspleáigh ar son an Athraithe.

Is é gnó an Déardaoin Uimh. a5, an Bille um an Séú Leasú is Tríocha ar an mBunreacht, 2018 - an tOrdú don Dara Céim agus an Dara Céim.

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I dtaobh chraoladh na socruithe atá beartaithe do ghnó na seachtaine seo, tagraím don dara tuarascáil athbhreithnithe ón gCoiste Gnó dar dáta an 5 Márta 2018. Maidir le gnó na Máirt, beartaítear:

(1) Go dtógfár an tairiscint maidir leis an 18ú Tuarascáil ón gCoiste Roghnóireachta gan díospóireacht agus go ndéanfar aon vótáil a éileofar ar an gcéanna a thógáil láithreach;

(2) Nach mbeidh aon cheisteanna ó bhéal ann faoi Bhuan-Ordú 38(1)(b) an tseachtain seo, nach dtógfár ceisteanna i scríbhinn Dé Céadaoin agus go dtógfár saincheisteanna tráthúla tar éis na gceisteanna chun an Taoisigh faoi Bhuan-Ordú 39(1)(a);

(3) Nach faide ná deich nóiméad gach ráiteas maidir leis an nGaeilge ó Aire nó Aire Stáit agus ó príomhurlabhraithe páirtithe agus grúpaí, nó ó Chomhalta arna ainmniú nó arna hainmniú ina n-ionad; agus

(4) Go dtógfár Gnó Comhaltaí Príobháideacha ó ghrúpa na nDaonlathaithe Sóisialta agus an Chomhaontais Ghlais ar 6 p.m. ar feadh dhá uair an chloig agus go ndéanfar an Gnó Comhaltaí Príobháideacha ó Pháirtí Fhianna Fáil, a raibh sé beartaithe é a thógáil Dé Céadaoin seo caite, 28 Feabhra 2018, a thógáil tráth nach déanaí ná 8 p.m. ar feadh dhá uair an chloig agus go rachaidh an Dáil ar athló ar an gcéanna a chríochnú.

Maidir le gnó na Céadaoin, beartaítear:

(1) Má tá an gnó roimh mheán lae críochnaithe roimh an am sin, go mbeidh an Dáil ar fionraí go dtí meán lae;

(2) Go dtosóidh an tairiscint maidir le hÉire do Dhaingniú Choinbhinsiún na Náisiún Aontaithe ar Chearta Daoine faoi Mhíchumas ar 6.40 p.m. agus go gcríochnóidh sí laistigh de 90 nóiméad, mura mbeidh sí críochnaithe roimhe sin; ní dhéanfaidh ach Aire nó Aire Stáit agus príomhurlabhraithe páirtithe agus grúpaí, nó Comhalta arna ainmniú nó arna hainmniú ina n-ionad, óráidí a thabhairt, is óráidí nach faide ná deich nóiméad an ceann, agus beidh freagra deich nóiméad ann ó Aire nó Aire Stáit; agus féadfaidh na Comhaltaí go léir am a roinnt eatarthu féin; agus

(3) Go dtosóidh na ráitis maidir le Tuisceart Éireann tráth nach déanaí ná 8.10 p.m. agus go gcríochnóidh siad laistigh de dhá uair an chloig agus cúig nóiméad, mura mbeidh siad críochnaithe roimhe sin; ní dhéanfaidh ach Aire nó Aire Stáit agus príomhurlabhraithe páirtithe agus grúpaí, nó Comhalta arna ainmniú nó arna hainmniú ina n-ionad, ráitis, is ráitis nach faide ná 15 nóiméad an ceann, agus beidh freagra cúig nóiméad ann ó Aire nó Aire Stáit; agus féadfaidh na Comhaltaí go léir am a roinnt eatarthu féin agus ní atógfár an t-ordú ina dhiaidh sin.

Maidir le gnó an Déardaoin, beartaítear go rachaidh an Dáil, ar éirí di, ar athló go dtí 2 p.m. Dé Céadaoin, an 21 Márta 2018.

An Ceann Comhairle: Léiríonn sé sin go bhfuil trí mholadh le cur os comhair an Tí. An bhfuil an moladh i gcomhair gnó an lae inniu aontaithe? Aontaithe. An bhfuil an moladh i gcomhair gnó na Céadaoine aontaithe?

Deputy Bríd Smith: Níl.

An Ceann Comhairle: Níl an Teachta sásta le gnó na Céadaoine.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Tá brón orm nach bhfuil mé líofa a dhóthain le mo argóint a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge. I am worried about the referendum on the eighth amendment and getting the legislation through the Houses on time. We have consistently made the argument that we need to ensure that we get an early referendum and I know the Taoiseach agrees with me on that. We have been delayed because of the awaited outcome of the Supreme Court case. Indeed staff in the business office told me that the barristers were delayed because of the snow. If we are going to rise on Thursday evening and not return until 21 March, what guarantees do we have that we have enough time to get this over the line in order that we can have an early referendum so that students and young people can cast their votes, which is the consistent argument that we have made? In the event that there is no guarantee of that and we are pressed for time, I would like to ask the House to sit on Friday, to sit late if necessary and to come back next week, if required. After all, we have been off since last Wednesday and we will have an Easter break shortly. We owe it to the people of Ireland to ensure that we have an early referendum. We owe it, in particular, to the young people of Ireland who have been campaigning extremely hard for it.

The Taoiseach: I quite agree with Deputy Bríd Smith on this matter. The Supreme Court will deliver its judgment in Limerick tomorrow and the Business Committee will meet at 4.30 p.m. today. As a result of that, we will be requesting that the Dáil meets on Friday. We would like to have a Cabinet meeting on Thursday to approve the wording of the referendum and the policy paper associated with it in order that we can have it in the Dáil on Friday and establish the referendum commission formally on that day. If we do not do that, we will lose around ten days and that does jeopardise our ambition to have a referendum before the end of May. I ask for the co-operation of all parties in this House to allow us to meet on Friday for that purpose. I also ask parties to work together to make sure that there is a quorum. I know it is the norm that the Government is supposed to provide the quorum but this does arise in the context of an all-party committee report. I ask, therefore, that all parties be willing to help provide a quorum for Friday.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is the Government's job.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is good news from the Taoiseach. He has thought to hold a sitting on Friday and I am sure people will co-operate with that. I share the concern that we are on a very tight timeline in any event. We cannot afford any slippage. That is probably a concern across the House.

If I understand the Order Paper correctly, however, the Taoiseach is asking us to vote for an order on Thursday even though it seems that there is some doubt regarding the matter to be dealt with on Thursday. The Ceann Comhairle might clarify the position. The Taoiseach is now saying there is some question in respect of a verdict from the courts and what might or might not be brought forward. I am saying this in an absolutely supportive spirit because we want the legislation before the Houses. This is a critical debate and time is very tight. Can the Taoiseach clarify the intention of the House as regards Thursday and how the Friday sitting will be facilitated?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach said that the Business Committee will meet later to make a decision on that. I call Deputy Howlin.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I am very supportive of any mechanism that we need to employ to ensure there is adequate debate on this matter and that we have the referendum before the people so that the maximum possible level of participation, particularly among young people,

can be facilitated. That means holding the referendum before the end of May. From a technical point of view, when will the Taoiseach be in a position to lay out the step-by-step approach to referendum day so that we will actually be able to see what will be involved? In terms of logistics, we are now agreeing the Order of Business for the week. From an administrative perspective, we have just heard from the Taoiseach that it is proposed to sit on Friday. When will that matter be put to the House? Should we be agreeing it at this point as well?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, the Business Committee has to meet in order to consider it. The matter has not yet been formally agreed.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Will a separate Business Committee report be brought forth?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Business Committee will be meeting at 4 p.m. or shortly thereafter.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: In terms of the Taoiseach's ambition to hold the referendum by the end of May, I certainly pledge the support of the Labour Party to facilitating that objective.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The separation of powers in the context of the courts and the Oireachtas is a fundamental plank of the Constitution. When I saw the first agenda that came out for this week, I knew that everybody was too concerned about the Supreme Court and it was all a rush. As a result of an act of God or whatever, the recent bad weather meant that there was nobody here to draft the business, etc. The relevant people were off work, and rightly so. Now the Government wants to rush to put the cart before the horse again. On behalf of the Rural Independent Group, I am objecting to this change but not because we do not want to sit on Friday or anything of that nature. I am objecting to putting the cart before the horse. It is all rush, rush, rush. I have said several times in respect of this issue that there is a need to make haste slowly. Matters are moving with indecent haste as far as I am concerned. This issue needs to be properly debated, discussed and managed. We should wait and see before we decide anything, at least until the Business Committee meets later. In any event, we are objecting and we will call a vote.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We were alerted this morning that the Business Committee may consider a Friday sitting at its meeting this afternoon. Our Front Bench agreed readily to a Friday sitting. I think it is important that the Supreme Court does its own work independently of the Oireachtas. In that context, there is no suggestion of the Oireachtas putting any pressure on the Supreme Court. It should be absolutely independent in its timing and, obviously, it will be independent in its decision-making.

Having been involved in and directed many referendum campaigns, I would caution that what is most important is getting it right. Timing and speed are important but, ultimately, getting it right is the key issue in terms of laying the ground, particularly with regard to the establishment of a referendum commission. It must be given the time, space and proper remit to do its work. In previous referendum campaigns, there have always been tensions over the timing of the commission's appointment and whether it had enough time. There are quite a number of reports in existence, following various referenda that have taken place, in which the various referendum commissions give their evaluations as to the mandate they were given by the Oireachtas and the Government. It is extremely important that we dot the i's and cross the t's and that the proposition the Oireachtas ultimately puts to the people is correct.

Deputy Alan Farrell: On a point of order, the Ceann Comhairle suggested that I cannot

have input on the Order of Business in respect of the decision of the all-party Business Committee.

An Ceann Comhairle: To explain, normally the leaders raise the issues on the Order of Business.

Deputy Alan Farrell: That is fine but the leaders are finished and I wish to make an observation on the Order of Business being proposed.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is on his feet.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I seek clarity about the point to which we are proposing to push the proposed constitutional Bill on Friday, if it is agreed by the Business Committee this afternoon. Are we proposing to complete Second Stage? That has not been clarified and I would appreciate if clarity could be provided.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: A Cheann Comhairle, on the same issue-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy may proceed.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am trying to be helpful. I am looking for guidance here. We are being asked to vote that Thursday's business will be a Second Stage debate on the thirty-sixth amendment to the Constitution Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are still talking about Wednesday.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am talking about the legislation to be discussed on Thursday.

Deputy Joe McHugh: It is not agreed yet.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We will be discussing this, with respect. We are going to vote on debating a Bill on Second Stage. The Taoiseach has already told us that there will be a special Cabinet meeting on the same day to consider the same Bill. It does not make much sense to vote to debate something that we know is not going to exist on Thursday. Can the Taoiseach give us some further information? Is it possible that the legislation will be published in time for Thursday's debate?

The Taoiseach: I suggest that we agree the Order of Business for today and tomorrow now, and we can then make a decision after the Business Committee meets this evening as to whether we need to sit on Friday.

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I will respond to some of the procedural questions on the process. We have set out a very clearly defined process. We have had the Citizens' Assembly. An Oireachtas committee scrutinised the issue. We had a special Cabinet *3 o'clock* meeting on 29 January, which published draft wording. We took a decision that we would await the adjudication of the Supreme Court, which is entirely independent in all its functions, and we know that judgment will be delivered tomorrow. The Cabinet will then meet on Thursday, hopefully, to approve the constitutional amendment Bill and to publish a short policy paper outlining how I am progressing with developing the legislation to be put before the House if the people vote "Yes". If the Business Committee so decides, we will have a Dáil sitting on Friday to commence Second Stage. I envisage that it will only sit to commence Second Stage but that is a matter for the Business Committee. My colleague, the Minister for

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Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, will establish the referendum commission in the coming days in order that it can begin its preparatory work.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: The question is: "That the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business be agreed to."

Question put and declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal for dealing with Thursday's business agreed to?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Should that matter be deferred?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That should be deferred.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the present proposal, subject to amendment arising from the Business Committee, agreed to?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is not agreed. Unfortunately, we are just running futa fata here. But for the weather, we would have been discussing this today, tomorrow and late on Thursday night. It did not matter about the Supreme Court decision originally. From what happened last week, I knew what was going to happen today. The Government called an emergency meeting of the Business Committee to deal with the closure of this House due to the red weather alert.

There is indecent haste here, as there has been throughout the debate. If we continue in this way, as Deputy Micheál Martin said, we are going to have shaky foundations.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Deputy Micheál Martin did not say that.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The foundations are shaky already and they will be much shakier. We will end up without a commission. The Minister for Health should not laugh. It is a matter of life and death.

Deputy John Halligan: That is outrageous.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We were speaking about red alerts. This is a major red alert. What the Government is doing here is simply disgraceful. It is acting with indecent haste and is pandering to certain elements and groups.

Question put.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Vótáil.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputies claiming a division please rise?

Deputies Michael Collins, Noel Grealish, Mattie McGrath, Danny Healy-Rae and Michael Healy-Rae rose.

An Ceann Comhairle: As fewer than ten Members have risen, I declare the question carried. The names of the Deputies dissenting will be recorded in the Journal of the Proceedings of the Dáil.

Question declared carried.

Eighteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Joe McHugh): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the Eighteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection in accordance with Standing Order 27F, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 5th March, 2018, and discharges and appoints members to Committees accordingly.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

EU Meetings

1. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the February 2018 informal EU leaders' meeting; the issues that were discussed; the contributions that he made on the multi-annual budget for the post-2020 period; his contributions on the European Parliament; and if he held bilateral meetings at same. [9654/18]

2. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the discussions at the EU leaders' informal meeting regarding the budget after 2020; the contributions he made; and the consensus. [10147/18]

3. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the outcome of the meeting of EU leaders in Brussels on 23 February 2018 at which the EU budget was discussed. [10466/18]

4. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the informal summit of EU leaders on 23 February 2018. [10928/18]

5. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his engagements with leaders at the G5 Sahel conference. [10929/18]

6. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his contribution at the most recent informal EU leaders' meeting regarding the EU budget after 2020. [11543/18]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 6, inclusive, together.

I attended an informal meeting of the 27 EU Heads of State and Government in Brussels on 23 February. This was the third such meeting convened by President Tusk under his "Leaders' Agenda" format, with the focus this time on institutional issues and the post-2020 multi-annual financial framework.

On institutional issues, there was general support for the proposal to redistribute 27 of the 73 European Parliament seats left over following the departure of the United Kingdom. I expressed our support for this move, which will see two additional seats allocated to Ireland.

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We noted the European Parliament's rejection of the use of transnational lists for the 2019 elections but agreed to keep the proposal under consideration for future elections. We also agreed that, while European political parties can nominate their candidates for the role of President of the European Commission, the final decision should remain with the European Council. I have already outlined my views on these issues, including in my address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in January.

Although not formally for consideration, a number of other institutional issues were discussed, including the size of the European Commission, in respect of which we are strongly opposed to any reduction, and the proposal to combine the roles of President of the European Commission and President of the European Council, which we also oppose.

In response to President Macron's proposal for EU-wide public engagement on the future of Europe, I was happy to outline our own citizens' dialogue, which I launched last November and which is being achieved under the leadership of the Minister of State at the Department of European Affairs, Deputy Helen McEntee. The dialogue is scheduled to conclude on 9 May and I offered to share our experience with partners.

In discussions on the next EU budget, the multi-annual financial framework, I noted that a strong and well-funded CAP remains a key priority for Ireland. I acknowledged the contribution of cohesion funding, including the PEACE and INTERREG programmes, which have done so much to support peace and reconciliation on this island. I also acknowledged the contributions of research and innovation initiatives, such as Horizon 2020. I also recognised the importance of newer EU priorities and said that Ireland is open to contributing more, if and where it brings added European value and provided our core priorities are protected.

A range of views were expressed at the meeting including in regard to the size and the priorities of the budget. Further intensive discussions will take place on this following the publication of the European Commission's formal proposal in early May.

We discussed a number of other items, including the importance of finance for Libya and developments regarding Turkey and Cyprus.

In addition to the informal summit on 23 February, I attended a dinner the previous evening at the invitation of Prime Minister Charles Michel of Belgium. I was joined by a number of other EU leaders, including Chancellor Merkel, President Macron and the prime ministers of Spain, Italy, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Luxembourg and Bulgaria. This dinner provided an opportunity for an informal and open-ended exchange of views ahead of the meeting of the 27 Heads of State and Government the following day.

On the morning of the informal summit, I also attended a high-level conference on the Sahel, together with my EU counterparts and the leaders of the G5 Sahel countries - Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger - in addition to representatives of international organisations and relevant parties. The aim of the conference was to bring together the three strands of our support for the G5 Sahel region, namely political and diplomatic support, security and development. I noted Ireland's ongoing commitment to the region, including through humanitarian and development funding, as well as the deployment of Irish civilian experts and defence personnel to a number of CSDP missions in the region.

I had no scheduled bilateral meetings during this trip but used the opportunity of the informal summit, the high-level conference on the Sahel and the dinner event on Thursday to engage

informally with my counterparts, including the President of Mali, with whom I discussed our EU mission to Mali.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have said before that it is extraordinary and strange that there were no pre-EU Council statements prior to the EU informal summit held last month because, as the Taoiseach outlined, institutional and transnational issues were discussed, in addition to high-level EU appointments.

With regard to the discussion on the number of seats, the departure of the United Kingdom from the Union because of Brexit will mean a redistribution of about 27 seats, in keeping with the principles of degressive proportionality. Will the Taoiseach outline what was the nature of the discussion around this? Does he support a wider discussion regarding the number of seats which the European Parliament should have? I believe there was some attempt to reduce the number of MEPs from 751 to 705. What was the Taoiseach's position on that?

Was there a discussion at the informal summit on the Brexit negotiations and draft withdrawal agreement? Will the Taoiseach outline the Government's priorities for the next multi-annual financial framework? What level of consultation took place on this and with whom before the priorities were decided upon? The Taoiseach might recall his speech to the European Parliament where he said they were his personal views and had not been signed off by Government. I am interested in the Taoiseach's approach to this meeting. Was it the Government's views or his own personal views about institutional reform?

On investment in research and innovation, I am glad that the Taoiseach said that CAP will still be a major priority. While she was a Commissioner, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn did fantastic work on Horizon 2020. We, as a country, should place a very high premium on the importance of such a European research programme and substantial investment being put behind it.

Deputy Seán Haughey: MEPs were recently before the Joint Committee on European Affairs and they are concerned about the post-Brexit European budget, which may be in a deficit from anything from €7 billion to €15 billion. Can the Taoiseach confirm that Ireland has agreed to increase its budget contribution as long as other states do likewise? What increase might this involve? Would it be 10%, 20% or another figure?

I welcome the Taoiseach's comments regarding the protection of the CAP, the Cohesion Fund and the Structural Fund. They are things that the EU does well, and I know it wants to take on new projects. I also welcome the Taoiseach's opposition to a common corporate tax base throughout the EU, which he expressed at the summit.

It was not on the agenda for this meeting, but the media has reported that Ireland is signing up to two of 17 PESCO projects on offer as we speak. There is a meeting in Brussels today. Can the Taoiseach give us any information on the two projects to which we are apparently signing up? Presumably, they are in compliance with Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality.

There has been a proposal for some MEPs to be elected by transnational Europe-wide lists. What is the Government's view on this? I have concerns about this proposal as it removes MEPs from the citizens and makes them less accessible.

Finally, will the Taoiseach confirm that support for Ireland's position in relation to the avoidance of a hard border remains firm among the EU 27, and that it has not diminished as the negotiations continue?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: When will the question of additional seats be settled? How and when will the distribution of seats within the State be determined so that people can begin to make preparations?

On the next multi-annual financial framework, apparently Ireland is agreeable to making an increased contribution to the next funding round. How much extra is Ireland willing to pay? Has the Government examined the options put forward by the Commission to raise additional European funding? For example, the EU emissions trading systems moved from state level to EU level. Where does Ireland stand on that? Does the Taoiseach have a view?

Was there agreement on the proposal that profits from seigniorage, the profits made from issuing currency, by the European Central Bank could be an EU resource? Does the Taoiseach have a position on that?

On the discussions with leaders at the G5 Shafiq meeting, Ireland has its defence force in that region, although we do not currently have diplomatic personnel. Is it part of the deepening and broadening of Ireland's footprint that the Taoiseach signalled when he took office to have an aid office in that region? It is a region that is focused more not only on defence force personnel, but also personnel from An Garda Síochána than in the past. Does the Taoiseach have a view on this?

Deputy Joan Burton: The United Kingdom is currently a significant net contributor to the EU budget. Brexit, when it happens, will cause a weekly €200 million gap in the European budget. The options currently being examined by the EU Commission include increasing member states contributions from 1% to 1.2% of GNI* which is a very large jump and would particularly affect Ireland at a time when our GNI* is rising; an entirely new income flow, such as the EU introducing some new form of tax with a number of options having been discussed already; and increasing the increasing VAT contributions into the EU budget. At present, Ireland is a small net contributor. Under all options laid out by the EU, it will become a very large net contributor. Where does the Taoiseach stand on the proposals that are now on the table in this matter?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On the additional seats in the European Parliament, is the Taoiseach open to the idea of people from the North of Ireland being afforded a seat and an opportunity for representation in the Parliament given that everyone born on the island is entitled to Irish citizenship and, by extension, European citizenship? I commend that idea to him.

I met Michel Barnier yesterday to discuss the draft withdrawal agreement. I am pleased to see that they are holding firm on the backstop option and the efforts to protect the Good Friday Agreement and avoid a hard border on the island.

The British Prime Minister, Theresa May, came out with a rather outlandish suggestion that the Canadian-US border might be looked to for inspiration, an idea to which the Taoiseach has responded. It does not augur well for the British contribution or its ability to come up with solutions rather than political rhetoric. Can the Taoiseach tell us whether Mrs May and the Conservative Government has indicated when they might come forward with real solutions rather than fantasy?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has about two minutes to respond.

The Taoiseach: The way informal summits work is that matters are discussed but no con-

clusions are reached or decisions made. I am always interested in other parties' views on institutional issues and matters of reform. I encourage parties, if they have not done so yet, to produce a short paper outlining their views on institutional reforms and submit them to the public consultation being led by the Minister of State, Deputy Helen McEntee, so we might take them into account in forming Government policy. I have not seen any policy papers from any Opposition parties yet.

Deputy Joan Burton: We will send ours on.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have been publishing policy papers on European reform for a long time - for years.

Deputy Joan Burton: Did the Taoiseach miss it?

The Taoiseach: I said that I had not seen them. I did not say they had not been produced. I will make a point of reading them.

Deputy Joan Burton: The strategic communications unit should send them on.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please, we have just over a minute left.

Deputy Joan Burton: I apologise.

The Taoiseach: The Government has adopted a paper on the multi-annual financial framework. It was brought to Cabinet by the Tánaiste and Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform about two weeks ago. The paper adopted by the Government was very much in line with views expressed in the European Parliament in Strasbourg. We indicated that we would be willing to increase our contribution to the budget but we have not said by how much. We have said that we would prefer to stick with the GNI*-based system of making contributions to the budget; we are not enthusiasts for new European-wide taxes or sources of funding. We need to be very cautious about that as it may lead to a whole series of EU-wide taxes that we or the public might not support. In the context of the spend, our view is that we should continue to fund well programmes that we believe work well, such as those relating to the Common Agricultural Policy and to Structural Funds. These programmes include INTERREG, PEACE II, ERASMUS, Horizon 2020, research and development, etc. If we are to continue to fund them well in the absence of the UK, we will need new money. I invite parties to publish papers on the multi-annual financial framework, MFF.

With regard to Deputy Burton's comment, I would not like us to get sucked into a very narrow view of net contributors and net beneficiaries. This is the kind of talk we hear from eurosceptics - especially those in Britain and other places - to the effect that a country is paying this much in and getting that much out. That is a very narrow view of European Union membership. It is not just about what a member state pays into the budget and what it gets out in programmes. The real value of EU membership is intangible. It is about the four freedoms, the freedom of movement of people, labour, capital and free trade. These intangible benefits are enormous. It disappoints me when I see that type of thinking entering our debate. As Ireland moves from being a net beneficiary to being a net contributor, we need to ensure that we do not get into that kind of argument as put across by eurosceptics all the time.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is because the issue is never discussed. We need a debate on the issue.

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The Taoiseach: I would always like to spend more time discussing issues of substance.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There are no pre-Council statements. There is no real or genuine debate on the issue in the House.

Programme for Government Implementation

7. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach the status of the commitment in A Programme for a Partnership Government on political reform. [9663/18]

8. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the status of commitments in A Programme for a Partnership Government in respect of political reform. [11221/18]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take questions Nos. 7 and 8 together.

A Programme for a Partnership Government, which was published in May 2016, contains a number of commitments on Dáil and Seanad reform.

The most recent report setting out the progress made in implementing the commitments in the programme for Government was published on 19 December last. An annual progress report will be published in May. On Dáil reform, this Government continues to build on the Oireachtas reform packages introduced between 2011 and 2016 by the previous Government.

Since the 2016 general election, a number of additional reforms have been introduced. These include: the establishment of a new cross-party Dáil Business Committee to discuss and agree the Dáil schedule; a new Committee on Budgetary Oversight was established to allow the Oireachtas play a greater role in the budgetary process; committee chairmen are now appointed using the D'Hondt system; there is more time for Private Members' business in the Dáil; and votes are now grouped to encourage a more family-friendly environment and workplace.

Since September, there is now more proportionate speaking time for all Deputies, additional time is provided in the Dáil for Government business to make progress on the Government's extensive legislative programme, staffing for the new Parliamentary Budget Office, which will be a source of financial and budgetary intelligence for Oireachtas Members, and, in particular, for the Committee on Budgetary Oversight, chaired by Deputy Colm Brophy, has been provided.

Within my Department, there is an expanded role for the Chief Whip's office, alongside the new parliamentary liaison unit, to support these arrangements, including supporting good communication between Departments and the Oireachtas, particularly in the context of progressing legislation through the Houses.

There is now more proactive communication between Ministers and their Departments and Opposition spokespeople and Oireachtas committee chairpersons and members. The new budgetary procedures and the new use of pre-legislative scrutiny by committees give the Oireachtas greater input into significant policy matters.

As I outlined in my recent speech in the Seanad, I have decided that an implementation group on Seanad reform should be established and given an eight-month mandate to consider the Manning report and develop specific proposals to legislate for Seanad reform.

I propose that the implementation group comprise Members of the Oireachtas and should have the assistance of outside experts, including the franchise section in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, as appropriate. It is important that all groups in the Oireachtas be represented on the implementation group and also that it be representative of the groups' different sizes in the Houses. I will be writing shortly to party and group leaders inviting them to nominate members to the group.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: This is the third time the Taoiseach has told the House that he is writing to us to ask for nominations to the Seanad reform group. I look forward to receiving the letter. Subsequent to the referendum held on the future of the Seanad, the agreed position across the House was that reform of the Seanad was needed. The Taoiseach referred to the reform group. I understand that a chairperson for the group was suggested and this was to be Senator Michael McDowell. It is the understanding on this side of the House that the nomination was blocked by the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross. Will the Taoiseach indicate whether this continues to be the case? Is the Minister continuing to block the nomination of Senator McDowell to chair the Seanad reform group? In a truly reformed situation, would this not be an appropriate decision for the Seanad and the Dáil to make?

On the previous occasion on which we discussed these issues, I also referred to town councils. I acknowledged, and even admitted, that one of the mistakes we made when in government was the abolition of town councils. I am most anxious that we restore these councils. A tier of local democracy has been lost. The Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Phelan, has said he plans to introduce town districts to replace town councils in the 28 largest towns. How does the Taoiseach see those town districts operating? Will they be analogous to the powers that town councils formerly had? Would the Taoiseach agree that the urban focus is a really important part and would he consider returning to that?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On that note, the programme for Government contains an important commitment on local government. The programme states:

As part of the next wave of local government reform the relevant Minister, having consulted widely with all relevant stakeholders, will prepare a report for Government, and for the Oireachtas, by mid-2017 on potential measures to boost local government leadership and accountability.

This report has not been published but reports at the weekend suggest that the Government is considering establishing town districts, as Deputy Howlin said, to compensate for the abolition of town councils in 2013. It seems that the proposal arises from a report submitted to Cabinet last week by the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Phelan. Will the Taoiseach indicate whether this is the report that was promised in A Programme for a Partnership Government? If it is, why has it not been made available to the Oireachtas? Can the Taoiseach please make arrangements for Members to see the report?

The programme for Government also contains a range of other commitments on political reform, such as those relating to Ministers of State playing a more substantive role in policy formation and the re-examination of their functions within departmental structures and their relationship with Cabinet Ministers. The programme for Government also contains a commitment to examine the creation of unpaid roles of parliamentary private secretaries and, crucially, an examination of the balance of power and responsibility between Government and the Civil

Service - a matter that looms large at present. None of these has happened. Can the Taoiseach tell us why?

Deputy Micheál Martin: There are many commitments in the programme for Government in respect of political reform. One of the disappointments has been the lack of progress for many Opposition Bills going through the House and the abuse of the money message. At the beginning of the lifetime of this Dáil, Members were told that a reasonable approach would be taken in using the money message with regard to certain Bills. I am of the view that there has been an abuse of the money message by the Government. This needs to change. I refer to three examples of Bills that could go through, namely, the Mortgage Arrears Resolution (Family Home) Bill 2017, the Parole Bill 2016 and the Mental Health (Amendment) Bill.

On page 150 of the programme for Government, there is a commitment to “examine the balance of power and responsibility between the Government and the Civil Service.” Will the Taoiseach confirm whether this review took place and if not why not? In light of the current debate on the strategic communications unit, would the Taoiseach agree that it is a very opportune moment to conduct such a review? In this context and going back over the freedom of information material, the Grangegorman campus of Dublin Institute of Technology, DIT, was part of the budget campaign promoted by the strategic communications unit. The campus was part of the national development plan campaign, as were the projects relating to the national children’s hospital, the National Maternity Hospital and the Central Mental Hospital. All of these projects have been on the go for eight or nine years. The Grangegorman campus was conceived by Bertie Ahern and a lot of work was done in decanting the health services there.

Deputy Joan Burton: I was on the original steering committee.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Various Governments brought that project through. I visited DIT recently and buildings have been constructed. It has the makings of a fine campus. It is being advertised, through the use of taxpayers’ money, as though it was something completely new that Ireland will get in 2040. All the time, the project is rolling on. There is a very legitimate question to be asked. Why are civil servants engaged, wittingly or unwittingly, in promoting and inputting into campaigns of this sort, which are paid for by the taxpayer, about projects we have all known about for the past five or six years? The national children’s hospital-----

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

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----will have its own campaign shortly.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. I call the Taoiseach.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is bizarre, absurd and wrong.

The Taoiseach: The Seanad implementation group - and it is an implementation group - is designed to implement the Manning proposals. There had been a few suggestions for chairman and I am open to it being a decision of the House rather than my decision. I do not feel it needs to be an appointment that I make-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Minister, Deputy Ross, has had his way then.

The Taoiseach: -----so I will certainly take Deputy Howlin’s suggestion into consideration. It is supposed to be independent. I do not see why it has to be an appointment made by me and I am not sure how that came about in the first place.

There is no decision to restore town councils.

Sorry. I am being distracted.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach said he was not sure how it came about that the nomination of the chairman - anyway, we will talk about that again.

An Ceann Comhairle: The procedure must be that one asks the question and then, having asked it, one lets the person answer it. If there is-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: I know, but sometimes one is taken aback by the answer.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Wait until we hear what the Taoiseach has to say about town councils.

An Ceann Comhairle: I know, but if there is an opportunity for supplementary questions, we can-----

The Taoiseach: As I said, the Government does not have any plan to restore town councils. The matter has been examined. It would cost approximately €40 million a year to do so, and we do not believe that is how ratepayers and people who pay the local property tax would like to see their rates and local property tax money spent.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Taoiseach might give us a briefing note on that-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Howlin, please.

The Taoiseach: The Minister of State, Deputy Phelan, when he is ready to publish proposals, will do so. He proposes that town districts and borough districts would essentially function as area committees do now but could have the ceremonial functions that previously town councils and borough councils had. This would be a kind of restoration of their ceremonial functions. He is also carrying out a separate piece of work, which is nearing completion, on directly elected mayors for Dublin, Cork and perhaps other counties and the relationship between chief executive officers and county cathaoirígh.

The Ceann Comhairle will be aware that discussions about the lack of progress on legislation are ongoing. There is absolutely a delay in progressing Private Members' Bills. It is not as simple as money messages. We have a difficulty in that there are different standards for the ways in which legislation passes through this House. For Government legislation, in the ordinary course of events, it is necessary to produce the heads and general scheme of a Bill, go to pre-legislative scrutiny, talk to the Attorney General's office and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, publish the legislation, leave a gap for people to consider it and then take the legislation through the Houses. What we allow from Private Members, including those from my own benches as well as those from the Opposition benches, is for legislation to be produced on a Thursday, discussed in the Dáil the following week and passed through Second Stage, and this is not a good way to do legislation. We need a better process to ensure that legislation that comes through from Private Members is of equal quality to that of what is produced by the Government. If we are serious about getting some of these Bills through - and there are some good Bills there - we need to reform our procedures. I know under the Deputy's leadership some good work is taking place in this regard and I hope we can make some progress on that.

I would have to check up on the review Deputy Micheál Martin mentioned. I do not think

it has been done but I may be mistaken. In any case, I very much believe in the separation between the Civil Service and politics. It serves us well. This is part of the reason I was so disturbed by Deputy Martin's comments on "The Last Word" last night, on which he alleged that the Government - he said "the Government" - refused to release information under freedom of information, FoI. He said those making the FoI request were first refused and then went to the Information Commissioner. He asked why the Government refused to release the information and what it had to hide. He said it should release all material. I have not been in this House for as long as some Deputies have been, but we all should know how the FoI legislation works. There is a deciding officer in each Department or agency. He or she decides what is and is not released under FoI. It is not permitted for politicians to try to influence or interfere with civil servants when it comes to the FoI Act. That would be a very genuine and legal breach of the separation between civil servants and politicians. I am therefore very confused when I hear allegations thrown at me that I have blurred the line between the Civil Service and politics yet I hear Deputy Martin claiming that an official function is a Government function and suggesting I should somehow interfere with the Civil Service. I will come back again and again to this and the other allegations he has made and seek the evidence for them every time these issues are raised because the double standards in this regard are a matter of concern to me, as are allegations being thrown around without evidence and the real double standard in this regard.

Deputy Micheál Martin: On a point of order-----

An Ceann Comhairle: There are no points of order on questions.

The Taoiseach: When it comes to DIT's Grangegorman campus and the national children's hospital, the fundamental difference, I would have thought, from a very practical point of view, is that these projects were promised and promised and promised by previous Governments; now they are actually under construction.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We built them in our time in government.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will move on to Question No. 9.

Deputy Micheál Martin: On an important point, the Taoiseach talks about allegations. He made an allegation about someone who is not a Member of this House last week. This is a very important point regarding Standing Orders. He has not withdrawn the allegation he made about Mr. Flaherty in the Dáil. He is the last man to be lecturing anyone about casting aspersions on people's characters. He repeated the allegation-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----again today when he said he has his own conspiracy theories. I am giving him an opportunity-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----to reflect on what he said today and last week about Mr. Flaherty and to withdraw those remarks.

The Taoiseach: A Cheann Comhairle, I never mentioned the man, for a start.

An Ceann Comhairle: I do not even know what the Deputies are talking about, so will they please-----

The Taoiseach: Second, Deputy Martin has made any number of allegations against people not in this House and will not produce evidence to support them.

An Ceann Comhairle: May we move on to Question-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Do we have time for a supplementary question?

An Ceann Comhairle: We have no time for supplementary questions.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Martin has made any number of allegations-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We move on to Question No. 9.

The Taoiseach: -----about people that he will not support with evidence.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, please.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach does not like criticism.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Martin does not like his own standards being applied to him.

An Ceann Comhairle: It appears to me that neither of you likes abiding by the rules of the House-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am happy enough.

An Ceann Comhairle: -----which provide limited time-----

The Taoiseach: Deputy Martin is happy enough to make allegations about unnamed people and not produce the relevant evidence. It is not right.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputies please stop this bickering?

Cabinet Committee Meetings

9. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee D (infrastructure) will next meet. [9873/18]

10. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee D (infrastructure) will next meet. [10930/18]

11. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee D (infrastructure) last met; and when it is scheduled to meet again. [11220/18]

12. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee D (infrastructure) will next meet. [11546/18]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 9 to 12, inclusive, together.

Cabinet committee D last met on 1 February 2018. The next meeting of the committee has not yet been scheduled.

Cabinet committee D was established to cover the areas of infrastructure investment, cli-

mate action and housing. There is significant work under way across each of these areas.

Cabinet committee D aims to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of this work and the ongoing development of policy.

In this context, the Government provided a forum in which the preparations for the recently launched Project Ireland 2040 were discussed, although there were several Government meetings dedicated to the preparation of the plan.

Project Ireland 2040 marks the first time our national planning policy and national programme of investment in infrastructure have been developed in tandem. Cabinet committee D will continue to provide a forum for oversight of the implementation of the plan.

Project Ireland 2040 places climate action objectives at the heart of public capital investment plans. It builds on the national mitigation plan and the national adaptation framework and will support a significant reduction in carbon emissions over the period to 2030. The largest single allocation under any theme in this plan is for climate change at approximately €22 billion over a ten-year period.

Regarding housing, Project Ireland 2040 anticipates provision for 550,000 additional houses by 2040, taking forward the progress already under way in implementing Rebuilding Ireland. Of these additional homes, 110,000 will be social or public housing.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I wish to ask the Taoiseach about one specific piece of infrastructure that I have discussed with him particularly when he was Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport and was responsible for this piece of infrastructure, namely, Dún Laoghaire Harbour. A very important meeting will take place in the council tonight at which there will be a discussion as to whether Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company will be dissolved and Dún Laoghaire Harbour transferred under the full control and ownership of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. As the Taoiseach knows, I have campaigned on this since I was elected to the Dáil, for six or seven years, and have argued with him, among other Ministers responsible for transport, that it should have happened long ago. The company had driven out the ferry and wasted millions of euro and there has been a risk assessment and due diligence. The county manager of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown says the council still does not know, after two years of investigating the finances of the company, what is going on in it, how much revenue it has, what real liabilities it has and so on. I very much welcome a report by the county manager that came out last week in which she has endorsed the position we have been campaigning for, that is, the dissolution of the harbour company, a dysfunctional quango, and its transfer into public ownership, a big victory for people power. However, because of the six years of delay on the part of the Taoiseach among others, major questions hang over the financial position of Dún Laoghaire Harbour, questions that I appealed to successive Ministers to get to the bottom of.

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

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Given that this transfer may go ahead and should go ahead, will the Government ensure that the decks are cleared in terms of the finances and liabilities of Dún Laoghaire Harbour in order for this transfer to occur in an orderly way and for this unique piece of cultural and architectural heritage to be able to be used to the benefit of the millions of people who use those piers?

An Ceann Comhairle: We have ten minutes remaining and if people consume all of the

time asking the questions, there will not be any answers.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Tell that to the previous Deputies.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will, and I think I did.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Taoiseach has confirmed Cabinet committee D on infrastructure did meet to discuss if not formally approve the Project Ireland 2040 national development plan, and perhaps the Taoiseach will indicate to us whether it did approve it. Were there specific evidential criteria applied to the individual projects that were proposed in the plan? I asked in advance of the plan that they would be published at the same time. To ensure that we know proper due diligence and proper evaluation for every project on the same basis was made, will the Taoiseach arrange to have it published?

On the specific investment on preparing Ireland for Brexit, I am very concerned that while Rosslare Europort is one of the most important ports in the country, the only reference in the development plan to it is to have a further review of the port and neither is there a commitment to complete the M11 motorway, from Oylegate to Rosslare Europort itself, when the current phase, which is the Enniscorthy bypass, is completed, hopefully by the end of this year. In the event of there being difficulties with a land bridge across the UK to the rest of Europe, this would be a vital national link. I ask the Taoiseach to give his views on this matter.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I too would like to hear something about the due diligence and metrics applied in terms of the compilation of Project Ireland 2040. It seems upon reading it that much of it was a restatement or rehash of announcements that had long been made and that people have been long awaiting.

The Taoiseach spoke earlier about the weather event and the status red the country has been through. He quite correctly commended the public services and emergency services. There has been infrastructural damage as a result of the very severe weather. The Taoiseach was in Wexford and he saw at first hand the devastation there. The stories among the farming community, where sheds caved in due to the bearing down of record snowfalls, were extremely worrying. It may be a mundane matter, but does committee D propose to look at this weather event and assess the infrastructural needs or gaps that arise as a result of such weather events, for example, the issue of technical specifications for sheds? This might seem mundane but it is an important matter. Will these types of issues be addressed? In terms of transport and housing equally, it not just a case of picking over the damage that has been done but planning in a concrete way for future episodes. Sadly, with climate change and global warming, it seems that increasingly these severe weather events are with us.

Deputy Joan Burton: The other evening I went to see “Lady Bird” featuring Saoirse Ronan. Before the film started, there was a bit of a laugh around the cinema as an advertisement was played of little balsa men and little balsa houses that looked like architects’ working models on behalf of the Government for the national development plan. To be perfectly honest, I wonder when we go to the cinema why we have such trivia put in front of us, paid for by public taxpayers’ money. People were just laughing at it. The bus shelters, I do not quite know how many, particularly in Dublin 7 and Dublin 15, have been somewhat taken over by the same advertisements. These are in an area where there is a lot of housing need and it is not nice. They are balsa housing units and apartments that are not there. I do not get it. I notice some of them have been removed, and perhaps the Taoiseach will tell us why. In terms of the national development

plan, are we now going to have a set of mini-launches of specific areas such as one for arts and culture, which I understand is in the works as we speak?

Technically, is the Taoiseach able to say why the Government decided to remove the cap of 10% on public private partnerships which was put in place by the previous Government and has now been removed? Of the two of the big providers of public private partnerships, Carillion, is bust, gone and in liquidation, and Capita is in a great deal of difficulty. Why is the Government removing the ban when, in particular at this point in time, public financing is definitely cheaper?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Martin and ask him to stick to 30 seconds if he would.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I note the entire Cabinet is decamping to UCC on Friday.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Is that right?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am now beginning to understand why the Taoiseach was seeking assistance from all parties in the House for a quorum, because clearly half of the Fine Gael Party will be on the UCC campus marketing the national development plan.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Taoiseach will be in Waterford.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: On his way to Cork.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Delivery is the key and more than 9,000 people are in emergency accommodation of whom 3,267 are children. This is the bottom line. When people come into our clinics in desperate situations looking for housing, they find it unbelievable that there are all these advertisements about 2040 and 2027. The Luas to Finglas is post-2027 but it is a great thing and the Government will even get a few personalities and pretend it is contributing-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We need to give the Taoiseach a chance to respond.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We need delivery. Rapid housing was promised when the then Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, announced it three years ago. In 2015, some 1,500 houses were to be delivered. There is a huge issue about delivery in 2019, 2020 and 2021 in hospitals, health services and housing. They are the key issues on which the Government needs to refocus.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has just under three minutes to respond.

The Taoiseach: On Deputy Boyd Barrett's first question on Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company, I am not up to date with the issues relating to the harbour but I am familiar with the company and the place from my previous time as Minister with responsibility for transport. It was my view at the time, and we discussed it then, that the smaller harbour companies were not viable as semi-State companies and it would be better if they were transferred to the control of the local authorities. My role as Minister was to get the legislation through the Dáil and Seanad to make that possible. I did that and a number of smaller port companies have now been transferred to local authorities and this is another one. It is obviously a decision for the local authority as to whether it wants it to happen or not. It would be appropriate because these small port companies and harbours are more amenities than commercial enterprises. As amenities it is more appropriate that they be under local authority control than operated as if they were semi-State companies like the ESB or Dublin Airport Authority. I cannot make any commitment on clearing the debt. That is a matter the Deputy would have to raise with the Minister, Deputy Ross. I am not aware of the debts having been cleared for any other port, if there were

debts on transfer.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There were liabilities.

The Taoiseach: Project Ireland 2040 was approved by the Cabinet and not by a Cabinet subcommittee, and all projects were assessed by the line Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The extent to which there was assessment depended on the nature of the projects. Projects under the purview of Transport Infrastructure Ireland or the NTA often had quite detailed assessments and benefit to cost ratios, and other projects perhaps did not so much.

Rosslare Europort is owned by Irish Rail. Irish Rail did not put forward any specific plans for the development of the port but we thought it would be useful and helpful to include a mention of it to keep open the possibility that there could be investment in Rosslare.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: That is depressing in and of itself.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It got a mention.

The Taoiseach: Other ports, for example the Port of Cork, the Port of Dublin and the Port of Foynes, put forward their own detailed proposals for development, which the Government supports. That is why they are included in the plan. The plan, which is backed by a ten-year infrastructure investment plan, covers ten years and in any ten-year investment plan there is a pipeline of projects, some that are under construction, some that have gone to tender, some that are still in planning and design and some that have yet to go to planning or design.

I looked back on previous capital plans. I looked back on the capital infrastructure priorities plan, which was produced by Fine Gael and the Labour Party when we were in Government together. I looked at the 2007 plan published by Fianna Fáil and the Greens. We all *4 o'clock* took exactly the same approach and I think it is the right approach; to take the full ten-year spectrum of projects, including some that are already under construction, some that have yet to go to tender, some that are at the planning stage and some at the design stage. This is the approach that has been taken with previous capital plans and I did not see any reason to change it.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann 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 Carol Nolan - the methods used to rural-proof the national framework plan; (2) Deputy Ruth Coppinger - the latest homeless figures, which show more than 9,100 people in emergency accommodation; (3) Deputies David Cullinane, Imelda Munster, Pat Buckley, Martin Kenny, Louise O'Reilly, Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire, Martin Ferris and Maurice Quinlivan - practical measures taken by the Government to protect workers last week during the status red alert issued by Met Éireann; (4) Deputy Mary Butler - the unique south-eastern model in residential care homes; (5) Deputy Michael Harty - the proposed direct provision centre in Lisdoonvarna; (6) Deputy Thomas Byrne - the need the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to provide for investment to ensure a reliable and sustainable water supply

in Ratoath and Ashbourne; (7) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - the availability of ASD unit spaces in Carlow-Kilkenny; (8) Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin - the need for a supplementary budget for local authorities to repair roads after Storm Emma; (9) Deputies Brendan Ryan and Clare Daly - the need to save homes from falling into the sea due to coastal erosion in Portrane; (10) Deputy Frank O'Rourke - Garda resources for Kildare North; (11) Deputies Bernard J. Durkan and Catherine Murphy - the need for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to examine the full extent of the damage throughout County Kildare arising from the recent snowstorms and the extent to which the various emergency services have responded so dutifully and the possible need for emergency funding and the ongoing road or path network inaccessibility in the wake of Storm Emma leaving many residents unable to leave their homes; (12) Deputy Eoin Ó Broin - extra investment the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government intends to make available to address the water shortages and water restrictions in Kildare, Meath, Fingal, Dublin city and north Wicklow and additional actions the Government and Irish Water intend to take to alleviate the restrictions as a matter of urgency; (13) Deputy Billy Kelleher - the need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on the impact of recent weather conditions on the health services and to outline what action is being taken to deal with same; (14) Deputy Mick Wallace - storm damage in County Wexford; (15) Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony - the concern of residents of Kinsale and its environs about the availability of an out-of-hours medical facility specifically for the Kinsale area, in circumstances where the population is growing and the increased number of tourists to the area as a result of the Wild Atlantic Way necessitate a localised out-of-hours service; (16) Deputy John Brady - the fire at Gaelscoil na gCloch Liath in Greystones following the delay in works on fire safety issues identified by the Department of Education and Skills; (17) Deputy Gino Kenny - the continuing imprisonment of Mr. Tony Taylor; (18) Deputy Sean Sherlock - the need for the Minister for Health to say when a child of three years of age can expect to receive a wheelchair he is awaiting and why funding for special wheelchair assistance in County Cork for adults and children is grouped together and not separately as in other counties; (19) Deputy Mattie McGrath - the status of the upgrading of Clonmel Garda station; (20) Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - the evidence of Sergeant Maurice McCabe at the Charleton Tribunal; and (21) Deputy Charlie McConalogue - the need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to outline the support funds he will make available to farmers who suffered damage to farm equipment, infrastructure and produce as well as loss of livestock because of the severe weather caused by Storm Emma.

The matters raised by Deputies Carol Nolan, Ruth Coppinger, David Cullinane, Imelda Munster, Pat Buckley, Martin Kenny, Louise O'Reilly, Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire, Martin Ferris and Maurice Quinlivan have been selected for discussion.

Topical Issue Debate

National Planning Framework

Deputy Carol Nolan: I wish to raise an issue concerning the national planning framework. Given the spatial imbalance of the national planning framework and its failure to include measures to address rural decline, I would like details on the specific metrics, processes and methodologies that were used to rural-proof the plan throughout all stages of development. I would also like to know which stakeholders contributed to that process.

This Government claims to have strong rural credentials. It claims that it is committed to ensuring that the interests of rural communities and businesses are equitably accounted for in planning, policies and programmes. However, that is not evident in Project Ireland 2040. There is little or no evidence that this plan was subjected to a robust process of rural-proofing. There is absolutely no trace of any rural-proofing having taken place. Rural counties and rural regions like the midlands have been left behind. There is a 9.3% unemployment rate in the midlands. It is one of the poorest regions in this State and yet it is left behind in this planning framework. I know that there has been criticism across the parties about this very issue. Towns in the midlands like Tullamore, Portlaoise and Mullingar have been overlooked. We have seen stroke politics in action in this planning framework and that is not good enough. It is not fair. We need accountability, transparency and fairness to all regions.

Rural-proofing is not an abstract idea. It is a systematic process of stress-testing proposals to ascertain whether or not they will achieve critical targeted outcomes in rural areas. The rural-proofing of policy and its implementation are important in ensuring that Government policies show an understanding of and take into account the specific characteristics that exist in rural areas. This systematic impact assessment approach is informed by statistical data and analysis from a range of sources as well as qualitative and quantitative processes of inquiry carried out with key rural stakeholders in the public, non-governmental organisation, NGO, private and community sectors.

The process of rural-proofing should be started at an early stage. Policymakers and analysts should work collaboratively to identify intended or unintended impacts and how policies differ from their application in the urban context. In summary, it is an evidence-based process which robustly provides the foundation for rural investment decisions and the suitability of solutions which affect the rural economy, agriculture, small and medium-sized enterprises, employment creation, demographic trends, access to rural services and infrastructure. Rural Ireland is not a homogenous non-urban hinterland and solutions for coastal and island regions will vary substantially from those in the Border area. They will differ again from those in the midlands region.

Rural-proofing is therefore a sophisticated process which tests proposals in a diverse range of geographical scenarios and differing socio-economic contexts. This plan should have been rural-proofed at all stages of development and it should have been reflective of the issues that need to be addressed. As I have said before, the midlands is left behind. Recent figures from the Central Statistics Office show that my county of Offaly has the third lowest disposable income in the State. It is not good enough that we are being left behind again and I speak for the regions. Looking at investment driven by the Industrial Development Authority, IDA, there has been a net loss of 198 jobs in Longford. Laois has gained four additional jobs and Offaly 26. I have raised this issue a number of times. What I seek from the Minister of State is this: I want to know what rural-proofing was done and what he intends to do, because for job creation to have reached 12% of the target of 135,000 jobs is not good enough or acceptable.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I thank Deputy Carol Nolan for raising this issue and giving me the opportunity to clarify any misconceptions about the relevance of the national planning framework to rural communities. I have been involved in the strategy throughout its development. It is a document which will help stop decline in many rural areas, and can actually save rural Ireland. I addressed that at the Committee on Rural and Community Development, where we discussed this draft plan last October or November. Deputy Nolan was also at that meeting.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I was and I raised some concerns at that meeting.

Deputy Damien English: That is correct and we had a very good discussion there. A lot of changes were made following the committee meetings. Those meetings fed into the plan, and rightly so.

I want to start by saying that the national planning framework is a national plan. It has a high-level ambition of creating a single vision, a shared set of goals for every community across the country and of delivering these in a way that makes sense for our communities, rural and urban alike. Let us get that joined up. We must recognise that very often rural and urban areas are intertwined and depend on each other. As a Deputy, I represent two counties, County Meath and County Westmeath. In the constituency there are large towns like Navan and Trim and many rural villages like Castlepollard, Oldcastle, Delvin and Fore. There are many Deputies who represent urban and rural areas, just like Deputy Nolan, and we understand that.

Likewise, the Department that led this, my Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, very much understands the breakdown of urban and rural areas, how they are linked and dependent on each other and how one can help the other. That was the logic guiding our plan from the start. I hope people can understand that.

The national planning framework recognises the need for sustainable and co-ordinated development of our towns, villages and rural communities. To this end, regional, spatial and economic strategies will also be developed. Three strategies will be developed from the national plan. Work has started on them this year and will finish in 2019. These plans will link strategic national planning and investment with regional-scaled physical planning and the local economic and community development functions of local authorities. Each local authority will develop its own county development plan and will also be able to set out its own ambitions for its urban and rural areas in order to develop both. That is what we want them to do.

In fact, a full chapter of the national planning framework is dedicated to planning for diverse rural places, which builds from the Government's action plan for rural development. This recognises that rural areas continue to undergo change due to economic restructuring arising from a more globalised economy, a move away from traditional agriculture and the influence of increased mobility and easier access to urban centres. Again, I make it very clear. People often say that rural Ireland is not functioning, or is dead and gone. However, I refer to Westport or Clonakilty, two rural areas that are thriving because they had a plan and a logic. That is what we are asking for in the national planning framework, through the regional plan and the county plans; that there is a plan for a county, a rural village, a rural area or a town. The authorities must put a plan in place and make it happen. It does not happen by just clicking one's fingers. One must plan for it, allow for it and fund it. Likewise, as for getting jobs into any county, we want to create the environment whereby jobs can be created. That is what we are trying to do by having this long-term plan for 20 to 25 years. Many of those towns I have just listed had long-term plans. For example, Portlaoise has a great plan for the town centre, which will help with investment into Portlaoise and win jobs for all areas of the town. Plans like that can now be funded.

Consultation and participation was key to the finalisation of the national planning framework. The national planning framework document maps this consultation process, starting in October 2014, when Government approval was given to commence drafting. There were two formal phases of public consultation during drafting - February and March of 2017 and

October and November of 2017 - with over 40 regional events and workshops, many of which I attended and which involved both urban and rural agencies. There were four engagements with various Oireachtas joint committees, including the rural affairs committee, feedback from an expert advisory group and detailed submissions from a range of stakeholders, with every relevant Department and agency represented. In addition, development of the national planning framework was informed by a strategic environmental assessment. All of the submissions have been published on the national planning framework website. In the last round of consultation, there were more than 1,000 submissions, including 150 from Oireachtas Members, councillors and others involved in politics, and many members of the Deputy's party contributed to this. Every submission was looked at and used, and this fed into all of the changes made in the past couple of months.

I assure the Deputy that the consultation process and research used to underpin the plan were detailed and extensive. Development was supported by technical analysis, statistics, census data and other relevant research, including work carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI. The process was led by my Department and overseen by a high-level cross-departmental steering group, which had its first meeting in March 2016 and included representatives from what is now the Department of Rural and Community Development. The evidence base underpinning the national planning framework includes the ESRI research study, entitled "Prospects for Irish regions and counties: scenarios and implications", which is available on the ESRI's website.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Minister of State for his response but I am very disappointed with it because I feel he is missing the point. He said he is a rural Deputy but he and I both know there has been rural neglect, and while it has not happened today or yesterday, it needs to be addressed. That is what we are all trying to do. As a rural Deputy, I feel very strongly about this issue and I believe the Government has let us down. I will explain why. The Government has failed to reach its own rural development targets over the past two years. To take job creation, just 12% of the targeted 135,000 jobs outside of Dublin have been created to date. How will the Government get the rest of the jobs - the other 88% - created before 2020? To take expenditure on the Leader programme, just 0.3% of the budget has been spent to date. It is not reaching the ground in rural communities, which are suffering because they are without this money. Rural broadband is a perfect example. The Minister of State talks about areas preparing plans to push things forward. How can they do that in the absence of rural broadband? We are being let down time and time again. These are clear, factual examples. Rural housing targets also have not been achieved and nothing is happening in regard to rural resettlement.

We need to do more. It is about achieving balance among all of the regions. I put it to the Minister of State that not enough is being done and, in particular, not enough rural-proofing has been done on this plan. I urge the Minister of State to look at this again. I brought forward my concerns at the committee meeting in regard to the IDA not tackling job creation effectively in the regions. That needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

Deputy Damien English: The Deputy said we are missing the point but I think she is the one who is missing the point.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I am not missing anything.

Deputy Damien English: The rural decline which has happened in many counties, and which we have seen in so many villages, happened over 20 or 30 years because there was no

plan or ambition.

Deputy Carol Nolan: We need vision.

Deputy Damien English: There was no vision. We are asking that, through the national planning framework, such a vision would be set out for urban and rural Ireland and all the various cities and towns. There would be the three regional plans and the county plans and we can then make it happen and put funding in place to achieve that. There was no plan or vision and that is why there was decline. We are trying to correct that although it will not happen in two or three years. These are long-term commitments backed up by the Government and its Departments and agencies, all of which are involved and can make that happen. There is endless opportunity for ambition for Offaly, Portlaoise and the other areas represented by the Deputy. The key point is to take the opportunity to make it happen.

As I mentioned earlier, there will be further opportunities to elaborate on the national planning framework at regional and local levels through the regional spatial strategies. Consequently, it is important that people work hard on them and get them right. The preparation has begun in each of the three regions and that work will end in early 2019, to be followed by the various city and county plans. This is where policies and opportunities in regard to specific places can be fleshed out. In addition, the Action Plan for Rural Development, published on 23 January 2017, takes a whole-of-Government approach, led by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, to the economic and social development of rural Ireland and will act as an overarching structure for the co-ordination and implementation of rural initiatives across Departments and other public bodies. This will be underpinned by a new rural regeneration and development fund to be established under the Department of Rural and Community Development, which will invest an additional €1 billion in supporting rural renewal. That €1 billion is new money and it will be invested in rural Ireland.

There is now a whole-of-Government approach to the development of our country, our regions, our urban centres and our wider rural areas and rightly so. The Government believes the combination of the national planning framework and the national development plan represents a major opportunity for rural Ireland. I reiterate that if we stick to this plan and drive it and the regional plans, they can save rural Ireland. This is the best way to do it. It is wrong to say that only 12% of the jobs have been created. Over 70% of the jobs created in the past two years are outside of Dublin, and that is a fact. The rural action plans for jobs have worked, as have the regional plans. While the Deputy might not like to admit it, the data are there to back it up. We are committed to rural Ireland and will remain committed to it for the next 25 years through Ireland 2040. That is our job. The Government is planning long-term to save rural Ireland.

Emergency Accommodation Provision

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Minister of State is aware there are now more than 9,000 people homeless in this State, that is, officially accessing emergency accommodation, although many more are also homeless. The excuses last week by the Minister were unreal and absurd and would be funny, were it not so tragic. The reason the Minister gave for the increase was that more beds having been brought into the system means that suddenly, there is a huge clamour from homeless people identifying themselves to take up those beds. The Minister seemed to be oblivious to the fact the people were homeless even before they took the beds.

The Minister of State and the Minister assured us that the rate of increase has stabilised. When I questioned the Minister of State the last time, he told us the figures were not bad by international standards. Can he please stop this absolute insult to the public? It is now four years since I took part in the first protest against homelessness and evictions - four years that this crisis has been raging at its peak and it continues unabated. I imagine the key reason for the increase in figures is the same reason this happened last January and the January before that. Landlords, who develop a bit of a conscience before Christmas, do not want to evict families at Christmas and they let them stay until January, when, suddenly, a huge number of people have to find new accommodation.

Just over a year ago, if the Minister of State recalls, Solidarity brought forward an anti-evictions Bill. We wanted to outlaw some of the illegal methods that landlords are using to evict people, which is what is making people homeless, such as the sale of a property, a family member moving in, or the latest one, which is renovations that suddenly need to be done, particularly in apartments owned by vulture funds but also those being used by other landlords. The Government steadfastly refused to adopt any of those measures and families continue to be made homeless.

There were some extremely concerning issues in respect of the problems we saw during the bad weather last week. Everybody will have read that some people had to be sectioned under the Mental Health Act for their own safety to be taken off the streets. I have very mixed feelings about that. I can understand the desire of people working in the homeless services for people not to die on the streets. However, we can see how ill-fitting the services must be to many homeless people's needs that they would take such desperate measures and would risk dying in the unprecedented cold of last week. It says a lot.

I particularly want to focus on where homelessness has increased. There are 1,517 families in emergency accommodation and more than 700 of them are in Dublin. If the Government was serious about the housing crisis, a task force would be set up for the three or four key problem areas where homelessness exists. It is not the same everywhere. It is worse in some places, including Dublin, Limerick and other key cities. The task force would target those areas for social housebuilding or acquisition. Then we would not be here scratching our heads as if it was a mystery.

One company, Cairn Homes, is hoarding a massive amount of land in the Dublin area. The Minister of State could consider asking it to get on with housebuilding in that area. I will provide more detail on this matter in my next contribution.

Deputy Damien English: I thank Deputy Coppinger for raising this issue again today. We have had many discussions on this over the past year or two. The Department publishes data on a monthly basis for the number of homeless persons accommodated in all forms of emergency accommodation funded and overseen by housing authorities. We record and publish those figures in order to make policy. We base our policy changes, interventions and allocations of money on facts. That is our job. Any comparisons we make are based on being able to formulate policy on the basis of information and facts. These reports are based on data provided by housing authorities and are produced through the pathway accommodation and support system, PASS, the single integrated national data information system on State-funded emergency accommodation arrangements overseen by housing authorities. The monthly reports outline the number of individuals accommodated in emergency accommodation over a designated survey week, including a breakdown by local authority.

The report for January was published last week. It shows that 5,837 adult individuals used State-funded emergency accommodation nationally during the survey week. This included 1,517 families with 3,267 dependants. As the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, outlined to the Dáil last week, the increased number of homeless adults reflects the 200 permanent new beds put in place in the Dublin region towards the end of 2017, as well as the emergency beds added as part of the cold weather initiatives undertaken over the winter period. The Minister knows well that the Deputy says people are already homeless but when he says these new beds are in the system, he is referring to factual data. These people were recorded who might not have been recorded before. That is all he is saying. He is not saying that they have come out because he has provided the beds. The Deputy knows that is not what he said.

These beds would have been fully in use during January. The introduction of the new beds has brought increased numbers of rough sleepers into the services provided by the local authorities and their non-governmental organisation, NGO, partners. While the increase in the numbers is certainly regrettable, it is clear that rough sleepers are better off in emergency services receiving the necessary supports and assistance than they would be rough sleeping. We have seen this more than ever over the past ten days when extraordinary efforts were made to ensure that accommodation was available for all rough sleepers during the extremely cold weather. I take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in the local authorities, the NGOs and in the Department for the incredible work they did in taking care of our most vulnerable citizens. They went beyond the call of duty as they tried to encourage people to come in.

The Deputy referred to people being sectioned. They are not being sectioned by a politician, a Minister or a housing officer. This is done by a doctor on medical grounds.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I know.

Deputy Damien English: The Deputy should not try to give any other impression. It is done properly. The laws are there. People are well protected. It is done in extreme circumstances and a medical professional makes that call, not anybody else.

Returning to the January homeless figures, the increase in family homelessness in Dublin, where family homelessness is most problematic, was not anticipated to this extent. We have always said it is extremely high, far too high when we are talking about over 9,000 people. We never try to play that down. We always say it is far too high and our work will not end until we deal with those numbers in total. The Minister has asked the Dublin Region Homeless Executive to investigate the matter further and prepare a detailed report for review by the Department.

The Deputy gives the impression that people become homeless solely for economic reasons and that they have all been evicted. That is not the case. There is a story behind every person or family that is homeless. Sometimes it is to do with rent, sometimes not. There are other reasons. It is not always down to landlords and evictions. It is wrong to give that impression as well. When we get all the analysis and facts I will have no problem teasing through them. There are different categories of people.

Addressing homelessness is an absolute priority for the Government because we recognise that emergency accommodation is not the place for over 9,000 people to be and certainly not the place for young children to be raised. We agree with the Deputy on that point. Rebuilding Ireland, the Government's Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness, contains a wide range

of measures which are being delivered by the Government. Of course, addressing homelessness requires increasing the supply of houses. We are determined as a Government to increase the stock of social housing by 50,000 homes by 2021 under Rebuilding Ireland, with funding ring-fenced to achieve this. The Government has also increased the level of funding available to local authorities to ensure that they are in a position to provide effective supports and assistance. In 2018, a budget of €116 million is being provided by the Government for homeless services. This is an increase of 18% on the 2017 budget allocation, which was also increased, rightly so because we have to provide the money to tackle the emergency while we are dealing with the new supply of housing and bringing on stream new houses, which we are doing. Last year, through a combination of all the schemes, over 7,000 new social houses were made available which were not there at the start of the year. That helped us find homes for more than 4,000 people. There are thousands more who need a similar intervention this year. We will do that through the various arms of the State, including the Department - that is what we are there for - and local authorities, and with the support of NGOs.

Given the increasing number of families presenting to homeless services, as well as the continuing use of hotels, early in January the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, commenced a rapid hub programme that will see 400 additional family hub places this year.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is incredible that the answer to my matter on homelessness does not contain one mention of building any new homes anywhere, particularly not in the capital city. In December, there were 6,097 individuals homeless. In January, there were 6,428. This means that, within one month, almost 400 people in one city were made homeless. I suspect that it is for the reason I suggested. It always increases because landlords decide to end leases and make families homeless.

I pay tribute to those who were employed to go out and who volunteered to do so, groups such as Inner City Helping Homeless and the Muslim Sisters of Éire, whose videos I saw during the weather report. What is the Government going to do? I mentioned Cairn Homes, which is sitting on lands zoned for 14,100 homes, 90% of which are in the greater Dublin area. However, this company completed only 418 houses - taking up 3% of its entire land capacity - in 2017. The average selling price was €315,000, hardly affordable to the average person. Cairn predicts that it will increase the asking price for its next 400 houses to €374,000. Its gross profits quadrupled in 2017. Hoarding land during a housing emergency is akin to hoarding food in a famine. That continues because capitalism allows companies of this sort to control large amounts of land. The biggest hoarders of land in the State are the local authorities. It is interesting that the Minister of State did not mention any increase in the number of homes that will be built in the cities where they are most needed. Ideologically, the Government has turned its back on public housing. That is a real tragedy for those who are suffering most acutely. The money is there to build public homes that are affordable and social homes. There has been a huge increase in the amount of wealth at the top of society. There are also the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, and the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, funds.

Deputy Damien English: I cannot cover all the issues relating to housing in two or three minutes. The Deputy's Topical Issue matter specifically mentions emergency housing and the over 9,000 people who are homeless. It does not go into the supply of housing. I am happy to do that too in my answer.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: So it is not related.

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Deputy Damien English: They are very well related but I could not give detail of both because there was not time.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Is there no connection between homelessness and the supply of housing?

Deputy Damien English: Of course there is a connection. We have been saying that for the past two years. That is why many of our plans in Rebuilding Ireland are aimed at bringing the supply of housing back up. Last year, and the Deputy might not like to admit this, there were an additional 7,000 social houses in use through all the schemes. They were not there the year before that. This year again, because the supply of housing is up, there will be almost 8,000 new social houses available through the various schemes. We are making progress but it is not enough. I totally and utterly agree with the Deputy on that but it takes time to get the supply of housing back up. We estimate this year there will be more than 20,000 houses in total built in the country. That is our estimate. It could go beyond that. The building sector reckons there will be approximately 23,000 houses. That brings in a new supply of housing which will help deal with all the different housing problems, the cost of rent, the number of houses available and social housing. Supply is key. I am happy to dwell on that in other debates but there is not the time to do it all today. There are measures there and we are working with all the stakeholders, those who own land and those who do not to try to bring forward and activate those sites through various schemes, with success in some areas. I agree that other sites are not being developed but we are dealing with that too. The vacant site levy kicks in this year such that people will be charged for sites that are inactive, this year and next year. On the Deputy's point that we need to utilise public-owned lands, we are doing that. All of the local authorities have brought forward plans on how they propose to use their landbanks, which could be used to deliver approximately 50,000 houses over the years ahead. We will work with and fund the local authorities to ensure those lands are activated and to bring forward a combination of social, affordable and private housing.

Family hubs, which I mentioned earlier, are better accommodation than hotels. Last year, some 4,000 people were found a home and more than 1,200 families have left hotels. I agree with the Deputy that there are still far too many people in hotels but we hope that through new initiatives this year we will be able to take people out of them because, I agree, they are not a place to be.

Employment Rights

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are seven Deputies listed in regard to this matter. The Deputies have one minute each and will be called in the order in which they presented.

Deputy David Cullinane: A status red severe weather warning speaks for itself. Red is the highest alert and it is a warning to workers to stay safe, not to make unnecessary journeys and not to go to work unless it is safe to do so. The problem is that during the time of the red alert far too many workers were unable to heed the warnings given by An Taoiseach and those in authority because their employers instructed them to turn up for work. Some workers received messages telling them not to arrive too late for work, others travelled to work only to be sent home, many were under threat of having a day's pay docked if they did not turn up for work and for the vast majority of workers, particularly in the private sector, the days lost are to be taken from their annual leave allocation. For many people, particularly those in low paid jobs, this is

very difficult because it means they will not be able to take leave they had planned to take at a later stage.

Long before the recent weather event, Sinn Féin moved a Bill that would address this issue. We want this Bill to be supported by Government. What practical measures will the Government take to ensure that we do not have these types of situations again? While most employers are reasonable and flexible, some have shown themselves not to be so. It is not good enough for the Taoiseach, when pressed on this issue, to say it is a personal matter for employers. It is not a personal matter. It is about the safety of workers. We must ensure that the safety of workers is front and centre. What does the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and the Government propose to do on this issue?

Deputy Imelda Munster: I want to speak about the areas in respect of which the Government has outsourced or privatised services, namely, health care provision and other social services and particularly about St. John of God in the north east. The other day, workers at St. John of God received a letter from their employer stating that those who were unable to attend work during the adverse weather event will not be paid. It also states that adverse weather warnings are now the norm and they cannot be treated differently from past weather events. This organisation is not only funded through the HSE, but it is State funded. Why are workers in this organisation not being afforded the same rights as others who work in the health care provision sector?

Deputy Pat Buckley: We need to put in place a strategic plan to ensure everybody is assisted. In an article posted last weekend, a psychiatric nurse said that psychiatric nurses were bottom of the pile as they struggled to get lifts to work from emergency personnel. She also said: “For some unfortunate reason people must think mental health goes away when the snow comes. Or, maybe we are not seen as “real nurses”.” Further on in the article she states: “These are the kind of nurses you are losing to other countries.” Yellow, orange and red alerts aside, we need a plan to assist everybody such that no one is left limbo. People must know that if they cannot get to work, they will be protected.

In regard to the rural areas, surely when we experience these weather events the councils could contract farmers, who are the heartbeat of local communities, to assist them. I could go on about livestock, grants for sheds that have fallen down and so on. We need a strategic plan.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Minister will be aware of the Trojan work done by many workers during this particular weather event. Many people turned up for work only to find themselves trapped there and unable to get home. Those who were trapped in their homes and unable to get to work are now being told that they are going to be out of pocket as a result. Some of these people are working for the State, indirectly. Many of them are working for agencies of which the Government has stated it is not the direct employer. The reality is that these people are employed by the Government indirectly, and they are now in a very shaky situation with regard to their pay.

At times like this, everyone pulls together. We depend on the goodwill of people and on people supporting each other. Earlier speakers referred to Meitheal, whereby everyone comes together to help each other. That is very relevant. It is exactly what happens in many parts of the country when people are under huge pressure. At the same time, we need a plan in place to ensure that people, particularly those working in essential services, know where they stand because right now they do not.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister for Health was quick to tweet a message which contradicted the message given by the head of HR in the health service, namely, that anyone who could not get to work or whose workplace was closed would receive emergency leave with pay. This put at ease the minds of a lot of health care workers, many of whom stayed in hotels, away from their families during a severe weather emergency. Today, workers in Our Lady's Hospice and Care Services, who provide palliative care and are at the front line of care delivery in this State but who could not get to their workplace during the storm, have been told that the time is to be taken from their annual leave. Families are already crippled with child care costs and high rents. They cannot afford to lose a day's pay. They deserve a modicum of respect. They deserve to be treated decently and not given mixed messages. The message that must go out from Government is that all workers, regardless of grade, group and so on, must be treated decently. The Government needs to acknowledge that it did not send out that message.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I pay tribute to the staff of the key agencies who responded to the recent storm and the extraordinary circumstances in which they did so. While essential workers in those agencies, some of whom are volunteers, were required and provision was made for them, there were many people who were forced to go to work who are not essential workers. Many of them were asked by their employers, some of whom are paid directly or indirectly by the State and in other cases by private business, to turn up for work during severe weather alerts and that is not good enough. Workers need to know where they stand. The Taoiseach's reference earlier to flexibility seems to imply and infer that there was an understanding that those workers, if their employers so wished, could ignore the red weather alert. That is not good enough. Workers need clarity and this should be provided for legislatively.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I commend the emergency services on the fantastic work they did over the past few days, in particular Limerick County Council and Novas Initiatives who housed 78 people in emergency temporary beds over the past couple of nights.

The Government's response has been messy in some areas, in particular in regard to its announcement regarding the fuel allowance. Under pressure from the Opposition, including Sinn Féin, the Government changed its mind and decided to give an extra week's payment. That was obviously done on the hoof because payments were not ready in all instances when people went to collect them. Indeed, some people have not yet got their payments.

Workers and businesses did not know where they stood when the red weather warning was issued. In the aftermath of the last extreme weather event, Storm Ophelia, Sinn Féin proposed legislation that would clarify the position but unfortunately the Government kept its head in the sand and refused to deal with it. Some businesses and farmers will find themselves in severe financial difficulty as a result of the damage and losses to their businesses and I ask the Minister to outline the measures that are planned to deal with this.

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I will begin by paying tribute to the great work of the national emergency co-ordination group, the local councils, volunteers, the emergency services and all of those who went to work in very difficult circumstances to ensure that essential services were provided.

As Deputies will be aware, during the course of the recent extreme weather event the country experienced, a status red alert warning was issued by Met Éireann. Red alerts are rare and serious occurrences and they should not be taken lightly. The notice that was provided in the lead-up to the recent extreme weather event provided some time to allow businesses to put in

place plans to deal with the situation. Throughout this recent event, the Government strongly encouraged businesses to pay careful attention to the information and updates that were issued from the Government's national emergency co-ordination group following the severe weather warnings from Met Éireann. The most important issue for Government, citizens and employers is that of safety. This is the paramount and overriding concern for everyone. In the context of a red weather alert, businesses were asked to carefully assess whether, given the constraints on public transport and the deteriorating snow conditions, it was possible or necessary for them to open. They were asked to examine alternatives to accommodate workers such as working from home where that proved feasible and practical, agreeing to work back working time lost and so forth. In such situations however, the Government cannot give blanket advice to all businesses given that some companies are engaged in essential services such as power generation, services to vulnerable people and so on. Ultimately, businesses have to make their own individual decisions based on their duty of care to their staff. I was encouraged to note that industry representative organisations, including IBEC and ISME, encouraged businesses they represent to show flexibility with workers and emphasised the need to be vigilant as regards safety for workers.

In general, under employment law there is no statutory obligation on an employer to pay an employee where that employee cannot attend for work. Payment of wages in situations where an employee is unable to attend work due to severe weather conditions is primarily a contractual matter between employers and employees. Many employers will have absence management policies in place to deal with such circumstances. Employers may have included policies and procedures in their contracts of employment to cover severe weather events to provide for certain flexibilities, for example, to allow the taking of annual leave, the possibility to work from home where feasible and practical or to work back the hours or days lost and so forth. I would always encourage employers to engage constructively with their employees in these kinds of situations, bearing in mind that safety is paramount.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I remind all Deputies that they have one minute each to respond. Deputy Cullinane is first.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Minister's speech today is an absolute joke of a response to what is a very serious issue. I am really angered by her response because essentially what she, the Taoiseach and the Government are doing is outsourcing what should be the first priority for all of us in this State, namely, the protection of workers, to employers. The Minister said that the Government cannot give blanket advice to all businesses and went on to talk about those who provide emergency services. Of course exceptions have to be made for such categories of workers but those who work in non-emergency services were being told, in some cases, to come to work and they do not have the luxury of avoiding their employers, as the Minister well knows. The Minister also said that ultimately, businesses must make their own individual decisions. No business should be allowed to make an individual decision that puts its staff at risk but many did. The Minister went on to say that there is no statutory obligation under employment law on an employer to pay an employee. Of course there is not; that is what happens in Fine Gael land, where employers do not have to provide for their workers. This response is an absolute joke. The Government cannot outsource this to the private sector and to employers any more.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Government must do its job and make sure that in future when these situations arise, workers are given respect and have the support of the law of the

land-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy David Cullinane: -----and are not left to the mercy of some unscrupulous employers in this State-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The time of the Deputy's colleagues will be taken up-----

Deputy David Cullinane: -----who did not give workers the support they needed in these difficult times.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Cullinane is depriving Deputy Munster.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I refer again to the St. John of God workers, who are dedicated health care professionals. They could not physically get to work during the recent adverse weather. Had they attempted to get to work, they would have been putting their own lives and limbs at risk. The St. John of God service is wholly funded by the State through the HSE. Why will the Government not afford the same protections to those workers? Will the Government introduce legislation to ensure that those workers engaged in private health care service provision are given the same protection as those in the public sector? Will the Government commit to doing that?

Deputy Pat Buckley: The Minister said in her statement that red alerts are rare but if they are so rare, surely we have enough time to plan properly. My mum is 72 years old and is a home helper. She did not know what to do over the weekend but she knew that she had to get to the house to help the family. We did not have a structure in place and were putting people of all ages under pressure to turn up to work for State bodies when the State itself had issued a red alert. On the one hand, we were telling people to stay at home but on the other hand, we were telling them to go to work if necessary. That is criminal.

We are playing with peoples' lives because the Government would not be able to organise the proverbial session in the distillery. The Government must get things right and get a grip on this or people will die when we get the next red warning.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Minister said in her statement that during the recent red alert, businesses were asked, in the context of the constraints on public transport, to consider whether people should be asked to go to work but the difficulty was that many businesses insisted that people go to work. People have contacted me who were told to be sure to get to work but when they arrived there were very few customers and then they had no way of getting home. There were no taxis available and no way for them to get home. A young woman who works in a city centre restaurant left work at 1 a.m. on Saturday. There were no taxis or regular buses running but the airport bus was running from the city centre. She got on the bus, paid €7 and asked the driver to drop her off near her home which was on the route to the airport. The driver said "No", that the bus was travelling non-stop to the airport. She told him it was an emergency and pleaded with him but he told her that he could not stop to let her off. She had to get off the bus and walk almost two and a half miles to her home. That is the kind of problem that arose because no instruction was given, not only in terms of people getting to work but also in terms of getting people who were at work home again.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister said that the Government asked employers nicely

but that did not work. The Taoiseach, during many photo opportunities where he read out the weather forecast and so forth, told people to stay at home for their own health and safety. However, many people cannot afford to take a day off work. What is the Minister's advice to them? How do they pay their bills? What are they supposed to do? Do they listen to the Taoiseach or do they look after the bottom line and their own bread and butter? Is the Government going to lift a finger to help them or is it going to just rely on the kindness of employers? As someone who represented workers for more than a decade, I can assure the Minister that the Government cannot rely on the kindness of employers. We now have two grades of workers in the health service - those who have the protection of the Minister, Deputy Harris, and those who are denied it. That is not acceptable. Surely people should be observing the advice and should be able to stay at home and safeguard their own health, safety and welfare. They should not have to worry about having their wages docked.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The question is what measures the Government will put in place to ensure workers are protected if a status red alert is issued. Essentially, the answer given by the Minister was a statement of the legal situation, the existing responsibilities of employers and so on. It did not really address the issue. Clear advice was offered by Met Éireann and those who are responsible for monitoring the weather, namely, that it was not safe to be out of doors or travelling and that we should not put ourselves at risk. However, contrary to this advice some employees outside of essential services were forced to go into work, directly or indirectly, even by the State itself.

The question, quite clearly, is what measures the Government is going to take. Red alerts are rare but they are likely to become more common. We have a Bill and a proposal. It may not be perfect in the eyes of the Minister but it is a proposal. There is currently no proposal from Government on the table as to how to address this contradiction, which I think the Government does need to address.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: There is nothing in the Minister's response for workers. Our proposal was designed to try to get some protection for workers when there is a red alert in place. During the severe weather event in Limerick, a number of people contacted me. One man in particular was on the north side of Limerick and had to go to his job in Kerry. Obviously, it was very dangerous for him to go down there on the roads. The warning was out and the Taoiseach had told people not to go out, but his employer was insisting he go to work. In Storm Ophelia, tragically, a number of people lost their lives going out on the roads during the red alert. Severe weather phenomena do not occur often, so when they do happen people are rightly concerned and need guidance on what to do. The Government needs to work better with the Opposition when we have solutions and ideas and not constantly dismiss them and only change its mind if the immediate circumstances force it to do so. I hope the Government will now support the Bill from Deputies Adams, Munster and Cullinane and make sure there is some protection for workers and that we have clarity when red alerts are in place so workers will know what they need to do.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The vast majority of employers are actually very decent people and they do look after their workers. Government always encourages employers to take a long-term view of the working relationship, recognising that demonstrating concern for the welfare of employees and treating employees fairly translates into a better working environment to the benefit of both staff and employer. As somebody who worked as an employee all of

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my life before I came into the Dáil, I fully understand the concerns of employees but I have to say that normally if there is give and take one gets back three and four times, if one treats one's employees with respect and consideration in difficult circumstances. We had very difficult circumstances-----

Deputy David Cullinane: What has any of that got to do with the issue that we raised? It is pure and utter waffle. It is an insult to those of us who put down this Topical Issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister without interruption. The Deputy might not like the response but I have no control over that.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Thank you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. The Government would also encourage employers and employees to seek to resolve any issues in this regard at the level of the employment. Where issues cannot be resolved locally, it is open to an employee to make a complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, under either the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 or the Payment of Wages Act 1991.

Deputy David Cullinane: They should clog up the Workplace Relations Commission because the Government will not do its job. This is an "Alice in Wonderland" speech we are getting. It is ridiculous.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The WRC is an office of my Department and includes very useful information on its website aimed at employers and employees alike to cover extreme weather situations such as the recent events. The information on the WRC website is available at *www.workplacerelations.ie*. Where the employer and employee are agreeable, the commission may seek to resolve the matter by means of mediation.

Deputy Imelda Munster: What about the workers at the State-funded St. John of God's?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister without interruption.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Otherwise the complaints can be investigated by an adjudication officer of the WRC. It is important to note that every case is fact specific. The Government's role is to give the greatest level of clarity to employers as to the threats posed and the actions they should take themselves. I believe that over the last week this advice was clear and unambiguous and thankfully nobody lost their lives. The final decision must be left to employers themselves who know their own business best-----

Deputy David Cullinane: Yes, they know their own business best. They put their business first. The Minister has let the cat out of the bag. It is not the workers but the business.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: -----and who in the vast majority of instances will make the best decisions in the interests of their staff, customers and public safety.

Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015 [Seanad]: Second Stage (Resumed)

Question again proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Deputy James Browne: As Fianna Fáil spokesman on mental health, I am strongly in support of this Bill because of the significance that it will have for mental health issues in Ireland. Alcohol is known as a depressant and has been proven to be a contributing factor in half of

all suicides in Ireland. With national consumption levels of alcohol continuing to rise it has become increasingly imperative that we confront and combat this public health problem in our country. By introducing a minimum price for alcohol and restricting marketing, especially those advertisements aimed at youth, we can finally take steps to curb alcohol abuse and excessive consumption. The price of alcohol is directly linked to consumption levels and alcohol-related harms, so as these prices increase we can hope to see improvements in the cases of poor mental health of some people.

These mental health issues most noticeably affect our youth. Alcohol changes serotonin levels and neurotransmitters in the human brain and these changes are intensified in young people whose brains are still developing. Because of this effect, young people suffer more negative mental health consequences than adults do when consuming alcohol. A recent national study of youth mental health detailed an evident correlation between excessive drinking and poor mental health, low self-esteem and suicidal behaviour. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the binge drinking culture that is both perpetuated and enabled through alcohol advertising, low alcohol prices and easy accessibility.

Stemming also from the links between drinking and mental health problems is a lack of an organised infrastructure to deal with cases of dual diagnosis. Research has uncovered that many people suffer jointly from both substance abuse and mental health issues. In these cases, alcohol is often used as a form of self-medication for those suffering from severe mental illness. The World Health Organization has estimated that the risk of suicide increases eightfold when a person is under the influence of alcohol. Just recently, a University College Cork study of 121 suicides reported that 80% of the people had been under the influence of alcohol at the time of death.

Currently, there are no hybrid substance rehabilitation or mental health facilities in Ireland equipped to treat substance abuse and mental health diagnoses simultaneously, which ultimately leads to an ineffective treatment plan, repeated relapse and, in some cases, death. With this in mind, there are reports of hospitals turning away patients under the influence of drugs or alcohol who are presenting with symptoms of mental illness and suicidal behaviour. Last year, *5 o'clock* for example, it was reported that a young girl was denied admittance to a hospital after an attempted suicide due to the fact that she was intoxicated. This case points to the shortcomings in the health care system in dealing with mental health issues in the context of substance abuse. Another reported case of failed dual diagnosis treatment is a mother of four who suffered from both post-natal depression and alcoholism. After being treated for years for her alcohol issues with no success she was finally psychiatrically assessed following a suicide attempt. She was eventually diagnosed with post-natal depression, which led her to the help she needed through antidepressant medication.

This effectively halted her drinking problem, and she no longer turned to alcohol as a form of self-medication.

This specific case, which is one of many, illustrates how alcohol can magnify suicidal behaviour and worsen mental illness by increasing impulsivity, changing moods, and deepening depression. A multidisciplinary approach to solving these two intertwined problems is a necessity. People who suffer with both a mental health issue and substance problems struggle to access services. For many, substance abuse is a symptom of a deeper underlying mental health issue. These people have multiple and complex needs. For many it is not a lifestyle choice but a health condition, deserving of compassion, care and treatment.

While I welcome this Bill, it does not absolve the Government of its failure to put in place appropriate supports for those suffering from dual diagnosis of substance addiction and mental health issues. If this is a health initiative, it must include mental health. If it includes mental health it must include dual diagnosis, and if it includes dual diagnosis it must include the supports people need to recover. To recover, both the mental illness and the substance abuse must be treated. If both are not treated neither is treated.

I have focused more on mental health than the actual details of the Bill, but it is important to emphasise the importance of mental health as it relates to substance issues.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): I thank Members for their contributions to the debate and I look forward to their support for the Bill and their further consideration on Committee Stage. I also thank the staff in the Department of Health and the ladies beside me for the work they have put into the Bill.

There is indisputable evidence that alcohol and the abuse of alcohol significantly and negatively impacts on lives. It affects not only the individual but also their family and friends and it has serious implications for employers, the health services and other social services. We can no longer ignore the evidence of the harm and costs caused by harmful drinking. The passage of the Bill through this House is an opportunity for a frank debate about our attitude to alcohol and the role it currently plays in our society and in our lives. It is also an opportunity to make changes where they are needed in order that we can address and mitigate some of the harms of alcohol misuse.

During the debate, clarification on a number of issues was sought and I can provide that clarification now. Deputy Kelly asked about section 4 of the Bill, which provides that a person applying for a liquor licence, or applying to renew a licence, will be required to give one month's written notice of the application to the HSE. The section provides that the HSE may give evidence at a court hearing on such applications. The purpose of this provision is to ensure that issues regarding compliance with relevant public health law, such as this Bill when enacted, are brought to the attention of the court before making its decision.

On minimum unit pricing, Deputy Kelleher, among others, asked about the position with Northern Ireland and whether this measure would become operational simultaneously in both jurisdictions. The Government decision approving minimum unit pricing acknowledged the need for the two jurisdictions to act simultaneously to allay concerns about negative impacts on cross-Border trade. I recognise that it will be most effective if an equivalent measure is introduced in Northern Ireland at the same time. However, we are all aware of the difficulties facing Northern Ireland, not only in terms of restarting its administration but also the possible impacts of Brexit. Those issues were not envisaged at the time of the Government decision, therefore we will need to reflect further after the enactment of the Bill before deciding on the timing of the commencement of this provision.

Concerns were raised in our debate about the fact that minimum unit pricing will impact those on a lesser income more than those on a higher income. The Department of Health has commissioned studies which show that the real impact of minimum unit pricing is that it will reduce alcohol consumption among high-risk drinkers the most. The research shows that lower-priced alcohol is disproportionately purchased by the heaviest drinkers. This measure will increase the price of high-strength, low-cost alcohol. It is estimated that it will reduce the consumption levels of the highest-risk drinkers by more than 15%. It will also ensure that strong

alcohol can no longer be sold at pocket money prices.

We are not alone in proposing to introduce a minimum price for alcohol. In 2012, Scotland introduced the Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act. The Scotch Whisky Association and others challenged the lawfulness of the Act and the matter was referred to the Court of Justice of the European Union. The court ruled that minimum unit pricing is not precluded by EU law if it is considered to be an appropriate and proportionate response for the protection of human life and health, and this cannot be achieved by other measures, such as increased taxation. The case was appealed to the UK Supreme Court and on 15 November last year, the UK Supreme Court unanimously rejected the appeal. It found that the Act did not breach EU law and that minimum unit pricing is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate public health aim. Scotland will introduce minimum unit pricing from May this year.

A number of Deputies raised the issue of labelling measures in the Bill. Deputy Kelleher and others sought clarification on who has the responsibility for ensuring that the prescribed information on labels is present. The Bill does not list the responsible persons specifically but instead it provides that it is an offence to sell a product to a person in the State without the necessary information on that label.

In view of the numerous questions raised on this issue, the Department of Health sought legal advice from the Office of the Attorney General to ensure that I can provide a comprehensive response. The offence in the Bill is in relation to selling alcohol products within the State without the required warnings and information. Any person who sells an alcohol product in the State without the required warnings and information can be prosecuted under the section. The range of persons who may be prosecuted includes wholesalers, manufacturers and retailers. If a product is manufactured in the State without the required labelling information and the product is sold to a retailer or wholesaler in the State, then the manufacturer can be prosecuted. Wholesalers and retailers may also be prosecuted if they sell the product on without the required labelling.

It is not an offence to import for sale in the State an alcohol product that does not bear the required information and warnings. However, a person that imports an alcohol product which does not have the required labelling and sells the product within the State, without affixing the required information and warnings, may be prosecuted. On this point, the question was raised as to whether a person buying alcohol abroad for personal consumption would have to add the required information. If a person does not intend to sell the product in Ireland, then adding the information is not necessary. It is not an offence to export an alcohol product outside the State without the prescribed warnings and information. It is an offence only if the product is sold in the State.

It has been suggested that Irish products will be stigmatised abroad because of this measure on the basis that they will be in competition with alcohol products from other jurisdictions with labels that do not contain health warnings. As I have just set out, there is no requirement for alcohol products that are being exported to have this information on their labels. There will be no direct competition with products from other countries of the kind suggested. On this issue, I am not convinced that consumers in other jurisdictions will think that the alcohol in one product has health risks associated with it but the same alcohol in another does not merely because of the presence or absence of a label.

Concerns were raised that smaller manufacturers, such as craft brewers, which wish to ex-

port products will suffer major costs as they will have to have labels for products for sale in Ireland and different labels for products to be exported. The Bill does not prevent the relevant warnings and information being added through the use of stickers to the container or similar means. This is already provided for in respect of the necessary health warnings on tobacco products and there is no reason it cannot be done for alcohol products also.

Deputy Kelleher asked if there is an exemption from the labelling requirements for products being bought in airport shops by passengers leaving the State. There is not. The customer in an airport shop will be provided with the same health and other information about the product that they are buying as those customers in a shop that is not in an airport. The same issue was raised with regard to luxury brand whiskeys or other expensive alcohol products sold in airport shops. The purpose of this measure is to give information. It is no more than that. If the information is given, consumers will know what they are drinking and will be able to make an informed decision about that purchase. I do not see why customers in airport shops should be prevented from knowing how many calories are in the product they are buying, how much alcohol is in it or what health risks are associated with it. We are all consumers and we are entitled to know about it when we are consuming a product that has health impacts.

It was suggested that labelling would be best tackled at EU level. Commissioner Andriukaitis, who has responsibility for health and food safety in the European Commission, has expressed public support for the Bill and Ireland will continue to support EU initiatives to prevent the harmful misuse of alcohol throughout Europe. However, the current position at EU level is that the European Commission is awaiting the alcohol industry's self-regulatory proposals on providing information on labels relating to ingredients and calorie content only. The measures in the Bill go beyond such proposals because we have a problem with alcohol in our country and we have an obligation as legislators to address it if we can and to put the health of our people first. In accordance with our EU obligations, the amendments made to the Bill in Seanad Éireann have been notified to the European Commission. We await the outcome of its assessment.

There was discussion of the link between alcohol and cancer and references were made to the suggestion that burnt toast was an equal risk. I welcome the responses of Deputies O'Reilly, Chambers and Calleary who rightly addressed this suggestion in the context of the real health risks of alcohol. Suggestions such as that about burnt toast may seem amusing but they are not. The 2013 publication, *Cancer Incidence and Mortality due to Alcohol: An Analysis of 10-Year Data*, from Dr. Marie Laffoy of the national cancer control programme and others found that 12.2% of breast cancers or 305 cases annually in Ireland were attributable to alcohol in that period. This is the kind of analysis from respected sources that underpins the measures in the Bill. We will not be deterred from bringing it forward by attempts to trivialise or distract from what we are trying to do here for the good of all of our people.

It has been suggested that there are other problems which we should be tackling or other products which have health risks that should be labelled and therefore we should not deal with this product at this time. I do not agree. This Bill is an opportunity for us to show leadership on an important health issue. Ireland was the first country in the world to ban smoking in the workplace and other countries followed our lead on that undertaking. I suspect that the same will occur on the enactment of the Bill and that we will see other countries following our lead with their own alcohol legislation.

If we accept that there is a problem with the harmful use of alcohol in our country, which I

think all of us in this House do, we must be prepared to do what we can to address the problem. The provisions in the Bill on the advertising and marketing of alcohol are designed to protect our young people also. The Bill will restrict the amount of advertising that children are exposed to by creating alcohol advertising free zones in parks, on public transport and around schools, playgrounds and crèches. The measures on the content of advertising will make alcohol advertisements less appealing to children. The Bill also prohibits the sponsorship of events where the majority of participants are children or the event is aimed at children and also restricts the advertising of alcohol products at these events.

Research shows that the advertising of alcohol products is effective and it encourages our children to start drinking or drink more if they already do. The Bill is our opportunity to heed that evidence and to give our children a chance to play, to socialise and to learn without the marketing influence of alcohol. Several Deputies mentioned situations where underage drinkers are getting access to alcohol through others. I share their concerns on this issue. One of the primary objectives of the Bill is to delay the initiation of alcohol consumption by children and young people.

Deputy Kelleher and Deputy Kelly asked about the broadcast watershed times in the Bill for television and radio advertising. The watershed times were agreed in consultation with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and relate to the times when children might be in the audience for television or radio. If the measures in the Bill are enacted, our young people may not be interested in drinking alcohol until they are adults and, if they do drink, they will be better informed about alcohol and the risks associated with harmful drinking. I agree with the points made that education is important but the evidence shows that it is not enough on its own.

The World Health Organization's 2010 Global Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol found:

... the evidence base indicates that the impact of alcohol-education programmes on harmful use of alcohol is small. To be effective, education about alcohol needs to go beyond providing information about the risks of... alcohol to promoting the availability of effective interventions and mobilizing public opinion and support for effective alcohol policies.

The measures in the Bill will raise awareness among all of us about the risks associated with the misuse of alcohol and will implement practical changes to protect our children and all of our citizens. None of the individual measures in the Bill will on their own change our culture overnight but it is my strong view that the Bill as a whole will do so.

A number of Deputies raised whether reference to *drinkaware.ie* will continue to be allowed on labels and in advertisements. Under the Bill, the details of an alcohol public health website to be established and maintained by the HSE will be included on labelling and in advertising. That website, *askaboutalcohol.ie*, is already established. It explains the health risks of alcohol and offers support and guidance to anyone who wants to cut back on his or her drinking. It is an independent source of information. The *drinkaware.ie* website is funded by the alcohol industry.

Several Deputies spoke about whiskey museums and visitor centres in distilleries and suggested that the advertising provisions in the Bill would have major consequences for these tourist attractions. The provisions on the location and content of advertisements are designed

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to apply to advertisements that promote an alcohol product rather than to those that are solely promoting or giving directions to a visitor centre or similar destination. I am confident that advertisers will find ways to apply their creativity within the new requirements and continue those success stories of which we are all rightly proud.

I wish to make clear that we have a problem with the level of consumption of alcohol in this country and, contrary to what has been stated, it is increasing. According to the figures from the Office of the Revenue Commissioners, 11.6 litres of pure alcohol *per capita* were consumed in 2010. In 2011, the figure was 11.7 litres; in 2012, it was 11.5 litres; in 2013, it was 10.6 litres; in 2014, it was 11 litres; in 2015, it was 10.9 litres; and in 2016, it was 11.5 litres. This is an average of 11 litres of pure alcohol *per capita* per year. This amount of pure alcohol is the same as that in 41 700 ml bottles of vodka, 116 750 ml bottles of wine or 445 pints of beer. This is too much. The objective of the Bill is to reduce this level to the OECD average of 9.1 litres. For the first time, we are addressing alcohol on the basis of its impact on public health. We do so through a Bill which includes provisions which have been adopted elsewhere to tackle major public alcohol problems and which have saved lives and improved the health and well-being of citizens. On enactment, the legislation can do the same here. It is a first step towards a future in which alcohol is enjoyed in an age-appropriate and safe manner and in which the harm from alcohol misuse is significantly reduced.

I thank all Members who participated in the debate, as does the Minister, Deputy Harris. Above all, I thank Members for responding to the legislation as they have done. I thank Members for allowing the Bill to be introduced in the House. I look forward to further debate on Committee Stage and, ultimately, to the enactment of this important landmark Bill. I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and the other Members who have chaired the debate and I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the time provided to those who wanted to speak to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015 [Seanad]: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Health pursuant to Standing Orders 84A(3)(a) and 149(1).

Question put and agreed to.

An Ghaeilge: Ráitis

Irish Language: Statements

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We move on to ráitis maidir leis an Ghaeilge. Glaoim ar an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Joe McHugh, chun tús a chur lena ráiteas. Tá deich bomaite aige.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Joe McHugh): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Mar Aire Stáit ar a bhfuil

freagracht don Ghaeilge, don Ghaeltacht agus do na hoileáin, fáiltím roimh an deis seo labhairt leis an Dáil faoi chúrsaí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta, go háirithe agus muid i lár Seachtain na Gaeilge sa bhliain speisialta seo, Bliain na Gaeilge 2018.

Ar dtús báire, ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoin bpróiseas pleanála teanga. Mar is eol don Teach, tugann Acht na Gaeltachta 2012 feidhm reachtúil don phróiseas pleanála teanga faoina mbeidh pleananna teanga á n-ullmhú ag leibhéal an phobail i gceantair a bhféadfaí aitheantas a thabhairt dóibh faoin Acht mar limistéir pleanála teanga Ghaeltachta, mar bhailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta, nó mar líonraí Gaeilge. Gabhaim m'aitheantas do mo iar-chomhghleacaí, Dinny McGinley, faoi choinne an tiomantais sin. Is fiú a lua go bhfuil allúntas breise de €1.2 milliún ar fáil i mbliana chun cabhrú tuilleadh le cur i bhfeidhm na straitéise agus an chórais pleanála teanga ar aon. Fágann sé seo go bhfuil cistíocht ar fiú €2.65 milliún in iomlán ar fáil do 2018 lena haghaidh.

Tá an próiseas pleanála teanga tosaithe anois i ngach aon cheann den 26 limistéar pleanála teanga Gaeltachta. Ina theannta sin, tá obair idir lámha chun an próiseas a bhrú ar aghaidh mar a bhaineann sé leis na bailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta agus na líonraí Gaeilge.

Agus muid ag caint ar an nGaeilge agus an Ghaeltacht ní bheadh sé ceart gan aitheantas a thabhairt don ról fíorthábhachtach atá ag Údarás na Gaeltachta. Tá sé ráite agam roimhe seo ach measaim gur fiú é a rá athuair nach bhfuil aon amhras orm ach go bhfuil obair thábhachtach déanta ag an údarás anuas tríd na blianta ar mhaithe le saol teangeolaíoch, eacnamaíochta, cultúrtha agus sóisialta phobal na Gaeltachta a chur chun cinn. Is ábhar sásaimh é gur éirigh leis an údarás 630 post a chruthú in 2017 agus go raibh 155 duine breise fostaithe i gcuideachtaí an údarais sa Ghaeltacht ag deireadh na bliana 2017 i gcomparáid leis an mbliain roimhe sin. Bhí 8,109 bpost i gcliantchuideachtaí an údarais ag deireadh na bliana sin. Tuigim go maith go bhfuil aidhm straitéiseach ag an údarás a bhuiséad caipitil a mhéadú thar thréimhse ama go €12 milliún in aghaidh na bliana agus, mar atá ráite agam roimhe seo, tacaím go hiomlán leis an éileamh seo. Ár ndóigh, tá an-áthas orm dá réir go bhfuil gealltanas tugtha sa phlean forbartha náisiúnta do 2018 go 2027, a foilsíodh le gairid, go méadófar buiséad caipitil Údarás na Gaeltachta go céimniúil go €12 milliún in aghaidh na bliana. Is féidir liom a dheimhniú go leanfaidh mo Roinn féin agus an t-údarás ag obair as lámha a chéile chun an leas is fearr is féidir a bhaint as na hacmhainní atá ar fáil ar mhaithe le cur chun cinn na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta sa toadhcháí.

Ba mhaith liom anois cúpla focal a rá faoin straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge agus go háirithe faoin bplean gníomhaíochta don tréimhse 2018-2022 faoin straitéis, atá á ullmhú ag mo Roinnse faoi láthair. Mar atá ráite agam go minic roimhe seo, ós rud é go bhfuil freagracht thras-Rannach i gceist maidir le cur i bhfeidhm na straitéise 20 bliain don Ghaeilge, ba ghá go leor plé a dhéanamh le Ranna Stáit agus páirtithe leasmhara eile maidir le hullmhú an phlean gGníomhaíochta don tréimhse ó 2018 go dtí 2022 faoin straitéis agus go háirithe chun na spriocanna sonracha agus tráthchlár ina leith a aontú. Cé go n-aithnítear go bhfuil moill ar an sprioc ama a bhí luaite roimhe seo, bhí an gá ann, mar atá ráite cheana agam, a chinntiú go raibh téagar agus tairbhe ag dul le pé bearta a chuirfí sa phlean i ndeireadh thiar thall. Is fearr i bhfad é sin i mo thuairimse beagán ama breise a thógáil chun féachaint chuige go bhfuil fiúntas leis an gclár bearta agus leis an bplean gníomhaíochta don Ghaeilge ó 2018 go dtí 2022 go ginearálta, ar a bhfuil mo Roinnse ag cur bailchríoch air i láthair na huairé agus a ndéanfar a fhoilsiú sna seachtainí amach romhainn.

Cé go bhfuil moill ar fhoilsiú an phlean gníomhaíochta féin ní hionann sin agus a rá nach

bhfuil an Rialtas ag obair ar son na Gaeilge idir an dá linn agus nach bhfuil aon rud ag tarlú. Go deimhin tá cláir oibre á gcur i bhfeidhm ag mo Roinn féin agus ag Ranna agus forais ábhartha eile Stáit, chomh maith le raon leathan eagraíochtaí Gaeilge, chun cúram a dhéanamh i gcaitheamh an ama ar fheidhmiú na Straitéise. Mar shampla, tá muid anois i mBliain na Gaeilge 2018, ar thogra de chuid an Rialtais é. Ní fhéadfaí dáiríreacht an Rialtais ar an ábhar seo a cheistiú i bhfianaise an tagairt shonrach atá déanta don Ghaeilge, don Ghaeltacht agus do na hoileáin sa chreatlach náisiúnta pleanála agus sa phlean forbartha náisiúnta 2018-2027 a foilsíodh le gairid. Faoin bplean seo, tá sé fógartha ag an Rialtas go mbeidh €178 milliún in airgead caipitil ar fáil le caitheamh ar thograí Gaeilge, Gaeltachta agus oileán as seo go ceann deich mbliana. Is é sin €78 milliún in airgead nua anuas ar an suim de níos mó ná €10 milliún atá á chaitheamh ar na nithe céanna in 2018.

San áireamh sa phlean forbartha náisiúnta seo, tá gealltanais go méadófar buiséad caipitil Údarás na Gaeltachta go €12 milliún in aghaidh na bliana, go gcaithfidh an Roinn Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta €4 milliún ar lárionad Gaeilge i gcathair Bhaile Átha Cliath agus go ndéanfar forbairt ar ghréasán d'ionaid Ghaeilge timpeall na tíre agus sna líonraí Gaeilge agus sna bailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta ach go háirithe. Maidir le maoiniú don Fhoras Teanga, a chuimsíonn Foras na Gaeilge agus Gníomhaireacht na hUltaise araon, is féidir liom a dheimhniú gur tháinig méadú ar an soláthar sin le dhá bhliain anuas. Is soláthar €14.028 milliún atá ar fáil don Fhoras Teanga do 2018, maoiniú de €450,000 do Bhliain na Gaeilge 2018 san áireamh. Mar sin, is léir go bhfuil an Rialtas ag seasamh leis an nGaeilge, ag tabhairt aghaidh ar na dúshláin a bhaineann léi agus ag déanamh infheistíochta ina todhchaí.

Mar is eol don Teach, tar éis tréimhse fada comhairliúcháin, i mí Meitheamh na bliana seo caite, foilsíodh ceannuidil an Bhille teanga nua. Tá iarracht déanta sna ceannuidil seo dul i ngleic le dhá mhórchéist na scéimeanna teanga agus an earcaíocht sa tseirbhís phoiblí. Mar sin, mar chuid den Bhille nua, tá sé i gceist córas na gcaighdeán a thabhairt isteach in áit na scéimeanna teanga. Má tá an chórais úr seo chun a bheith éifeachtach, beidh orainn díriú isteach ar chúrsaí earcaíochta. Is é ceann de na príomhfhadhbanna a chuireann bac ar sheirbhísí a chur ar fáil trí Ghaeilge ná nach bhfuil na daoine leis na scileanna cuí fostaithe sna hoifigí cuí. Má tá muid chun feabhas a chur air seo, caithfidh an Stát líon na bhfostaithe Stáit atá in ann seirbhísí a chur ar fáil trí Ghaeilge a mhéadú agus a chinntiú go bhfuil Gaeilge ar a dtóil ag oifigigh Stáit atá ag feidhmiú i gceantair Ghaeltachta. Chuige sin, beidh sé mar chuspóir sa Bhille go mbeidh 20% de na daoine nua a earcaítear don tseirbhís phoiblí ina gcainteoirí Gaeilge, go mbeidh achan oifig phoiblí atá lonnaithe sa Ghaeltacht ag feidhmiú trí Ghaeilge agus go mbeidh na comhlachtaí in ann freastal ar an éileamh ón bpobal ar sheirbhísí trí Ghaeilge. Tá ceannuidil an Bhille seo curtha faoi bhráid Comhchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus na nOileán chun scrúdú réamhrechtach a dhéanamh orthu. Tá an Bille ar chlár reachtaíochta an Rialtais don seisiún seo.

Díreoidh mé anois ar an Ghaeilge san Aontas Eorpach. Tá sé an-tábhachtach don Rialtas go mbeidh an Ghaeilge ina teanga oibre iomlán in institiúidí an AE. Táimid tiomanta deireadh a chur leis an maolú. Tá sé geallta sa Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010-2030 go dtabharfaidh an Rialtas gach tacaíocht agus cúnaimh don AE chun an cinneadh maidir leis an Ghaeilge a bheith mar theanga oifigiúil agus oibre san AE a chur i bhfeidhm. Tá roinnt beartais nua curtha ar bun againn i mbliana le cuidiú leis an maolú. I mí na Nollag 2017, d'eagraigh mo Roinn i gcomhar le hardstúirthóireacht aistriúcháin an Choimisiúin Eorpaigh comórtas aistriúcháin le haghaidh meánscoileanna Gaeilge in Éirinn, Thuaidh agus Theas. Mar chuid den chur chuige céanna, tá mo Roinn ag maoiniú seó bóthair de chuid Conradh na Gaeilge, a chuirfidh os ci-

onn 120 ceardlann ar bun le linn na bliana ar bhonn uile-Éireann. Anuraidh, d'fhreastail siad ar 6,000 dalta iar-bhunscoile sna 32 Contae. Anuas ar sin, tugann an seó bóthair cuairt ar os cionn 80 coláiste samhraidh agus d'fhreastail breis is 10,000 dalta ar na ceardlanna anuraidh. Cuireann siad 12 ceardlann ar fáil sna hinstitiúidí tríú leibhéal mar chuid de sheachtain an bhfreisir chomh maith. Tá béim ar leith á chur sna ceardlanna seo ar bhuntáistí na Gaeilge agus fostaíocht á lorg ag na daltaí, le cur síos ar chúrsaí tríú leibhéal agus deiseanna fostaíochta le Gaeilge, na deiseanna san Eoraip ach go háirithe. Táimid ag réiteach scéim nua faoi láthair chun intéirnithe a chur chuig na hinstitiúidí Eorpacha ar feadh tréimhsí cúig mhí. Tabharfaidh sé seo deis do dhaoine óga blaiseadh a fháil den saol oibre san Eoraip, oiliúint a fháil ó na hinstitiúidí agus cur lena gcuid scileanna chun deis níos fearr a thabhairt dóibh sna comórtais earcaíochta amach anseo.

Creidim go láidir go bhfuil féidearthachtaí móra ann cuidiú le cur chun cinn na Gaeilge tríd an teicneolaíocht. Is cúis sásaimh agus dóchais é an chaoi go bhfuil an Ghaeilge le fáil go forleathan ar na meáin dhigiteacha agus go bhfuil obair cheannródaíoch ar bun san earnáil seo. Ba mhaith liom na hardáin éagsúla ilmheáin atá forbartha ag RTÉ, TG4 agus Raidió na Gaeltachta a lua mar shamplaí. Tá tábhacht ar leith le nuachtáin agus irisí Gaeilge ar nós *tuairisc.ie*. Tá forbairtí móra déanta agus á ndéanamh ar chorpas na Gaeilge leis an bhfoclóir nua *focloir.ie* agus an suíomh *tearma.ie*. Chomh maith leis sin, tá tacaíocht á tabhairt ag mo Roinn d'Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann chun foclóir stairiúil na Gaeilge a chur i gcrích. Sheol mé corpas stairiúil na Gaeilge anuraidh.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tá do chuid ama caite. B'fhéidir go mbeidh tú ábalta níos mó a rá faoi na hábhair seo ag deireadh na ráiteas.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Tháinig an Chéad Dáil le chéile nach mór 100 bliain ó shin, ar 21 Eanáir 1919. Ar ndóigh, ritheadh imeachtaí an lae sin trí Ghaeilge ar fad, ach amháin gur léadh amach Forógra na Poblachta - forógra an neamhspleáchais - i nGaeilge, i bhFraincis agus i mBéarla. Cé is moite de sin, bhí imeachtaí an lae sin uilig i nGaeilge. Caithfidh mé a rá gur údar díomá é dom, beagnach 100 bliain ina dhiaidh sin, nach bhfuil á thabhairt ag an Dáil seo ach deich nóiméad an duine do na hurlabhraithe agus cúig nóiméad ina dhiaidh sin do dhuine ar bith eile ar mian leis nó léi labhairt ar cheist na Gaeilge. Is dóigh liom go gcaithfidh an Teach seo breathnú ar an gcaoi a bhfuilimid ag caitheamh leis an nGaeilge agus an cheist a chur an bhfuilimid ag tabhairt dea-shampla.

Níl aon cheist faoi ach ó bunaíodh Conradh na Gaeilge go bhfuil obair mhór déanta ar son na Gaeilge agus go minic is dóigh liom nach dtuigeann daoine an chontúirt a bhí ann ag an am go bhfaigheadh an teanga bás. Ag deireadh an 19ú haois, ní raibh ach 1% den phobal nach raibh in ann Béarla a labhairt. Ag an am sin duine ar bith i nglúin amháin a bhí dátheangach, bhí a gcuid gasúir aonteangach sa chéad ghlúin eile. Mar sin, níl aon amhras orm ach gur shábháil Conradh na Gaeilge an teanga, ní hamháin sa Ghaeltacht ach gur chuir siad ar fás í taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht.

Tógann athrú teanga tamaill fhada, go mórmhór i dtreo mionteanga. Mar sin, in ainneoin na mbotún a rinneadh, agus rinneadh botúin, is féidir linn a rá go ndearnadh gaisce sa Stát i gcaitheamh na mblianta.

É sin ráite, chaithfinn a bheith thar a bheith gearánach faoin laghad atá á ndéanamh i láthair

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na huaire, in ainneoin an mhéid a bhí le rá ag an Aire Stáit.

Tá caint i gcónaí ar an straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge, amhail is nach raibh ann ach go mbeadh grúpaí deonacha ag plé le pleanáil teanga. Tá i bhfad níos mó ann agus b'fhiú don Rialtas é a léamh arís.

Ba mhaith liom díriú ar roinnt nithe. Ar an gcéad dul síos ó thaobh na meáin chumarsáide, aithneoidh éinne atá ag éisteacht le Raidió na Gaeltachta ar na saolta seo go bhfuil ciorruithe i ndiaidh ciorruithe á gcur i bhfeidhm. Níl forbairt ar bith á dhéanamh air. Maidir le TG4, nuair a chuirtear an chistíocht atá ar fáil ag TG4 le hais RTÉ, atá ag craoladh i mórtheanga an domhain, feictear go bhfuil sé fágtha ar an ngannchuid. Sa bhliain dheireanach ina raibh mo pháirtí sa Rialtas, thugamar cuid den cheadúnas do TG4 don chéad uair agus ba cheart cur go mór leis sin. Chuir mé coimisiún beag ar bun, daoine óga, agus chuir mé ceist orthu céard a fhéadfaimis a dhéanamh, go simplí, ar son na Gaeilge. Tháinig siad ar fad, dream ón nGaeltacht, agus ar barr an liosta bhí éileamh amháin beag simplí acu. B'shin stáisiún raidió ar nós 2FM le popcheol a bheadh rite go hiomlán trí Ghaeilge. Leis an teicneolaíocht nua atá ann, agus le raidió digiteach, níl aon fhadhb leis sin níos mó. Ní hé nach bhfuil aon tonnta ar fáil - tá siad ar fáil agus ba cheart díriú ar sin láithreach. Is féidir é a dhéanamh trí Raidió Rí-Rá nó trí bhealach nua a thabhairt do Raidió na Gaeltachta agus go mbeadh craoladh as na stiúideonna i gcaitheamh an lae agus i gcaitheamh chuile oíche.

An dara rud nár tugadh faoi ná ceist cumas múinteoirí múineadh trí Ghaeilge. Ba cheart dúinn bheith macánta faoi - bhí an t-am ann nuair a casadh le múinteoir bunscoile agus d'fhéadfadh comhrá a dhéanamh le chuile dhuine acu trí Ghaeilge.

Ní hamhlaidh atá sé anois. Tá daoine ag iarraidh an Ghaeilge a mhúineadh agus níl sí acu féin. Bhí moltaí sonracha le déileáil leis an gceist sin sa straitéis 20 bliain - tréimhsí níos faide sa Gaeltacht – ach céard atá déanta ag an Rialtas? Táthar tar éis táillí a ghearradh ar na hábhair oidí atá ag dul chun na Gaeltachta, in ionad na dtáillí a íoc agus a rá leis na hábhair oidí tréimhsí fada a chaitheamh ann agus an teanga a thabhairt leo. Chomh maith leis sin, níl aon pholasaí ceart maoiniú againn. Níl aon pholasaí ceart ó thaobh bunú Gaelscoileanna agus Gaelcholáistí. Ba cheart go mbeadh fáil ag gach saoránach sa Stát ar Ghaelscoil ina gceantar féin. Tuigim go gcaithfear taistil, agus nílim ag rá gur chóir go mbeidís i chuile shráidbhaile sa tír.

Ach ba cheart go mbeadh gréasán Gaelscoileanna ar fud na tíre, agus iad pleanáilte, ní mar chuid den chóras Béarla ach mar chuid de chreatlach agus de ghréasán iomlán oideachais trí Ghaeilge. Tá an t-éileamh ann. Níl aon mhaith a rá go mbeidís ag goid scoláirí ó na scoileanna Béarla - sin rogha na dtuismitheoirí. Níl aon amhras faoi ach go bhfuil éileamh ann do scoileanna Gaelscolaíochta ó go leor leor tuismitheoirí.

Tá go leor brú ar an nGaeltacht. Cloisim go leor daoine ag caint ar an mbrú seo. Tá an brú ann mar nach bhfuil an pobal seasmhach mar a bhí fadó. Fadó, phós daoine daoine as a gceantair féin, nó théidís chun cónaithe leo. Ar ndóigh, ní mar sin atá an saol i lathair na huaire. Mar sin, tá daoine ag bogadh isteach go dtí an Gaeltacht an t-am uilig nach bhfuil an teanga acu. Caithfidimid admháil go bhfuil sé sin ag dul le tarlú mar is é sin nadúr an tsaoil agus an sochaí ina bhfuil muid ag maireachtáil. Mar sin, caithfidimid treisiú go mór ar na tacaíochtaí den teanga taobh istigh den Gaeltacht, go mórmhór i measc an aosa óig. Níl aon mhaith a bheith ag caitheamh anuas ar an aos óg má labhraíonn siad Béarla eatarthu féin mura bhfuil Gaeilge ag na cairde ar fad atá acu.

Tá go leor rudaí maithe déanta ag muintir na Breataine Bige sa gcomhthéacs sin ach arís caithfidimid bheith sásta airgead a infheistiú. Mar shampla, má thagann duine gan Bhreatnais i scoil Bhreatnaise, cuirtear ar chúrsaí sé seachtaine iad sula dtéann siad ar scoil le go dtabharfaidh siad an Bhreatnais leo sula dtiocfaidh siad isteach i scoile lán-Bhreatnaise. Ní thugaimid tacaíocht ar bith do na daoine gan Ghaeilge i gcomhthéacs mar sin. Caithimid iad isteach sa scoil agus bímid ag déanamh iontais cén fáth nach bhfuileadar ag labhairt Gaeilge agus cén fáth a bhfuil chuile dhuine ag tiontú ar an mBéarla.

Maidir leis an gcreatlach pleanála, tá tagairt don Ghaeilge ann ach níl aon mholtaí maidir leis an nGaeltacht ná leis an nGaeilge ann. Mar shampla, níl tada maidir le pleanáil fhisiciúil sna cheantair Ghaeltachta. Níl tada maidir leis an gcaoi an teanga a chosaint, mar shampla, i gcomhthéacs Chonamara - an Ghaeltacht is láidre sa tír - ó ilfhorbairt na Gaillimhe atá molta. Níl focal faoi. Ó thaobh cúrsaí pleanála de, níl aon fhocal ach oiread faoin gcaoi a bhfuil an Rialtas ag tógáil na greásáin Ghaeltachta sna bailte móra ar fud na tíre.

Maidir le hinfheistíocht sa bplean náisiúnta, tá an Rialtas ag déanamh gaisce as €178 milliún thar deich mbliana. Sin meánchaiteachas de €17 milliún in aghaidh na bliana am éigin amach anseo. Tá €10 milliún i gceist ó thaobh caiteachas capítail i mbliana. Tá an caiteachas céanna ag an Stát i mbliana ó thaobh caiteachas vótáilte agus a bhí ann sa mbliain 2008. An bhliain sin caitheadh €71 milliún ar chúrsaí capítail a bhain leis an nGaeilge agus leis an nGaeltacht.

Ar deireadh, fáiltím roimh rud amháin sa phlean náisiúnta agus is é sin go bhfuil sé i gceist lárionad Gaeilge a thógáil i mBaile Átha Cliath. Tá dhá rud le rá agam go sciobtha faoi sin. Is é an chéad rud ná gur cheart an t-athchóiriú atá molta don fhoirgneamh ar Shráid Fhearchair a dhéanamh. Is foirgneamh stairiúil é. Bhain sin le banc Shinn Féin i rith thréimhse Chogadh na Saoirse. Ina dhiaidh sin bhronn an Stát ar an gconradh é sa bhliain 1966. Ba cheart lárionad Gaeilge a bhunú ansin. Ach ba cheart go mbeadh lárionad eile ar an taobh ó thuaidh den Life. Bheadh súil agamsa go mbeadh sé sin ar shuíomh Shráid Uí Mhórdha. Cén áit ní b'oiriúnaí le haghaidh ionad den chineál sin ná láthair Shráid Uí Mhórdha, áit a bhfuil an oiread ceangal leis an oiread Gaeilgeoirí leis - Ó Raghallaigh, an Píarsach agus araile? Bheadh sé go maith dá gcuirfí tús leis sin i mbliana - i mBliain na Gaeilge.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Caithfidimid ar dtús gearán a dhéanamh mar gheall ar an am ina bhfuil na ráitis seo ag dul ar siúl. Tá siad ar siúl ag díreach an t-am céanna le cruinniú den Chomhchoiste Gaeilge, Gaeltachta agus na n-Oileán. Ba cheart go mbeinn féin agus go mbeadh an Teachta Ó Cuív ag freastal ar an gcrúinniú sin ach ní féidir linn.

Fáiltím roimh Bhliain an Ghaeilge mar creidim go mór i luach agus i dtábhacht ár dteanga náisiúnta. Is mór an trua é nár thug an Rialtas maoiniú sa bhreis leis an bhliain speisialta seo a chomóradh. Tháinig an maoiniú ó bhuiséad Fhoras na Gaeilge agus bhí air airgead a bhaint ó thionscail eile chun é a chaitheamh ar an bhliain seo. Léiríonn sé seo an cur chuige atá ag an Rialtas ó thaobh na Gaeilge de - béalghrá agus cur i gcéill. Bíonn an Rialtas ag maíomh go bhfuil an-chuid á déanamh aige agus ag an am céanna tá sé ag gearradh siar ar sheirbhísí do mhuintir na Gaeltachta agus lucht labhartha na Gaeilge. Cur i gcás an bád farantóireachta a bhfuair muintir Thoraí. Cuireann sé an t-amhrán i gcuimhne dom. Tá báidín an Teachta McHugh diúltaithe ar Thóraí. Nuair a smaoinítear ar an gcuma atá ar an tseanbhád sin agus go bhfuil an tAire Stáit agus an Rialtas ag iarraidh go mbeidh sé ag freastal ar phobal beo Gaeltachta, is siombail eile oiriúnach é don tslí ina mbíonn an Rialtas ag déileáil le riachtanais mhuintir na Gaeltachta.

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Is maith an rud é go bhfuil deis againn an Ghaeilge a mholadh agus na tréaniarrachtaí atá á ndéanamh ag an-chuid daoine a mholadh freisin. Ach ní dóigh liom féin go dtuigeann baill den Rialtas an phráinn atá i gceist mar gheall ar an Ghaeilge agus an Ghaeltacht. Caithfidh mé seo a rá arís agus arís eile; níl tuiscint ag an Rialtas ar chor ar bith mar gheall ar cad ba cheart dó a dhéanamh mar gheall ar an Ghaeilge. Níl an tsuim ag an Rialtas ar chor ar bith mar gheall ar cad ba cheart dó a dhéanamh chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. Mura bhfuil muid ionraic faoin fhadhb ní bheimis in ann dul i ngleic lei. Tá contúirt ann go gcaithfimis ár gcuid ama ag marú na Gaeilge le platitudes agus le neamhaird istigh anseo.

De réir an daonáirimh, tá titim 11% ar líon na gcainteoirí laethúla sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Níl ach 502 pháiste idir trí bliana agus ceithre bliana d'aois sa Ghaeltacht a labhraíonn Gaeilge go laethúil taobh amuigh den chóras oideachais sa lá atá inniu ann. Tá todhchaí na Gaeltachta ag brath ar an mhéid caol sin. Tá sé dochreidte. Tá tromlach na réamhscoileanna sna ceantair Ghaeltachta ag feidhmiú trí Bhéarla agus déanfaidh sé seo an-chuid dochair do chur i bhfeidhm an pholasáí don oideachas Gaeltachta.

Bhí titim 70% ar mhaoiniú caipitil d'Údarás na Gaeltachta ó 2007 agus bhí dada nua sa bhuiséad is déanaí. Bhí ardú 66% ar mhaoiniú caipitil an IDA agus ardú 42% ar mhaoiniú caipitil Fhiontar Éireann sa tréimhse chéanna. Taispeánann sé sin an dá shlí ina ndéileáillean an Rialtas leis an Ghaeltacht agus an Ghalltacht. Mar a luaigh an Teachta Ó Cuív an tseachtain seo caite, tá maoiniú caipitil don Ghaeilge agus don Ghaeltacht tite ó €71 milliún in 2008 go dtí €10 milliún i mbliana. Ba é an Teachta Ó Cuív an tAire ar a raibh freagracht as an Ghaeltacht ag tús na gciorrúithe déine sin.

Cad is féidir a dhéanamh chun an Ghaeltacht a threisiú agus an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn? Is gá cur chuige trichosach a thógáil. Is iad an Ghaeltacht, an córas Gaeloideachais ina iomlán, agus an Státchóras na trí rud is tábhachtaí. Faoi láthair táimid ag feidhmiú gan stiúradh gan treoir agus ag fanacht go deireadh an tsaoil ar an phlean gníomhíochta don straitéis 20 bliain; plean ina mbeidh spriocanna sonracha agus amscálaí. Is gá scéim aitheantais do naíonraí sa Ghaeltacht a thabhairt isteach. Faoi láthair níl ach 44% de naíonraí sna ceantair Ghaeltachta ag feidhmiú trí Ghaeilge agus déanfaidh sé seo an-chuid damáiste don Ghaeilge. Is gá go dtabharfar ar ais próiseas daonlathach chun ionadaíocht a dhéanamh ar an bpobal ar bhord Údaráis na Gaeltachta. Is gá go dtabharfaí maoiniú mar is gá don údarás. Tá sé geallta anois ag an Rialtas go méadóidh sé an méid airgid caipitil ach cathain go díreach a dtarlóidh sé seo? An dtarlóidh sé an bhliain seo chugainn, nó i gceann deich mbliana?

Is gá go mbeadh an Roinn in ann obair in éineacht leis an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna. Dúirt an tAire Stáit an tseachtain seo caite go raibh an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna ag déanamh an-chuid oibre ar son na Gaeilge. Níl plean ar bith ag an Roinn sin mar gheall ar an Ghaeilge taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. D'admhaigh an Roinn é sin domsa cúpla seachtain ó shin i bhfreagra ar cheist pharlaiminte. Níl ach 5% de na páistí sa tír seo ag freastal ar Ghaelscoileanna in ainneoin go bhfuil 23% de thuismitheoirí ag iarraidh a bpáistí a chur ar scoil i nGaelscoil.

Ba cheart go mbeadh cultúrlann bunaithe i mBaile Átha Cliath. Tá cultúrlann i mBéal Feirste, i nDoire agus san Iúr ach níl ceann anseo.

Ba mhaith liom i bhfad níos mó ama chun i bhfad níos mó fíricí a chur os comhair an Aire Stáit ach stopfaidh mé ansin.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Tá mé lánsásta labhairt faoin topaic seo inniu. D'fhás mé suas i dteach ina raibh meas ar an teanga Gaeilge, cé nár fhás mé suas sa Ghaeltacht nó aon rud mar sin. Ceapaim go bhfuil meas ar an nGaeilge fiorthábhachtach, áfach, agus ní dóigh liom go bhfuil go leor measa ann sa chóras oideachais faoi láthair. Má táimid i ndáiríre faoin teanga, ár dteanga dúchais, caithfidh gach uile iarracht a dhéanamh chun díriú ar an nGaeilge sa chóras oideachais. D'fhoilsigh an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna straitéis litearthachta agus uimhearthachta in 2011 ach níl meas ar an teanga sa straitéis sin. Bhí mé i mo mhúinteoir i mbunscoil nuair a tháinig an straitéis sin isteach. Cuireadh iallaigh ar mhúinteoirí díriú ar an mBéarla agus ar an matamaitic i ngach scoil nach Gaelscoil í. Ciallaíonn sé sin go bhfuil múinteoirí ag caitheamh i bhfad níos mó ama ag múineadh an Bhéarla agus na matamaitice agus tá an Ghaeilge fágtha ar leathaobh agus é sin toisc go bhfuil siad ag déanamh a seacht ndíchill sna scoileanna. Is é sin an córas.

D'fhoilsigh Pádraig Mac Piarais *The Murder Machine* blianta ó shin agus ceapaim go bhfuil an córas oideachais atá againn faoi láthair cosúil le meaisín dúnmharaithe mar tá sé ag scriosadh na teanga. Níl sé féaráilte ar na páistí nach bhfuil an deis acu an Ghaeilge, an teanga shaibhir seo, a fhoghlaim. Níl na deiseanna atá ann mar an gcéanna leis na deiseanna atá ann an Béarla agus matamaitic a fhoghlaim sna bunscoileanna. Rud déisteanach is ea é sin. Mar a dúirt mé, níl an Ghaeilge curtha ar chomhchéim agus ba chóir go mbeadh athrú maidir leis sin. Tá an Ghaeilge curtha ar leathaobh agus léiríonn an straitéis go bhfuil dearcadh diúltach i leith na Gaeilge ann. Caithfidh ár seacht ndícheall a dhéanamh chun é sin a athrú chomh gasta agus is féidir linn nó déanfaidh sé i bhfad níos mó damáiste do mhúineadh na Gaeilge i mbunscoileanna. Tá an grá don Ghaeilge ann i measc múinteoirí agus daltaí. Mar sin, tabhair an deis shaibhir atá ann dóibh an teanga a fhoghlaim.

Tá athrú dearcadh ag teastáil ón Rialtas maidir leis an gcóras oideachais. Mar a dúirt mé, rud déistíneach atá i gceist anseo. Leath-náisiún é náisiún nach bhfuil a theanga dúchais aige. Ba mhaith liom a bheith dearfach faoi seo agus go mbeidh athrú éigin ann chomh luath agus is féidir.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Glaoim ar an Teachta Brendan Howlin. Níl aige ach níos lú ná deich bomaite.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Déanfaidh sé sin an gnó. Guím Seachtain na Gaeilge shona ar an Aire Stáit agus ar an Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Bhí mé ag éisteacht leis an méid a bhí á rá ag an Teachta Ó Cuív agus, i mo thuairimse, tá sé in am smaointeoireacht nua a bheith againn ar an teanga. Aithníonn Páirtí an Lucht Oibre an áit lárnach atá ag teanga na Gaeilge i gcomhthéacs oidhreacht agus stair na hÉireann agus gur áis shaibhir bheo na linne seo í. Fáiltímid roimh an ardú suntasach atá tagtha ar líon na ndaoine a labhraíonn Gaeilge go laethúil. Is rud maith é sin. Ó thaobh oideachais de, áfach, theip go mór orainn mar thír. Theip orainn an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. Is féidir pointí a scóráil ó thaobh páirtí polaitiúla de, ach mar thír agus mar Stát theip orainn ó thaobh múineadh na Gaeilge agus foghlaim na Gaeilge ó bhunú an Stáit agus sinn ag iarraidh an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. Ní dóigh liom gur féidir linn ár méaracha a shíneadh i dtreo aon áit eile ar fud an domhain agus tír a aimsiú ina gcaitheann páistí ina scoileanna níos mó ná deich mbliana ag foghlaim teanga ach nach bhfuil ar a gcumas an teanga sin a labhairt go flúirseach agus go líofa ina dhiaidh sin. Caithfidh é sin a admháil. Tá sé dochreidte agus níl a fhios agam an fáth atá leis sin.

Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an-chuid anailíse déanta ar an gceist seo. Cén fáth nach bhfuil páistí in ann an teanga a úsáid tar éis deich mbliana á foghlaim ar scoil? An easpa spéise atá i

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gceist? An bhfuil fadhb ann le heaspa suime ag tuismitheoirí? Ní dóigh liom go bhfuil. Tá sé deacair a rá cén fáth go bhfuil sé mar sin ach tá sé mar sin, agus is iar-bhunmhúinteoir mé féin.

Tá smaoinemh ag urlabhraí Pháirtí an Lucht Oibre, an Seanadóir Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, ó thaobh chúrsaí oideachais de. B'fhéidir gur chóir dúinn rud éigin níos réabhlóidí a dhéanamh sna bunscoileanna. B'fhéidir gur chóir dúinn bliain amháin nó dhá bhliain a mhúineadh go huile agus go hiomlán trí Ghaeilge. Ní bheadh an Ghaeilge againn mar ábhar inár scoileanna mar sin ach mar theanga labhartha. Ní féidir an Ghaeilge a mhúineadh mar ábhar agus í a spreagadh mar sin. Caithfidh an Ghaeilge a mhúineadh mar theanga. Sílim, ag an staid seo, go bhfuil orainn bheith réabhlóideach faoi seo. Ar a laghad, bheadh sé ar ár gcumas an Ghaeilge a labhairt níos fearr má dhéanfaimid an méid sin.

Seasann Páirtí an Lucht Oibre do chosaint agus d'fhorbairt na Gaeltachta. Cinnteoidimid go leanfar leis an infheistiú i bhfostaíocht trí Údarás na Gaeltachta i réimsí cosúil leis an turasóireacht, tograí a bhaineann le bia ceardaithe agus turasóireacht chultúrtha i gcomhthéacs fhorbairt Shlí an Atlantaigh Fhiáin, fhorbairt na mbealaí glasa agus fhorbairt Shean-Oirthear na hÉireann. Spreagfar iad siúd a bhfuil cónaí orthu sna ceantair sin an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim agus í a úsáid.

Tá sé ráite cheana féin ag an Teachta Ó Cuív ach, maidir le seirbhísi poiblí, tuigimid go bhfuil sé rí-tábhachtach go gcuirfí gach aon seirbhís Stáit ar fáil i nGaeilge agus oibreoidimid chun an aidhm sin a chomhlíonadh. Is aidhm é atá ag gach páirtí sa Teach seo.

I welcome the opportunity to speak here on the Irish language. It is a shame the debate around the state of our national language happens every year during Seachtain na Gaeilge in an almost tokenistic way. *6 o'clock* Ár dteanga dúchais should not be discussed just for a couple of hours on an annual basis. We should make a more conscious effort to discuss the future of the language throughout the year. In order for our language to survive and, more importantly to thrive, we need to be realistic about its uses and the way in which it is taught in schools. We need only to look at how videos from Coláiste Lurgan go viral every summer when they translate the biggest current hit of the summer into Gaeilge. There is a hunger out there for new ways to use our language, to learn our language and to embrace our language if we could only tap into it properly. The problem is that we have singularly failed to do this, to date. I hope we will take the opportunity to devise a strategy and not simply pay lip service on an annual basis so that athbheochan na Gaeilge is not some vague aspiration like draining the Shannon, but is a realistic objective to be achieved in our lifetime.

Cuireadh an díospóireacht ar athló

Debate adjourned.

Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: Roimh an chéad phíosa ghnó eile, tá moladh ag an bPríomh-Aoire maidir le gnó na seachtaine.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Joe McHugh): As Béarla, más féidir liom.

An Ceann Comhairle: Ceart go leor.

Deputy Joe McHugh: It is proposed, notwithstanding the Order of Business of the Dáil today, 6 March 2018, that the business on Wednesday before midday shall be No. 31, statements on the third interim report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, resumed. After midday, the business shall be No. 9, motion re Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; No. 30, statements on the Irish Language, resumed, if not previously concluded; No. 31, statements on the third interim report from the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, resumed, if not previously concluded; and No. 32, statements on Northern Ireland. The motion re Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities shall commence on the conclusion of Private Members' business and shall conclude at 8.10 p.m., if not previously concluded. In relation to that motion, the speeches of a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons of parties and groups, or a member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed ten minutes each. All other Members shall not exceed ten minutes each, with a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State, and all Members may share time. The statements on Northern Ireland shall commence at 8.10 p.m.

The Dáil shall sit at 12 noon on Thursday. Thursday's business shall be No. 32A, statements on diaspora issues, to conclude by 5 p.m., if not previously concluded; No. 30, statements on the Irish language, resumed, if not previously concluded; and No. 31, statements on the third interim report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, resumed, if not previously concluded. The statements on diaspora issues of a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons of parties and groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed 15 minutes each. All other Members shall not exceed ten minutes each, with a ten-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State, and all Members may share time.

An Ceann Comhairle: An bhfuil sé sin aontaithe? Is the proposal agreed? Agreed.

Provision of Cost-Rental Public Housing: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— we are in the midst of a housing crisis which is undermining our society and threatens our economy;

— since 2010, rents in Dublin have increased by an average of 81%;

— there are 700 sites in public ownership around the country which have recently been identified by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government as having potential for housing development;

— the Government is overly dependent on the private sector for the provision of new housing supply, relying solely on increasing such supply will not address the affordability issue as developers will bid up the prices for available land, leading to further increases in house prices and rents;

— the provision of new social housing, using differential rents, will not on its

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own address the housing crisis, as it will not affect rent and property price rises in the private sector;

— providing a direct subsidy to existing private market rents similarly fails the test of helping reduce overall rents and would prove very expensive to the exchequer without the State ever acquiring any additional assets;

— EUROSTAT has recently indicated that approved housing bodies will not be able to avail of off-balance sheet financing for the provision of new homes;

— 1,000 new apartments are currently under construction in the docklands area of Dublin but most of those units are already sold to international corporations for the use of their staff;

— we must avoid the mistakes made in other international high-tech cities, where local people are frozen out of the housing market and public servants are unable to afford housing close to hospitals, schools and other social and public services;

— European countries with more stable, affordable and socially inclusive housing systems support large-scale provision of secure cost rental accommodation where rents reflect costs, not the maximum that the market will sustain;

— the case for a new more ‘unitary’ public housing model was set out in a report compiled by the National Economic and Social Council, entitled *Social Housing at the Crossroads: Possibilities for Investment, Provision and Cost Rental*, in June 2014, which proposed the widespread adoption of a cost rental housing model;

— a cost rental model of housing can reduce development cost by availing of low interest rate public finance, publicly owned land, economies of scale from large-scale development and the absence of profit margins to private developers;

— this model will enable national public housing sectors to remain off-balance sheet, which allows investment to continue through downturns in economic activity;

— cost rental housing schemes could be funded through a combination of the European Investment Bank and other European Union funding institutions, credit unions, pension funds, Home Building Finance Ireland which funds from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, the Housing Finance Agency, and Exchequer funding, as appropriate;

— this model will provide multi-annual funding commitments to facilitate forward planning;

— the Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness contains no targets, and no clear funding stream, for the delivery of cost rental housing; and

— only one small test site for new cost rental housing has been initiated and no other affordable rental scheme is being developed by the Government;

and calls on the Government to:

— define cost rental housing as publicly owned housing which is publicly provided on State-owned land where the rents are set on the basis of recovering the cost

of the property over the lifetime of a long-term loan;

— introduce regulations to ensure that any long-term profits, after the repayment of such loans, are retained within the system and reinvested in housing supply;

— direct the new National Regeneration and Development Agency to work with the relevant State agencies to designate Cathal Brugha Barracks in Rathmines, Dublin 6, and Broadstone Garage in Dublin 7 as the first locations and plan for them to be the first of the major cost rental housing developments;

— plan for the construction of 3,000 new homes at these two locations;

— design each cost rental scheme to target those individuals who are currently spending more than one-third of their total income on their current rental accommodation;

— also allocate a percentage of new housing for people on the local authority housing lists and in those cases facilitate the use of a suitable State support - for example, housing assistance payment - to allow them pay the same rent as other tenants;

— involve disability communities, such as Nimble Spaces, in each development so that it promotes an arts-led participatory design process, meets the needs of many different citizens, enables active citizenship and participation, encourages social inclusion and positive relationships, and incorporates smart design that is good for people and the environment; and

— immediately identify other publicly-owned sites that would suit the provision of cost rental schemes led by local authorities, approved housing bodies and housing co-operatives.

I am very glad to introduce this motion on the promotion of a form of cost-rental housing for our country for consideration and, I hope, agreement by the Dáil. The need for a change in our housing system has never been clearer. There are hundreds and thousands of families living in acute homelessness, more often than not because they can no longer afford private rented accommodation. The single greatest cause of homelessness, particularly for young families, is their being forced out of the private rented market. It is a fact that the supply of rental accommodation in particular is drying up. Only some 3,000 properties are advertised on *daft.ie*, this being the most common accurate measure of supply. It is a fact that rent prices, despite the attempts to introduce rent restrictions, continue to rise. In certain instances in the Dublin area, there have been dramatic rent increases of over 81% in the past seven or eight years.

More than anything else, we need to debate this matter because it is clear that Fine Gael's housing policy is not working and needs to change. It is also clear that we should be using this opportunity as we recover and emerge from an economic crash caused mainly by the nature of the property market and banking and lending systems in recent years. The case for change is so clear, and we do not want to and cannot go back to the system that got us into such trouble. However, I am afraid to say we have been looking, in the two years since it was formed, for the Government to grasp this opportunity of doing things differently. However, it is not happening. Fine Gael seems happy to stick with the *status quo*, to rely on the market and to promote developers as the solution to the problem. This is both a terrible failing and a terrible mistake.

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I am very glad to see the Minister of State, Deputy English, for whom I have high regard, present. However, the absence of the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, speaks volumes about the importance Fine Gael attaches to this housing crisis. The Minister is no doubt attending a further meeting of the national emergency co-ordination group in the wake of the recent storm and snow but he could and should have taken time to attend this debate and outline some of his own views. In the constituency I share with the Minister, people are in acute difficulty all the time because of this housing crisis, not just because there is a storm or snow but also as a result of the fact that they cannot find a place to live and cannot afford the rental accommodation that applies. They deserve the respect of the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and his attendance in the Dáil to address a motion on the subject of housing pure and simple.

I fear we are going back to the same form of housing supply model that got us into trouble and that we are in a numbers game. The Minister and the Government seem to be saying that if only they can get the numbers up the market will sort this out. That is a fatal mistake. The housing market is not a perfect market and never should be. It has different characteristics and different variables and will never work with a reliance on market-based solutions to deliver the housing needs for our people. However, this is what we see this Government doing, emphasising all the time a loosening of regulations, providing tax breaks, easing the planning system to try to get a construction and development industry working, then thinking that by building those numbers of houses we will find a way out of the problem. That will not work. It will only bring us back to the property market that got us into the trouble. It will only increase competition between developers and pump up construction and land prices, which, ultimately, will be shouldered by the Irish people, who must pay the higher rents and property prices we see returning. We must avoid that.

I welcome the fact that there are proposals in Rebuilding Ireland and elsewhere for the building of social housing. It has taken far too long for us to build up that capability, but a second message we have today, and the reason for this motion, is to recognise that while this social housing is urgently needed and very welcome, on its own it will not address or change the nature of our housing market. Part of the problem we had in our housing market was this very divided, dualist system, with one half a social housing model with very specific rules, differential rents and all sorts of inequities of its own and, on the other side, the private market. We believe, even if we do build a larger number of houses in the social housing market, which we do need, that this will not address the huge problem of affordability that is particularly occurring in the rental sector.

I have listened in recent weeks to such commentators as Ronan Lyons and Lorcan Sirr identify the fact that the private rented sector is the one in which the housing crisis is at its most acute. I do not believe either reliance on the market or social housing will tackle that problem. We need what the National Economic and Social Council, NESC, outlined in its 2014 report - which is almost four years old now - Social Housing at a Crossroads. We need to move towards a unitary system. NESC argued in that report with real cogent analysis and a good review of what is happening in other countries that the central response to the current housing crisis should be moved towards what is known as a cost-rental form of public housing. The need for this is clear because, particularly in the cities, where we have the highest pressure points in terms of the private rented market, there is, as I said, this incredible increase in rental costs, but we are also seeing a segregation occur. Dublin risks going the same route as San Francisco, another tech city that is similar to ours, whereby ghettos or enclaves are created in cities in which whole sections of society are no longer able to afford to live. As evidence of this, I cite

the fact that there are 1,000 apartments being built in the Dublin Docklands, but I am told that the vast majority of those are already committed and sold for use by people in the international companies which operate in the area. We cannot run a city or our housing market on this basis because we need accommodation for our nurses, doctors and teachers, people involved in care work and families who want to live in the city centre and grow up there and who have grown up there in the past. Therefore, we must provide a wider, balanced mix of housing and that is what cost-rental housing can do. It has to be low cost.

Cost rental means the rent covers the cost of the accommodation and the loan. It has to cover the full costs for reasons I will set out and, over the long-term lifetime, this has to be fully paid off through the rent, so it is cost rental. There are advantages to this, the first of which is that it allows us the prospect of being able to do such lending off-balance-sheet. Although this may not be easy, we can and should be able to argue and get it through EUROSTAT and the European Commission, and they will recognise that in those circumstances the full cost of construction and the loan that covers that construction is paid for over the lifetime of the rental agreement. I believe we can do this, and the advantage would be that we could avail of financing through downturns as well as booms and balance our construction activity over a longer period of time.

This is a long-term policy decision and it will take many decades for the real benefit to accrue, with the maturation of those assets as they stay in public ownership then being able to help other construction activity to take place. A virtuous circle would start to develop. It would take several decades outside the political timescale we are all involved in, but sometimes, particularly in the area of housing, we have to think long term.

Another reason we should not just focus on social housing is that there is a fundamental problem with our existing model, whereby the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, in all its grandeur, hands out a wad of cash to a local authority and pays upfront for the full amount of the construction of that housing. This gives the Department great power and control over local government, but it does not make financial sense. All financial advisers will tell us that where we have such a long-term investment and potential return, it is far better to match it with a long-term loan rather than doing it all in cash, as is the historical way we have done it.

It has to be low cost but it is very much part of the market. This low cost, cost-rental housing has to influence the private market and has to interact with it if we are to move away from that divided dualist system towards a more unified system. It would be the great prize and benefit from this step if we were to take it. I believe it is possible in a variety of ways to keep the costs down. Critically, we could apply public financing, which we can get at very low interest rates at present. This is probably the best and most significant way in which we can deliver a cheaper option than the private sector.

The Minister's amendment states that the Government is in discussions with the European Investment Bank, EIB. It is about time. The EIB came before the Committee on Budgetary Oversight and publicly stated one of its biggest problems in this country is that no one is looking to borrow from it. It does not have sufficient counterparties. We should be going to the EIB in this area for cost-rental funds and looking for loans of hundreds of millions of euro to invest immediately in this long-term housing solution, such is the scale and nature of our crisis. There are other places we could look for such long-term low cost finance, including pension funds, credit unions and the State's investment fund. It is critical. The one advantage we have and the

way we can bring the cost down is to make sure it is secure public lending financing where the interest rate is typically lower, which would affect the overall cost of the rent.

To keep costs down, this is targeted at State lands, be they with local authorities, State agencies or the State itself in whatever form. It is the 700 sites identified by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government as being potentially convertible for housing that we should use for the cost-rental model. We should, as the NESC report sets out, consider doing it in a way which helps keep the cost down by setting the land price at a level that helps us to do so.

We need to do this at scale to bring down the costs. The test runs that are not even up and running in Dún Laoghaire, Lusk and Sandyford, to which the Government refers in its response to the motion, are too small. This will only work to really bring the cost down if we think at scale. If a builder - not developers, because they would not be involved - local authority or approved housing body was able to build hundreds of units at a time, it would help bring down the costs and create new vibrant communities in the process. There are ways in which this can be done, but I see none of it happening.

Deputy Martin and I were involved briefly in the programme for Government negotiations, and I will be honest and say we were slightly aghast and removed ourselves. One of the main reasons was that the discussion we heard with regard to housing was all about the market. This was very out-of-date in terms of really getting the market humming here as a solution to this problem. Nothing I have seen since has changed my mind in this regard. We need to step up our game and start providing cost rental at scale. There is nothing in Rebuilding Ireland, the national planning framework or the new national capital plan. The Taoiseach briefly mentioned it just before the plan was launched, stating he would have a major announcement in the Dáil on cost rental on the day, but there was nothing about it. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government has not turned up today to discuss this motion, which speaks volumes in its own right.

Cost-rental housing is for everyone. It should be open to the entire market, and the best example of the model we have seen is in Vienna, where as far back as the mid-1920s it addressed its housing crisis by going in this direction. That housing became the most sought-after housing in Vienna, and it still is, and it has been a huge success. We are similar to Vienna. We are similar in size as a country to Austria. There is no reason we should not learn from that experience and apply the same model here. It has to be a model where it is opened up to a variety of people so it has the prize of bringing the whole market down because we have a lower-cost solution that does not have developers' profits priced into the cost of rental and has those other low-cost effects I mentioned.

The exact details of this would have to be worked out by the national regeneration and development agency, which I believe should have the task of leading this. It should target people on the social housing list, and if they cannot afford cost rent, they should get a subsidy similar to what we give through the housing assistance payment, HAP, or the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, to the private sector. If we want to target those in the private rental market currently paying more than 30% of their income, which is the definition of unaffordable housing, as a way of trying to address that specific sector, which is the pinch point of the housing crisis, we should go further. We have included in the motion that we should look at designing communities that are really integrated where we bring disabled people in and ask how can we make them part of a community that works for them as well as for everyone else. We need to think of

it as a cultural space and a part of a community and not just as housing units.

Our motion set two locations which we believe should be immediately targeted for the development and roll-out of this model. These are Cathal Brugha Barracks in Rathmines and Broadstone bus garage in Phibsborough. Other Members will ask why we have picked two Dublin sites. One of the reasons is that Dublin is where the rental crisis is at its most acute. The average rental costs in south Dublin city are 65% above what they are in Cork, 75% above what they are in Galway and 95% above what they are in Limerick. People in that area often live on the same wage as a teacher, nurse or garda or social welfare payment as someone in another city. We have a particular problem in Dublin that needs to be addressed.

The Labour Party has tabled an amendment, and I do not know whether it can adjust it at this late stage, but if there are alternative sites that people would argue we should consider, it would be a very welcome amendment and we could add them to the list. There are loads of places. We picked the two sites particularly because they are large and close to the centre. They are close to Luas lines, schools, shops, churches, swimming pools, libraries and all the services people need. It would be a real benefit for the State. They are in locations where people could walk to work and where there is a tradition of people renting and where, as I said, our crisis is most acute.

We have been in correspondence with various people from the Army who have asked us to hold on because it is showing disrespect to the armed services, but far from it. We have the highest regard for the Irish armed services and we believe they need the restoration of pay and conditions, which recognise the high regard they are held in by the people of the State. I do not believe this is happening under the current model. I do not believe it is happening given the number of people we have driving from around the country to do barracks duty in Dublin. We could do it in a better and more effective way for the Army, whereby we use McKee Barracks, Baldonnell, the Curragh and other resources, so we do not have soldiers moving around all the time and we base them and improve their conditions and resources.

The same applies in Broadstone. There was a very good report by Steers Davies Glieve in the transport expert review in November 2016. It advised that it would not be possible to renovate it, which is badly needed, and that there might be real gains from the use of other sites, probably not in the centre, or to amalgamate it with other bus sites. This would allow a much better service for Bus Éireann.

Those sites, given their scale and position, are the best sites we can see for rolling out cost rental at scale in a way that changes the nature of the market and changes the public perception of housing policy. Maybe in his contribution the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, will restore some faith that Government is really serious about cost rental. It says in the programme for Government that his Government is going to do it, but it has done nothing about it since. What is his solution? Will the Government resort to a form of affordable housing or affordable rental whereby it continues to subsidise the private rental market? This does not address the problem. It does not stop the ever-escalating rates, it actually drives them upwards. It costs a fortune. That approach to affordable rental accommodation cost us €535 million last year.

Will the Government go with affordable purchase as the only solution? I do not think that is appropriate and right. We need to start respecting people who rent. We need to give them a fair rent, a sense of security of tenure, a sense of community and a sense of being central to

our housing strategy. I do not get that sense from Fine Gael. I think Fine Gael thinks buying property is the purpose of life and helping people do that is what a good housing policy is about. That is out of date. It is not serving us, it is expensive and it will cost us more in the long run.

I ask the Minister of State and other parties to use this occasion. I know we have a debate the week after next on affordable housing. We need to understand what this cost rental model is, because it is a fundamental piece in the jigsaw of developing an alternative housing market. It is not easy to understand because it is different from anything we have done before, but I believe it is the way forward for this country, this city and indeed each of the cities, particularly where the rental housing crisis is at its worst.

We very much appreciate the support, online and elsewhere, of Threshold, the Nevin Economic Research Institute, NERI, the housing association Respond!, Social Justice Ireland and others. Everyone with a keen interest and a keen eye on what is happening in the property sector is saying to us privately that cost-rental has to be a big part of the solution: everyone except, it seems, Fine Gael.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I move amendment No. 2:

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

“notes that:

— the Government reaffirms its commitment, in the Programme for a Partnership Government, to develop an affordable cost rental option for low-income families, to help keep rental costs manageable for tenants and allow them to avoid future rental market increase shocks;

— the Government’s ambition is to make cost/affordable rental a major part of the Irish housing system, with rents set at levels to cover construction costs and the management and administration of developments, but with only a minimal retained

profit margin, this will be informed by pilot projects being progressed in Dublin at Enniskerry Road and Lusk;

— following the second Housing Summit on 22nd January, 2018, local authorities are now finalising an outline of their respective affordable housing programmes, from the State residential land bank of around 2,000 hectares, including cost rental proposals;

— detailed discussions are continuing with the European Investment Bank regarding the application of its international experiences in developing and supporting affordable housing to large-scale cost rental projects in Ireland;

— the finalisation of new ‘Build to Rent’ and ‘co-living’ planning guidelines to encourage development and investment in more rental accommodation at more affordable rents;

— as part of Project Ireland 2040, the Government’s commitment to establish a new National Regeneration and Development Agency, including consideration of how best to make State lands available, including suitable lands in the control and ownership of Government departments and State agencies, to the new body for, *inter alia*, affordable

residential development;

— a package of affordability measures was announced on 22nd January, 2018, with the potential to deliver more than 3,000 new homes initially and a target for at least 10,000 new affordable homes to buy and rent;

— the new measures are targeted at low- to moderate-income households, with annual gross income of up to €75,000 for dual income and €50,000 for single income households;

— a new Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan was made available from 1st February, 2018, providing long-term, fixed-rate mortgages for first-time buyers;

— a new Affordable Purchase Scheme will see affordable homes built initially on State land, in co-operation with local authorities, such as at the centrally located O'Devaney Gardens in Dublin city centre;

— the new €25 million Serviced Sites Fund will provide funding for local authorities to offer low-cost serviced sites to Approved Housing Bodies or housing co-operatives for the delivery of affordable homes to buy or rent;

— a second Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF), an infrastructural investment fund, will be launched in the first half of 2018 to facilitate the early development of housing lands and delivery of more affordable new homes;

— the Government, through its Rebuilding Ireland – Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness and arising from the focused Rebuilding Ireland review in recent months, has prioritised measures to stimulate housing supply at more affordable prices and rents;

— the Government's initial primary focus has been on delivering homes for households in the lowest income brackets, through the commitment of over €6 billion to deliver 50,000 new social housing homes by 2021, with qualifying households also able to

avail of the Housing Assistance Payment, the Rental Accommodation Scheme and other targeted programmes;

— over 25,000 households had their social housing needs met in 2017, an increase of 90 per cent on levels achieved in 2015;

— the Government has also implemented a suite of measures to facilitate increased residential construction activity and ensure the sector's capacity to produce more affordable homes, through, *inter alia*:

— fast-track planning reforms and more flexible planning guidelines;

— €200 million investment in enabling infrastructure to service/open up housing lands with proportionate affordability dividends for house purchasers;

— the development of large-scale mixed-tenure housing projects, with social, affordable and private housing, on publicly-owned lands; and

— the help-to-buy scheme to assist first-time buyers to meet their deposit requirements;

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— the Government has also introduced targeted and time-bound measures to limit excessive rent increases (e.g. through Rent Pressure Zones), and to provide further protections and effective support services to both tenants and landlords;

— in Budget 2018, the Government removed significant obstacles to building more homes more quickly, by:

— investing more in direct house-building by the State;

— removing the Capital Gains Tax incentive to hold on to residential land;

— escalating penalties for land hoarding; and

— providing a new, more affordable finance vehicle for builders through House Building Finance Ireland; and

— these measures are having a positive impact with all relevant indicators clearly showing that the supply-based measures under Rebuilding Ireland are working, e.g. over 17,500 new homes commenced construction during 2017, three times as many as in 2016.”.

I thank the Green Party for moving this motion and giving us a chance to have a debate on the very important topic of cost rental and affordable rental, an area in which the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, is very interested. The Minister sends his apologies. He spoke on this earlier today. He would like to have been here, but as Deputies know, he was very much at the centre of the National Emergency Co-Ordination Group, doing great work on behalf of the State along with all our agencies and Departments, trying to co-ordinate the recovery throughout the country. I think Deputies might recognise that. It is unfair to claim that he should be here. He cannot be in two places at the same time, and he did address this issue earlier today. As Deputy Ryan knows, when the Minister took office in July, he made it very clear that affordability was a key part of the work he wanted to do, along with developing social housing. I think Deputy Ryan knows he is committed to this.

We are willing to work with the Green Party on this area and were willing, as Deputy Ryan said, to form a Government. We would have loved for the Green Party to be a part of that. Deputy Ryan made a decision not to be part of that. That is his choice and Deputy Catherine Martin’s choice, but we were open to having everybody involved in this Government and we were very clear on that. We all share a commitment to tackling the shortage of housing, both social and affordable.

I acknowledge the assistance of everybody in this House in facilitating the work of the National Emergency Co-Ordination Group this week and for rearranging the various meetings, including at committee, which the Minister had been scheduled to attend. We appreciate that and everyone’s effort to ease the work we are doing in the Department. Storm Emma was a national weather event the like of which we have not experienced for more than 35 years. My Department continues to manage the recovery from it, which is still under way. Some counties are still very badly affected. That said, the Irish people have shown incredible resilience this week. Thanks to the efforts of our emergency response services, as well as community and volunteer groups throughout the country, most areas have returned to some sort of normality. There are some counties, including Wicklow, Wexford, Waterford, Kildare, parts of Tipperary, Galway, parts of Westmeath and Meath which are still under pressure, but we are getting there.

Deputy Joan Collins: Is there a written version of the Minister of State's remarks? He is speaking very quickly.

Deputy Damien English: I will slow down, but it is not our motion and we do not provide a copy in those circumstances. I understand that those are the rules of the House, but I can supply the Deputy with a copy.

During debates on housing over the past two years, it has always been said that it is an ideology issue with Fine Gael, or that we are against something. That is not the case. Every week the Minister and I have to say that it is not the case. We are committed to all forms of housing. There is a specific rental strategy; we are committed to cost rental, which is in the programme for Government, as Deputy Ryan pointed out. The Minister has worked very hard on cost rental and affordable projects. We keep saying we are very open to that and recognise that if we are to address the housing shortage, action must be across all forms of housing, including social, affordable, rental, private and purchase. There has to be a rental part of that. People choose to rent now. They want the choice it offers because of job commitments and so on. We are very much committed to that so I ask Deputy Ryan not to keep saying we are not. It does not help debate. It does not help us work together to find solutions.

We are not totally relying on the private sector. We recognise that we do have to rely on the private sector in the short term, as we develop our own social housing stock and develop plans for social and affordable housing. We have to work with the private sector and in some cases rely on it. However, we also recognise that through Rebuilding Ireland our duty is to bring back a sustainable construction sector. It is to tackle an emergency housing shortage and homelessness now, to get our local authorities back to building social housing and to bring the stock of houses back up. However, in the long term our duty is also to have a sustainable housing construction market. That is what Deputy Ryan's party wants and we want it too. Rebuilding Ireland commits to that for the first few years, while Project Ireland 2040 and the national planning framework set out the long-term vision of how to achieve it. Yes, these plans involve social housing and private housing, but they also address the way we manage our land and where we build houses for the future. Where do the next million people live? Where are the next 500,000 jobs going to be and the next 600,000 homes? We are trying to address those issues in a sustainable way. We are committed to those goals in the exact same way that Deputy Ryan is, so I call on him not to keep saying that Fine Gael is against something or that its members all think one way. We recognise that our job as a Government is to bring balance to housing across all the various sectors.

There is a lot of common ground between the thrust of the motion and the Government's objectives, actions and plans in the area of affordable housing and cost rental. In considering the overall objective, we can all agree that it must be to ensure that people can access affordable housing in every part of the country, in cities, villages, towns or rural areas. Deputy Ryan mentioned two Dublin sites, but as he said, this does not just concern Dublin. People have been critical when the Minister has referred to one or two cities. We recognise that housing has to be available throughout all of our cities and urban areas and we must make sure that people in rural Ireland can afford houses as well.

Cost rental is a commitment in A Programme for a Partnership Government and the Government is determined to make cost rental a major part of the housing system. We share that desire with Deputy Ryan and everybody else in this House. For that reason, we welcome the opportunity to set out what the Government has done and is doing: delivering social housing for

those with the greatest affordability challenge, making the housing more viable and affordable generally and making affordable housing available to buy and rent. All of this is happening under our five-year €6 billion programme, Rebuilding Ireland. We have tabled an amendment which we will be supporting but there is a lot of common ground in both of the motion and the amendment.

When it comes to social housing, after the economic downturn we simply had to help those who had the greatest need and faced the greatest affordability challenge. Affordability of houses was not the only issue. In some cases, people could get houses. I have often referred to the fact that in many places, rent was half the price it is today only two and a half years ago. As such affordability was not the whole issue. The first priority was to get social housing stock back up and to put our local authorities and housing bodies back in the business of building houses. They have stopped doing so due to previous decisions, not just because of the downturn. Many people had fallen into negative equity. The Government was committed and made the decision, along with the relevant Oireachtas committee, that we would increase the stock of social housing by 50,000 homes by 2021.

Everyone keeps referring to the figure of 50,000 homes. We are all on the same page where that target is concerned. Other parties want to do more with affordable and cost rental and so do we. However, there was a commitment across the parties in this House to provide a minimum of 50,000 social houses. Taxpayers' money has been committed to doing that.

Those on the social housing waiting list can also avail of the housing assistance payment, the rental accommodation scheme and other targeted programmes. There is now a very strong plan to accommodate everyone on the social housing list. Some €6 billion in funding for this has been securely ring-fenced by the Government and beyond that money has been committed to make sure that we get back to delivering 10,000 or 11,000 houses per year. In the first ten years of Project Ireland 2040, money has been committed to increase that to 12,000 social houses a year. We are committing to that in the long term. I have no doubt that most people in this House would agree to that as a minimum and want to do more. It is a fair commitment to have that money secured and it shows our commitment to dealing with the housing shortage across all the different sectors. Over the past 18 months, we have been ahead of target in many sectors. I emphasise, on behalf of the Minister, that while we are ahead of target, we accept it is not enough to deal with the current number of people who need a house. When we say we are making progress, we know it is not enough and that is why we want to constantly put more money into this to drive the agenda.

More than 25,000 households had their social housing needs met in 2017, an increase of 90% on the levels achieved in 2015. We are delivering social housing, although we also realise there are people who are not eligible for social housing and who struggle to afford to rent or buy a home. These people also need the support of the State. The Minister recognises this and made a very clear commitment upon his appointment last July that this is an area on which he wanted to focus.

Before we get into the type of supply we need, it is important to remember the challenge the Government faces in the context of Rebuilding Ireland relates to the residential construction sector. Housing construction had fallen by 90% and the Government had to take immediate remedial action to make residential construction viable again across all the various sectors. To achieve this, we introduced a dedicated €200 million infrastructure fund, provided access to development finance, for example, through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund and now

through Home Building Finance Ireland, which can provide competitive development loans for builders, and also introduced new departmental guidelines and streamlined planning. These actions and many others are rebuilding the residential construction sector. This is borne out by the data on residential construction commencements for the year to the end of January, which, at nearly 18,000, is up by 34%, a one third increase on last year. We expect to see a minimum of 20,000 houses built this year across all the various forms of supply, and the sector itself estimates it might get about 23,000 houses, some 8,000 of which will be social houses, or perhaps even more when short-term rentals are taken into account. We are beginning to make the progress we need to bring back sustainable housing across the sector.

As we continue to address supply, we must ensure that the new homes are affordable and accessible. To achieve this, the help-to-buy scheme is a great help to many in securing a deposit, with almost 5,000 approvals in 2017. It has helped to drive up the supply of starter homes, as the reports show. As a Government, we are doing more to guarantee housing affordability. The Minister announced on 22 January that we are initially doing this in three main ways: an affordable rental scheme, with cross-rental; a Rebuilding Ireland home loan; and an affordable purchase scheme. The measures are generally targeted at households with low to moderate incomes, with a maximum of €50,000 for a single applicant or €75,000 for joint applicants. From the affordable rental and the affordable purchase schemes alone, we are targeting 3,000 houses in the first phase, with an ambition for over 10,000.

The Government is determined to make affordable or cost rental a major part of the Irish housing system. Such housing will be-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Excuse me. To follow on from Deputy Joan Collins' earlier question-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We have asked for the script.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is fine.

Deputy Damien English: I thought I had more time.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am afraid the Minister of State had just ten minutes and the time is up. Members will have the benefit of the script being circulated. I call Deputy Casey, who is sharing time with Deputies Curran, Cowen, Brassil and Murphy O'Mahony.

Deputy Pat Casey: I welcome and support this motion and I commend the Green Party and the Social Democrats on highlighting what I have long believed is a necessary model in addressing the worsening housing crisis. The housing crisis has consistently been getting worse according to all the evidence produced. Rents have been rising for over five years, supply in the rental market is abysmal and tenants are being broken on the back of unaffordable rents. Earlier, I checked the national property website. It shows that there are only 1,200 properties available to rent in Dublin, our capital city, which has over 1 million inhabitants. In my county, Wicklow, there are only 61 properties available for a population of over 142,000.

Since 2014, the cost-rental model has been endorsed by the NESC. The Government, however, has ignored this advice from the body of experts appointed to guide it in these matters. For four long years this advice has been ignored while the housing and rental sectors have spiralled out of control. This is a remarkable failure, by any standard.

The cost-rental model allows rental housing units to be provided on the basis of cost, not on the market forces that we all know are not functioning in this area of acute social need, an area where far too many of our people - our fellow citizens - are being denied access to the basic human right of a home. The Government has a duty to intervene for the common good. The cost-rental model has a number of advantages other than the immediate one of allowing rental homes to be provided strategically to our people at prices they can afford. The model provides the State with a key asset that can be accumulated to ensure that not only can we tackle the rental crisis where it is at its worst, but that we have a rental housing stock that can prevent future crises from occurring. The assets these units would provide on a permanent basis for the State would also allow financial leverage to secure additional funding for housing.

The cost-rental model for rental housing provided by State agencies, such as the Housing Agency, is, therefore, a win-win policy to tackle the lack of homes for our fellow citizens. Therefore, the timid, hands-off approach to this model beggars belief. The Minister and his party are not able to see the bigger picture that a responsible Government must see. The market is not going to provide a solution without State action. The State has a duty here and Fine Gael's ideological objection to permanent State action in the area of housing is no longer credible. The introduction of a strong, strategically placed and nationally managed cost-rental model of housing is an ideal job for the national housing agency proposed by our party. This agency could be used as an additional source of housing as part of a full portfolio of measures, from rental to affordable and social, and then to a healthy private market in order to create a holistic, modern, sustainable housing system for the people of 21st century Ireland.

We can still do this. We can work on a cross-party basis to get this model moving and established. We should establish it in Dublin initially but, in my view, this model should be in every major urban centre in Ireland. I welcome that the Minister eventually took action in regard to the short-term letting platforms such as Airbnb. I was the first politician to raise this anomaly in the Dublin market at national level nearly two years ago but only now are there statements on Government action. I urge the Minister to accept our Bill rather than delaying further by the production of his own. We need to co-operate more when we are in agreement - that is responsible leadership at national political level. We are in agreement on Airbnb and we are in agreement on the cost-rental model of housing. We can act quickly and with purpose for the sake of our people, who so badly need an affordable home, so let us do it.

Deputy John Curran: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. It is an issue that has crossed my desk on a number of occasions. As the House is aware we have seen the rental market, particularly in Dublin, increase very significantly for 22 consecutive quarters, with double-digit annual increases for most years. The situation has become unsustainable. Part of the reason we have the private rented sector, as the Minister of State clearly understands, is due to the deficit in social housing. On the other side, we have people living in private rented accommodation who have incomes and who would like to buy, but who, because of the high rents they are paying, will never break that cycle.

As Deputy Casey said, we must recognise the impact Airbnb is having on the rental market, particularly in the Dublin area. There is a certain irony when we think that properties that should be let to families on longer-term lets are being rented to tourists, and that those people who should be staying in them are probably staying in bed and breakfast establishments, hotels and other types of accommodation. It is an issue that needs to be urgently addressed.

The issue of the cost rental model has been around for some time. The Committee on Hous-

ing and Homelessness, which was formed before the Government was formed, has looked at this issue. Just today I reflected on the findings of the committee. It stated:

There appears to be relatively broad consensus on the need for some form of an affordable rent model to provide long-term affordable residential accommodation for low to moderate income key-worker households in urban areas of high demand.

We also noted the comments of Professor P.J. Drudy, who recommended that a cost rental model of housing be established. Threshold and the Irish Council for Social Housing all acknowledged this, and it was clearly laid out in the report. When the programme for Government was adopted, and it was also reflected in Rebuilding Ireland, there was some sense of encouragement that this was a positive step that needed to be developed. We were well aware of the issues around it, in particular the issues concerning off-balance sheet activity, the special purpose vehicle and the piece of research that needed to be done to give effect to what had long been acknowledged as necessary. Action 4.6 of Rebuilding Ireland refers to this and states, “We will introduce a new affordable rental scheme to enhance the capacity of the private rented sector”.

The initial timeline for that was the third quarter of 2016. In the action plan status report for 2017, the goal posts moved, delivering the same action but stating the Government had not made the kind of progress it had intended to make, delivering cost rental will be an important part of the overall solution, etc. We all agree this needs to be done and when Rebuilding Ireland was published, I said that we would support it and that its implementation was key. The Government has not lived up to expectations in the cost-rental sector and has not delivered in the timely fashion we expected.

Rebuilding Ireland is more than 18 months old. We have been encouraging the Government every step of the way to engage in the process. In a recent reply to a parliamentary question, however, the Minister stated:

In terms of broader research and discussions on developing a cost rental model as part of an evolving and more sustainable rental sector in Ireland, I plan to form an Expert Group to examine the issues and provide advice on the most appropriate way forward. I am currently considering the terms of reference, formation and composition of the Group with a view to establishing it later this quarter.

This should have been done a year ago or more. We are behind the curve. The Government spoke about this in 2015. The Committee on Housing and Homelessness spoke about it in 2016. Rebuilding Ireland spoke of it in 2016. It is in the status report for 2017 and here we are in 2018 about to establish a committee. We all recognise it is a job that needs to be done. We recognise the technical complexities in off-balance sheet development but it is truly important and possible to do. The Government has fallen way off the target line to be effective. We all knew the different projects in Rebuilding Ireland would take different periods but we expected that a group to draw up a clear roadmap for a cost rental sector would have been established much sooner.

Deputy John Brassil: The model for the money made available to housing associations to build houses is based on the average rental values in counties. While that works quite well in Dublin and Cork, where rents are high, in counties such as my native County Kerry, housing associations are offered between €180,000 and €190,000 to build a three-bedroom house. They

cannot do it for that money. We are trying to get programmes and proposals off the ground and associations such as Clúid and Respond! will not do it. The associated costs of development levies, water charges and Part V contributions amount to between €15,000 and €20,000. There are also the site development and ancillary costs, which make developing houses at that price unviable. The Department does allow an independent quantity surveyor to make an assessment and do a cost analysis, allowing a fair mark-up for the developer to build on that basis. That should be promoted in rural counties such as Kerry. For a housing association to come in and build houses it would need an average of €210,000 per house. That is what is needed to get projects off the ground. It happens in counties Cork and Dublin but we need to drive it on in rural counties. The Minister needs to consider that seriously to get supply under control.

Ruthless landlords are letting substandard properties. A family came to my clinic yesterday who had spent the entire week of the bad weather in one room in their house because it was the only one they could heat. It was pointless trying to heat the rest of the house because either the heating did not work or if it did, the house was so old and draughty that it was a pointless exercise. All houses should have a building energy rating, BER, certificate. State money is being given to landlords through the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, and the housing assistance payment, HAP, or rent allowance. Landlords are getting money from the State to provide proper accommodation but that is not checked. The local authorities and Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection do not send out inspectors. Ruthless landlords are getting away with unacceptable practice. Most landlords do a very good job and I do not see why they should have to uphold standards while others get away with not doing that. Will the Minister of State make sure that local authorities send out inspectors where good State money is being paid? The Minister of State should look closely at those two issues, namely, supply and an acceptable standard in rented houses.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I am happy to say a few words on this crisis and to support in principle the Private Members' motion introduced by the Green Party. There is no doubt that the rental crisis threatens to hollow out communities, villages and towns and is putting households under severe strain. The Government should cease its delays on cost-rental models and put in place a broader strategy to address the rental crisis. Many people ask why can we not consider the Scandinavian and German models. The main difference between those models and ours is that tenants in those countries have rent certainty and surety. They also have tenure. People there know that if they are happy with the home they are renting, they have the opportunity to stay there for a long time. While I accept that the private market cannot be controlled, the Government could do more to support the tenants. I do not suggest that we should be anti-landlord because we need them in the current system in which the local authorities are not addressing the crisis by building houses.

Banks need to be brought into the debate. This morning, a constituent contacted me. He is a young man whose partner sadly died last year and he has three small children. The local authority is paying HAP for his house. HAP can be a good system but in this case, the banks are taking the property from the landlord and the tenant has three weeks to leave the house. Surely we can find a better system than one in which a bank will take back a property that will possibly be boarded up, leaving a young man and his three very young children trying to find alternative accommodation, which is practically non-existent in Kildare at present.

At present, 325,000 households are renting private accommodation. The current system mitigates against both those who are renting privately and those who rent through the local authority. We need something that supports both elements of the market. Dare I say we also

need a system that takes on board what a couple or single person is paying out in rent for credit approval from a bank or financial institution when buying their own property? The data from the fourth quarter of 2017 show that rents have risen for 22 consecutive quarters. This upswing has not only lasted significantly longer than the preceding downturn but also longer than the upswing before that downturn, which lasted from mid-2004 until early 2008. There have been huge delays in addressing this issue. We need immediate action.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I am disappointed with the Government's counter-motion. I support the motion but I do not support the designation of sites, as I believe that is a matter for Government in the context of Rebuilding Ireland, in which it is stated that together with local authorities the Government will source sites for this process. At the very least, I expected the Minister of State, Deputy English, to acknowledge the failure of the Government to meet the objective mentioned earlier by Deputy Curran. When Rebuilding Ireland was produced, we all acknowledged it contained many credible actions within it and we all hoped it would achieve its objective. Along with others, Fianna Fáil played its part in feeding into that process by way of the all-party committee, the recommendations of which were only partly taken on board by the Government. That said, it was always going to be about implementation and the action matching the rhetoric but, unfortunately, that has not proven to be the case. Far be it from me to go over old ground and talk about how this crisis has progressively worsened over the past months and years, but I had hoped that the Minister of State, Deputy English, would be man enough tonight to admit that the objective of Rebuilding Ireland has not been met. During the debate on budget 2015, the Government stated the proceeds from the sale of Bord Gáis Energy would yield €400 million and that that money would be used for this very purpose but that has not happened. It is incumbent on the Minister of State, Deputy English, to inform the House during this debate, and by association the public, why he has failed in this instance, why he has not identified sites or whose responsibility it was to identify them. Who is culpable and who is accountable? Where is the transparency we were promised?

I congratulate the Deputies who brought forward this motion, which is very specific in terms of how this issue is to be progressed. I agree with the concept proposed by them, as everybody does, including the Government, but it is incumbent on Government to show some humility now and then. In this instance, it needs to acknowledge its failings and tell us what went wrong and why it went wrong and to acknowledge the recommendations from all sides of the House to move this process forward. If the issue is delays in respect of the European Investment Bank, there are other concepts, models and funding methods that can be utilised without relying on that institution. There is a vehicle that could be put in place and would provide the 51% public finance such that we could meet the criteria in relation to EUROSTAT. The Government has gone only half way in terms of acknowledging the contribution that credit unions, among others, want to make. They can provide the necessary finance and the Minister of State can provide the land. This would result in minimal site costs and allow us to replicate the success of the Ó Cualann model in many parts of the city and, if needs be, many parts of the country.

As I said in this House last week when talking to the Minister, all sections of society and all of those affected by this crisis want an option that is affordable and meets their needs, irrespective of what level of the spectrum they are on.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: On behalf of Sinn Féin, I acknowledge the significant additional work of the staff of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, the local authorities, homeless charities, including the Peter McVerry Trust and Focus Ireland, as well as grassroots campaigners such as Inner City Helping Homeless over the past number of days.

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There is no doubt that as a result of that significant effort, we are not here speaking about the death of homeless people on our streets. It is important that we acknowledge that additional work and I ask that the Minister of State convey that to those staff.

I welcome the motion and Sinn Féin is happy to support it. For those who do not know what cost-rental housing is, it is not market priced housing but rental housing based on the cost of providing, financing, building and maintaining it. This allows for the provision of rental accommodation substantially below current market values and it ensures that the future cost of that rental is not tied to the fluctuations in the market, which provides for a real level of affordability. I welcome that within the motion there are some very specific targets. Unlike others, I believe the two sites mentioned are sensible sites but they should not be an exclusive list. The comments of Deputies Cowen and Jan O'Sullivan regarding other sites can be supported but we need to be in the business of mentioning specific sites and specific targets. Notwithstanding the Government's opposition to this motion, I urge it to examine those proposals and to discuss with the Deputies from the relevant constituencies future possibilities in that regard.

I listened carefully to the contribution of the Minister of State, Deputy English, and I have carefully read the counter-motion, the words of which do not match with the facts. The facts are very stark. We are now into the third year of this Government and not a single affordable housing unit to rent or purchase has been delivered through a Government scheme. The only affordable housing that exists was delivered through a scheme involving a housing co-operative and Dublin City Council, which in itself speaks volumes. At the same time, never has the need for affordable purchase and rental housing been greater not only for young couples, but for older couples, single people and a range of other people, including people like me who do not want to buy a home but would prefer to have long-term secure and affordable rental accommodation.

The State has access to land and access to capital through the Housing Finance Agency, Revenue funds, the Strategic Investment Fund and other sources, yet it is refusing to directly intervene to provide affordable rental or purchase units. There is a plethora of schemes in existence. Officials in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the local authorities are exceptionally busy administering an ever-growing number of complicated schemes that have yet to deliver any units. Among these schemes are the help-to-buy scheme, which is inflating house prices in the private market - the majority of people benefiting from this scheme did not need any assistance because they already had their deposits and private finance; the land initiatives, which are proving to be very slow and on at least one of those sites, if not more than one, no genuinely affordable units are likely to be delivered; and the local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, in respect of which again, in Dublin in particular, there is no guarantee of any units below €320,000. The Government has provided €25 million to local authorities to assist them in developing Ó Cualann-type projects but, again, no scheme in this regard has yet been put in place and there is no timeline for its delivery. In regard to the pilots which have been talked about for more than 18 months, not only will they not be ready until the end of this year or early next year, but the entry level rents, particularly in the Dún Laoghaire cost rental pilot, will be quite high. While such rents might become more affordable over time, there are genuine concerns in this regard. The home loan scheme is not available to people who are not first-time buyers, which particularly affects older couples and people close to pension age. Moreover, it only works if there is an affordable for sale at an affordable price and again, in many of the areas of high demand for affordable housing, they are not available. While the Government has claimed that the package of measures it announced a few weeks ago will deliver 3,000 affordable units in the short term and 10,000 over the lifetime of Rebuilding Ireland,

it cannot tell us where these units will be or what they will cost.

While the Minister of State, Deputy English, mentioned balance - he is absolutely right - more than €1 billion of taxpayers' money has been given to private developers via loans or grants, without any guarantee of affordability. The only direct investment by the State in the delivery of affordable homes is €25 million. That is the balance about which many of us are so concerned. My colleagues will speak about Sinn Féin's preferred options. We have put forward many proposals in terms of mixed tenure, affordable sale and affordable rental and we will continue to pursue them. Until such time as the Government starts to take this problem seriously and invests significantly in direct local authority mixed tenure, mixed income, social affordable purchase and rental housing, this problem will not be resolved.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Three years ago, at a committee meeting with the then Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, I mentioned that as house prices were rising, we were heading towards another bubble. The Minister responded with a wry smile and stated that house prices were not expensive enough, which was a shocking statement.

If one looks at the record of the Government so far, that is exactly what it has sought to do, namely, to increase house prices. Instead of taking action with regard to building houses, it has produced schemes such as the help-to-buy scheme. That scheme simply puts money
7 o'clock into the pockets of those who are chasing the limited supply, thus raising house prices. One can also see an over-dependence by the Government on the private market and the private rental scheme is another example of Government money chasing limited supply instead of being used to build houses. Obviously the very favourable tax deals done for real estate investment trusts, REITs, and vulture funds allow massive multinational firms to chase limited supply and push Irish first-time buyers out of the market. It is a clear part of Fine Gael policy that house prices increase.

I do not have much time left but wish to raise one more issue with the Minister of State, Deputy English. As he knows, our constituency has the shocking, infamous record of being one of the areas that has seen the highest increases in rents in the country, quarter after quarter and year after year. That is causing immeasurable hardship and putting enormous pressure on families. What is the Minister of State going to do about this? Why has Meath West not been included in the State's rent control zones?

Deputy Pat Buckley: First, I express my complete support and that of my party for this motion. Cost-rental has long been a pillar of Sinn Féin's proposed solutions to the housing crisis. Social housing is simply a recognition that the provision of this basic need is too important to be left to the whims of the private market. How much social housing a state is willing to build is indicative of that state's desire to meet the needs of its citizens. Clearly we have a gap in our country where the Government sees profit as being more important than the needs of its people. This is because the less a state cares, the more social housing becomes the preserve of the most vulnerable, mistreated and the poorest in our society. Social housing should be the preserve of people who want to live in a vibrant and grounded community and the mix that cost rental could provide would be crucial to this. Cost-rental is also necessary because increasingly, housing is not only expensive for average earners but unaffordable and becoming more so by the month. In my own area of east Cork, this is a major issue in areas outside of the rent pressure zones. Despite rising rents, it is unlikely that they will be able to become part of the scheme as the national average is continuing to rise year in, year out. The system is nonsensical and is not a serious policy on the part of the Government to tackle rising rents but is merely window dressing.

A number of months ago, a woman came to my constituency office and the amount of rent she was paying, while not insignificant, was affordable. However, she was facing a 70% increase in her rent because rents outside the pressure zones are not capped. The system is extremely weak and this must be addressed. The Government must act on the issue of rents. There is no justification for the current trends other than unbridled greed encouraged by the Government's apathy. There is also no justification for annual increases in rents but this is encouraged by the model of regulation adopted by this State. Rents were unaffordable for many three or four years ago. We need deep and immediate regulatory action to set this right. The Government must stop making excuses for itself and for landlords and do the right thing.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Jan O'Sullivan is next.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: May I move my party's amendment to the motion now?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, the Deputy cannot do that now because the Government has moved its amendment. Amendment No. 1 can be moved later.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Regardless of whether we move our amendment, my party fully supports what is being proposed by the Green Party this evening. We just have some doubts with regard to the specific locations that are identified in the motion. I will begin by talking about our support for the motion. There is a real opportunity here but that opportunity is being lost as time passes. The 700 or more publicly-owned sites, most of which are owned by local authorities, could be used to address and solve our housing crisis. The Government's amendment to the motion refers to a suite of measures, one of which is the "development of large-scale mixed-tenure housing projects, with social, affordable and private housing, on publicly-owned lands" but that is not happening. That may be the stated policy but it is not actually happening because it is being left to each local authority to work this out and the private element is winning out over the public element. I am really concerned that we have an opportunity here with these 700 publicly-owned sites which are ideal for that kind of mix of social, affordable and cost-rental accommodation but not for private, for-profit housing and that is the problem. I am concerned about the Government's amendment to the motion because we have heard a lot of talk and lots of schemes have been introduced, which are listed in the amendment, but we are not seeing any action. I am very worried that in using the local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, and in using public lands, an opportunity will be missed and that private developers will move in and make a profit instead of using their own lands, for which many have already been granted planning permission. It was estimated recently that there is enough zoned land to build 40,000 new homes in Ireland and 19,000 of those in the Dublin area. The private sector should be building on its own lands and the publicly-owned land should be used for social, affordable, cost rental models and a mix of same. We should not be allowing the private sector to come in, take the rich pickings and use the LIHAF scheme and publicly-owned lands to make a profit. They should be using their own sites to make their profits.

The aforementioned publicly-owned sites represent a real opportunity to address the current housing crisis and that opportunity must be grasped. The cost-rental model is the one proposed in the motion tonight and we fully support that as part of the solution. I will now outline the reasoning behind our proposed amendment. We proposed our amendment because the two particular sites that are identified in the motion are not local authority-owned sites. Cathal Brugha Barracks and Broadstone bus garage are used by other State agencies at the moment. While the Labour Party fully supports the concept that is being put forward, we believe that progress would be much quicker if the sites identified were local authority-owned. I understand that the

Green Party suggested these particular sites because it wanted to begin with projects of scale but this could be equally effective if we chose a bigger number of smaller publicly owned sites. Deputy Eamon Ryan has suggested that we might propose sites but I do not know Dublin as well as I know Limerick. I certainly know that the problem in Dublin is bigger than elsewhere. In Limerick, for example, there is a site known as the Guinness site, which is owned by the council. I understand from Labour Party councillors that local authority management will propose the sale of that site next week. The site, which is big, is publicly owned and would be perfect for a cost rental housing project. That is one site I know of in my own constituency, located on Carey's Road near the station. I know that site well but I suggest there must be similar sites in Dublin that could be used. I do not know whether there are already plans for O'Devaney Gardens but that is one possibility, although I have not researched it in depth.

The Labour Party supports the cost-rental model. Indeed, the Nevin Economic Research Institute has done some good work on it and the NESC has produced a report on same. Deputy Eamon Ryan referred to the Viennese model. The model in Vienna is excellent. People can live right in the centre of the city and can afford the rents. The tenure is mixed and it works really well. There are models that can be used and cost-rental is a very important element of the model that we should be seeing in action. I would also refer to the Ó Cualann model, which others have also mentioned. That is working on a publicly-owned site that the Ó Cualann cohousing alliance got for €1,000 per unit. There are certain elements of the normal cost of sites that the alliance did not have to pay for but it is able to provide housing at affordable prices in Dublin.

A conference was organised recently by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, at which Mel Reynolds, an expert in this area, spoke. He said that 35% of the cost of any housing development is land and profit. A cost-rental model on State-owned land should be able to eliminate that 35% and that is where we need to be going with this. We need to grasp the opportunity that is there now. Local authorities all over the country are looking to figure out how they can comply with the Government's policy of using those sites for mixed tenure development. Each local authority has to develop its own proposal for each of its sites, however. A State model that kept out the private profit element really could supply housing for those on social housing lists and also for the growing number who are in the in-between category. They do not qualify for social housing, cannot get a mortgage, are facing rent increases continuously put upon them and are really worried about their future. A cost-rental model and affordable purchase and rental schemes are the only way we are going to address their needs.

I support the two previous Deputies who spoke about rent pressure zones. I also live in an area that is not included in rent pressure zones. They are not working for very large tracts of the country that are either just outside the zones or not in them at all and in which rents are increasing at the same kind of pace as they are within the zones. It is simply because of the model that is used that they are not included. That legislation is over a year old now and needs to be reviewed. We need to go back and look at better ways of protecting tenants from rent hikes that put them in real fear. There are many households that are really worried about their current situation.

We support the overall thrust of the motion although we have tabled an amendment, which I am not sure will be accepted. We think it is a very positive motion but would have preferred if the sites that were chosen were actually ones owned by the local authority.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am sharing time with Deputy Mick Barry. I thank Deputy Eamon Ryan for bringing forward the motion. Any motion that seeks to address one important

aspect of this crisis, namely, people who are not eligible for council housing and are looking for rental accommodation, which cannot be and is not being delivered by the private market, is welcome. I certainly think we should look at the cost-rental option as one part of addressing this crisis.

Every time we are debating this issue for the next four or five weeks, I will repeat that the Government's continued reliance on the private sector means we need tens of thousands of people out on the streets on 7 April, when the national housing and homelessness coalition, with which many parties in this House are affiliated, is holding a demonstration. The trade unions and ICTU are backing the demonstration and we need people out on the streets. I do not just say that because I like demonstrations and want to criticise the Government.

The Government is still relying too much on the private sector. It says it is going to deliver 50,000 council houses. That is better than what it was talking about before. However, of the 133,000 social housing units the Government is talking about, which is in the region of what we need to deliver, some 83,000 are in the form of housing assistance payments, HAPs, the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, or leasing. Last year, according to the figures, there were 17,000 HAP solutions. Some 2,000 of those tenants are already being evicted. I got this information in a response to a parliamentary question recently. That is 15% facing eviction or whose tenancies are in trouble.

Last year's tenancies were the low-hanging fruit in terms of HAPs. It will be harder to get the rest of the HAP tenancies or to get the landlords; I do not think the Government will get anywhere near 83,000 HAP tenancies this year. Already I am dealing with people in HAP and RAS tenancies being evicted and having to go into hubs. The numbers are increasing. The majority pillar of the Government's plan, however well intentioned it might be, is not going to deliver. We have to look elsewhere, and that means the State has to do it because the private market is completely incapable of it. We need public housing on public land to answer this crisis.

I did not like the spin in *The Irish Times* today. I know Deputy Eamon Ryan did not write the headline, but the implication was that social housing is not going to deal with the rental crisis in the private market. I am sorry but that is incorrect. One of the reasons rents are going through the roof - it is not the only reason - is that huge numbers of people who would normally have got council housing, when we used to build it, are being told to go out and find stuff in the private sector. This is driving up rents. If we built the 100,000 council houses we need, we would drive down rents.

Nor do I like the spin, which perhaps Deputy Eamon Ryan did not mean to put into his article, that reinforces the stigma around social housing. If we want to get rid of the stigma around social housing, we should raise the eligibility criteria so that people on higher incomes can apply for it. Someone rang me today who is accepting €10,000 less in her salary than her employer is willing to pay her because she would be taken off the housing list if she accepted the pay increase. She could not get a mortgage and could not get affordable rental because there is no scheme from the Government on this, and she wants to stay on the housing list. How do we address that? The Green Party's proposals could be part of it but we should also raise the eligibility criteria. One way or another, the State has to build affordable housing. I believe council housing has to be the majority answer to the problem. In addition to that, there is a need for housing that is genuinely affordable to people.

Deputy Mick Barry: The motion contains some correct points about the scale of the hous-

ing crisis, the plight of renters and the under-utilisation of publicly-owned land. However, it also contains a glaring untruth and, in the final analysis, it is a retrograde policy. I will not be supporting the motion although I am not sure which way I will vote. The fifth point of the motion states: “the provision of new social housing, using differential rents, will not on its own address the housing crisis, as it will not affect rent and property price rises in the private sector.” This is simply wrong. The fact of the matter is that if we now had a multiple of our current housing stock and the promise of significant public house building to come, demand for private rental would clearly decrease and be catered for publicly. This would not just directly benefit those on the housing allocations list but would also indirectly benefit those not entitled to apply for public housing, who would not find themselves competing with prospective tenants availing of the HAP.

The motion makes the case for a cost-rental model. However, it fails to venture an estimate of what people availing of this option might end up paying in rent. The Government’s land initiative, which was announced in 2015, provided for pilot public private partnership, PPP, type development on local authority-owned land. On one of those sites, the Lawrence lands on Oscar Traynor Road, 20% of the privately owned units - if they are ever built - are to be rented on a cost recovery model. To date, no ballpark cost has been put in writing although figures like 80% of market rates have been bandied about at Dublin City Council meetings. This is clearly unacceptable. The motion makes cost the driver of rent. Cost is in turn a function of interest rates on the borrowings required to build homes. In this regard, the motion refers to low interest rates. However, global interest rates have been increasing steadily in recent months and look likely to continue to increase.

There is also an underlying assumption in the motion that the current eligibility limits for public housing remain in place. Why? It may seem counter-intuitive, given the size of the list and the long waiting times, but I put it to the Green Party Deputies that a better course of action couples a massive stepping up of public housing delivery with the raising of the eligibility criteria. With such a measure, we would achieve a number of things. Besides the obvious housing solutions, we would also help build communities with all strata of the working and middle class living together. If we maintained the differential rents, there would be a greater revenue stream for local authorities from the middle income earners eligible to avail of it. My colleague, Deputy Ruth Coppinger, in her minority report after her participation in the Committee on Housing and Homelessness, made the case for a progressive differential rent whereby the typical 10% to 15% of income level for existing tenants would apply, while a higher rate of around 20% could be levelled for those with higher incomes.

These measures, coupled with a real affordable housing policy, a ban on economic evictions and strict rent controls, are what is needed, not a policy that is really a Trojan horse for the undermining of public housing.

Deputy Joan Collins: I support the motion and I thank the Green Party for bringing it before Dáil. It gives us an opportunity to debate the question of the direction in which housing policy is going. I agree with what previous speakers said. Fine Gael has been in power since 2011 and all we have heard is regurgitated rebuilding programmes for housing when we are facing the worst housing crisis we have ever had. For every step the Government proposes, there is a tsunami of homelessness following behind. People are losing their rented accommodation and their homes. What has been suggested will not even catch up with the horrendous situation we are facing in housing.

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I am part of a campaign for public housing. Unite, other unions and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, as well as Deputies and councillors, are supporting it also. It puts forward a game-changing idea. The policy of Governments over the past decade has been to allow private developers to build houses for people. That policy is not working. It did not help in the past - people put themselves into huge debt - and it is not going to work in the future. The campaign for public housing is calling for a new system of universally accessible public housing. Under such a system, the State would use its full legal and financial powers to dramatically increase the pool of public housing through a major build and buy programme. The sell-off of public housing to tenants must also be ended to ensure the continuous increase of public housing as a percentage of the overall housing stock.

We had public housing in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Train drivers, Guinness workers, bus drivers and factory workers were the people who accessed public housing in that period. This was in the 1970s and 1980s, when there was a huge drugs crisis in our cities. Public housing was abandoned throughout Europe, and there was a change in how social housing was viewed. I know people who left local authority housing estates because of the difficulties they were having in raising their families in those areas. That was Government policy at the time. There is a stigma attached to social and public housing sometimes. Robust, strong public housing on public land, increased by 25% or 30%, would cut across the high rents that are now being charged by landlords because people would have access to secure and decent rented accommodation.

I was going to read through a few points about the social housing programme in Vienna. I suggest that the Government sits down and reads it.

Deputy Damien English: A delegation visited from Austria recently.

Deputy Joan Collins: The Government should read the full report. It makes many valuable points about public housing. In Austria, housing is seen as a public right and a human need, and that is how housing policy is approached. In the future, I would like to read about how it is addressed. It is clear that secure housing helps mental health and general health because people do not have to suffer from horrendous thoughts that they might lose their rental accommodation or their home because their rent is secure.

I received an email recently from a young woman in Drimnagh. She said:

I am emailing you to raise a really important issue for not only my family but for many others. I can only speak on behalf of my family and our current situation in relation to housing. Myself and my partner are currently residing in the Dublin 12 area with our two daughters, aged eight and five. Our daughters both attend an Educate Together primary school. We are currently renting and have been since 2007. We both work and have permanent positions. We work opposite shifts to accommodate childcare as we would not be able to afford childcare costs if we both worked at the same time. We have a joint income of €56,000 and are currently paying €1,050 in rent per month.

In the current climate that rent is very reasonable, but if they lost that accommodation, they would be looking at a rent of €1,500 or €1,600. She goes on to say, "We really would like to be able to buy our own property so that we have security". Families are really looking for security. They are not looking for a huge debt around their necks, but security. The email also states:

[We want security] for ourselves and more importantly for our children as renting is so precarious. However, to be able to get our own home we will need more than €20,000 for

a deposit. We are not able to save this amount of money [because we are] paying so much in rent. However, if we had a mortgage we would be paying the same, or less, in mortgage repayments. I saw the new initiative for first time buyers, which seemed great, but it does not identify the issue of being able to save for such a huge deposit. We have heard the Taoiseach's solution - to ask parents for a deposit - but unfortunately our parents do not have that type of money.

These are the people who need public housing on public lands. We have St. Michael's Estate and O'Devaney Gardens. There are many sites we could look at on the north side of the city. I agree that a critical amount of housing needs to be built to make this operable and to ensure that it is a success. I believe this is the way we have to go. It would cut across the crisis that people are facing in rental housing at the moment. People who do not have mortgage-to-rent arrangements should come under that public housing umbrella as well. There is also the idea that people who are on low incomes could have the HAP to subsidise their rent under the cost rent model.

Deputy Michael Harty: I thank the Social Democrats and the Green Party for bringing this motion forward. I will be supporting it.

Our housing crisis is obviously getting worse in view of the fact that rents are increasing, as is the number of people in emergency accommodation. The over-reliance on the private sector to solve the problem is a mistake. State intervention is urgently required and the Government has to rise out of its ideological commitment to allowing market forces to solve this problem. The State and society has to supply housing in the future. Until now, there has been a general political consensus in many continental European countries that society should be responsible for housing supply and that housing is a basic need which should not be subject to free market forces. Society should ensure that a sufficient number of dwellings are available.

A young teacher, a garda or a nurse should have a reasonable expectation of being able to acquire good, decent quality accommodation at affordable prices but, unlike their parents, fewer and fewer of these people are able to afford houses. A cultural change has overcome Ireland. As a result, ownership is going to have to be replaced by an affordable rental model. We have to be open to new ideas and a different model of doing things. The European cost rental public housing model is not new. It is widely successful across many European cities. It is new to us, however, and we have to embrace that change. Our tradition of adherence to private sector and social housing has to have a third component to it, and that is cost rental housing. We need to change.

Explaining how this can be done will take a great deal of work. I would like to hear some further information about how the model will work. Who will build the rental accommodation? From here will the money for it come? Most importantly, how will it benefit people in search of a home, apart from the lower costs involved? We have to have a culturally inclusive form of housing that is community oriented and includes developments which are attractive to live in and properties which can be rented at affordable prices.

This is an urban solution to our housing crisis. In the context of scale, it will not solve the problem for smaller towns and cities that require housing. It is an urban solution and it should be embraced.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on this matter for a

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couple of minutes. I thank the Green Party and the Social Democrats for bringing the motion forward.

Increasing supply is the key to getting us out of the rut we are in. I do not agree with people who say that it should be the responsibility of only the local authority or the public sector to build houses. The private sector has a role to play as well and it should be supported in that. Everything has been thrown at the sector. It is difficult to get planning permission or finance. Its margins have been cut and it is regulated extensively. These issues should be looked at so that the sector has a level playing field. The tendering system is slowing down the building of houses for local authorities. It was much better before as they had a list system where they had their own builders who built so many houses. It seemed to happen a lot faster. We have a lot more equipment now. We have more diggers and teleports and different types of scaffolding, so no one can understand why it is taking so long to build so few houses.

On the cost of rent, this week has been terrible for those living in my neck of the woods. Girls with two and three children were bawling crying because they must leave their houses as they are being sold. They do not know where they will go. One girl, who has split up with her partner, has not seen her daughter for a number of weeks because she is in bed and breakfast accommodation and cannot get social housing to bring her little girl to visit her. It would drive one down to the ground to hear them crying and upset. Life is short and the least people deserve is a home.

Rents have increased to €1,200 and €1,400 per month in Killarney. This week, one girl was quoted €2,000 per month for a house in a certain part of the surrounds of Killarney. People just cannot afford those rents. They are in receipt of social welfare such as lone parent's allowance and whatever other little bits they get. The cap on the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme in Kerry is €575. People are therefore in a desperate state. Tenants should be asked to pay so much but, if the Government wants to reduce the rent, the tax that landlords pay on the rent received for houses should be reduced across the board. I have said it in the House a few times before. It might get things moving a bit.

I apologise to Deputy Mattie McGrath for taking some of his time.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá agus ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an gComhaontas Glas. I am delighted to be able to speak here tonight on the motion but I am tired of speaking on such motions, even if it is a very good one. This is because of the inaction of the Government and the inability of this Government, the last one and, to some extent, the one before it to build houses and supply a housing stock. It was a normal thing to build council houses and I do not know what is wrong that the Government cannot build them now. I do not know what planet the Taoiseach is on. Today, he said that Deputy Martin was here longer than most people expected to live. If that is the life expectancy those in the Government have, God help us all. Is that the way the Government is gone now? To hell with the people - let them live in boxes, give them shovels and let them live by the seaside, fall into the sea and go away with the tide. It is madness.

I have asked the Minister of State countless times to bring up the county managers and housing directors to sit down with him and say who is coddling whom. Millions are announced for this and that but nothing is built, never mind anything else. Not all landlords can be demonised. They are not all bad. There are very good ones out there too. We need a rental market. We also need more voluntary housing units. Those groups can build them. I am involved in one of

them. The Ceann Comhairle is gone but I was tempted to say while he was here that there is a fabulous building - an old convent - in Naas. It has up to 100 units in the complex. The people in the voluntary sector will have to do it because the Government, with all its advisers and spin, cannot do it. As Deputy Healy-Rae said, despite all the cranes and everything else, the Government is just not building. It is coddling the people. It is not rocket science. Get those people into the rooms here and see who is coddling whom. Money is being announced but nothing is built. They are saying they have not got the money and the Government is saying it gave it to them. The people know, however.

I think that there is a greater motive not to build houses for people and to have them in a situation of distress and the trauma that goes with it. The Government has a lot to answer for and a lot of questions will be asked in years and decades to come because it is an abysmal failure with regard to building dwelling houses for rent and otherwise.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I thank the Green Party for tabling tonight's motion. Whether renting or buying, the key issue facing anyone looking for secure housing today is affordability. This is the critical issue. Quite simply put, housing is not an affordable option for many, including those who are on relatively decent wages. For example, I have sent working people who are at risk of losing their homes to the Focus Ireland café. We would never have considered this possible. Everywhere we look, we will find people paying ever higher proportions of their income on rent or mortgage payments while being absolutely terrified of losing their home. Often it is more expensive to rent than to buy but in many cases people cannot get a mortgage. The figure of 35% of one's gross income is used as a benchmark when considering the maximum a person should be spending on his or her accommodation needs but people are going way beyond it and are denying themselves food and heat to compensate. It is a case of Hobson's choice.

To buy an ordinary home in Cork or Galway, one needs to be earning five times the average wage. It is eight times the average wage for homes in Dublin. Therefore, renting becomes the default option for so many people who simply cannot afford to buy. People are then paying huge rents and will never be in the position to be able to save in order to be in a position to get a mortgage to purchase a home, so the cycle continues. Those people are left to the mercy of the private rental sector, which is poorly regulated and subject to the whim of the markets.

Average rents have spiralled by almost 50% over the past four years. A test of any fair society is its capacity to house its people. This issue has been on the agenda every single solitary week since last September, yet we are back here again talking about housing in one guise or another. Despite all the fancy words and the so-called action plans, the only action is further entrenchment into the mindset of abdicating responsibility primarily to the private sector. It is clear that there is no security for those who rent and that buying a home is increasingly becoming a pipedream for many. This is simply not acceptable.

We must get out of the mindset of thinking of bricks and mortar as property. We must think of it as someone's home. If the mindset was different, the response would be different. While we in the Social Democrats support the cost-rental model proposed in tonight's motion, it is incumbent on us to note that, whatever model or solutions are employed, one of the key considerations must be to ensure a mix of tenure types so as not to end up with a concentration of one particular tenure type, or size of housing unit, in order to have communities that are sustainable. It is the only sure fire way to ensure healthy and sustainable communities and to ensure they are not transient. This should be the key objective of any housing policy.

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The Government must take immediate action to ensure long-term rent certainty. We in the Social Democrats have called for an immediate linking of rents to the consumer price index until there is sufficient housing to drive rents down. Even that is too late because prices are too high as it stands, however. We must free up as many of the 200,000 vacant properties throughout the country using mechanisms such as the vacant site levy. We must enforce that levy and make it punitive enough to count, but the budgetary measures do not achieve that as the levy is less than the rate of land inflation. Therefore, it is not having the desired effect. We need to drive down the cost of housing and bring ordinary homes within reach of ordinary incomes. Otherwise, we will have a mismatch where people will be demanding ever-increasing incomes because they need higher incomes to meet their basic housing needs.

We need a strong building sector but we have to reduce building costs, including finance costs. There may well be arguments relating to particular sites about which others have spoken. The Broadstone site would be a particularly great one given it is so close to the city and the Grangegorman campus. It is occupied by Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann at the moment, however. Doing things at scale would introduce more certainty. The building could be done to scale. The builders could come in and do pieces of the work. Alternatively, it can be done in a way that creates certainty. For instance, perhaps they would not have to go through planning permission individually. Across Europe and in many large American cities, long-term rentals are a vibrant and important part of the overall housing strategy. People happily rent knowing they have security of tenure, rent certainty and a place they can legitimately call home. They can put down roots and build sustainable communities, which is critical. The only reason we have failed to achieve such a rental sector in Ireland is because the Government has consistently taken a hands-off approach and allowed market considerations and landlord interests to dominate. A vibrant, affordable sector could benefit both landlords and tenants and should be encouraged, not avoided as it has been for so long. The cost-rental model provides a social mix and removes the profit motive from the supply of housing. It is a valuable model and it needs to be embraced in the context of mixed developments.

In the national planning framework, €11 billion was identified over ten years to build 112,000 houses. There are just over 100,000 people on the housing waiting list. If one assumes one does not have to make HAP payments, or provide long-term leasing and can apply all of that money to build 112,000 houses, they will still have to come in at €100,000 each. The Taoiseach was asked if it was build or provide because the terminology was obscure. It was “provide” and he said it was “build”. I would like to see where one can build houses for €100,000 each because that is the calculation. It does not divide up any other way.

The cost-rental model requires several different approaches. This is a valuable piece in addition, not instead of, local authority and private sector construction. The principal achievement must be to get to a point where people can afford a roof over their head, there is a degree of certainty, whether they rent or buy, and they can call the house where they live “home” rather than to have the roots they put down in the communities in which their children are going to school uprooted where a landlord wants a house back to sell on. Deputy Boyd Barrett referred earlier to the houses that are subject to HAP. There is not the same provision in that as there is in the rent assistance scheme where the local authority is obliged to find alternative accommodation if the landlord sells up. The worst of all worlds is the one in which people are moved to a transfer list, get a housing assistance payment but must find accommodation themselves if they are subject to eviction. We are starting to see this emerge as a problem. Deputy Boyd Barrett and I spoke about housing in the Dáil in 2012 and 2013 and it was a lonely place at that

time, which was just after the crash. Our areas may well be the first in which one sees this type of thing come through. It is starting to present as a problem and making even the HAP option a very precarious one. A specific consideration is required from that point of view.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): Housing access and affordability is a key topic and it is good that it has been debated and discussed here in the House this evening. It is a topic that every elected representative is confronted with almost every day of the week. The situations people are in as an overhang of the economic downturn can be very difficult. We all see it. The most challenged are those on the lowest incomes and in need of social housing. As such, the Government was right to put a major emphasis on this area first. More broadly, measures to get housing construction moving again under Rebuilding Ireland are starting to work. As housing supply increases, the entire Oireachtas can agree that ensuring access and affordability is an absolute priority for housing into the future.

Cost-rental is a model that is relatively new to Ireland but which I understand works very well in other European countries. The best way to introduce anything new is to learn from best practice and to produce really good pathfinder projects. The best place to do this is on a ready-to-go local authority housing site, not on a fully utilised key military base. However, from the debate tonight it appears that, overall, there is lot of agreement about the need for a cost-rental sector in Ireland's cities. The Minister is progressing two initial cost-rental projects and is working on another major cost-rental project drawing on expert support from the European Investment Bank. This is precisely the right way to go about it in my view.

I turn to the Government's record. Every study shows that the poorest in society suffer the most in a deep recession. This Government is absolutely delivering for the most marginalised in society. We are increasing social housing stock by a third, or 50,000 new homes, by 2021. With the housing assistance payment, the rental accommodation scheme and other targeted programmes, we have a fully funded €6 billion euro plan to accommodate the entire social housing list. With the needs of over 25,000 met in 2017, we have made great inroads and we are delivering on social housing. Through targeted interventions under Rebuilding Ireland in infrastructure, planning, financing, etc., the Government has also resuscitated the residential construction sector. I am heartened and optimistic when I see that, at 18,000, commencements are up by over a third. Again, we have all seen how the sector and the people that worked in it were devastated by the collapse. Rebuilding that sector is an absolute priority and we are making real, tangible, measurable progress here.

The focus now has to be on making sure new housing is accessible and affordable. The actions the Government will progress this through include the help-to-buy scheme, the affordable rental or cost-rental model, the Rebuilding Ireland home loan and an affordable purchase scheme. Taken together, these initiatives provide real help with securing a deposit for first-time buyers; affordable and predictable rental options for the many people who want or need to rent for a short time or longer depending on their circumstances; access to new and second homes through the very attractive new local authority loan; and affordable homes on mixed tenure local authority sites to make homeownership a realistic option for a generation of people for the first time.

These are real actions that this Government is taking now and which will deliver. Already, the help-to-buy scheme has been very successful in helping 5,000 first-time buyers. Dublin City Council is at a very advanced stage of procurement for O'Devaney Gardens, including

20% affordable purchase. The cost-rental model the Minister is working on with the Dublin local authorities and the EIB is important and interesting. The bank provides access to finance but almost more important is the access to a repository of learning on what works in affordable housing and cost-rental projects. I am really looking forward to seeing this project progressed and I support the Minister fully in what he is doing here. I want to see similar projects pursued in cities like Cork.

Another key issue I want to touch on briefly is land, in particular State land. We need to see optimum delivery from the State landbank, particularly the 700 local authority sites. Local authorities are working very hard on this and there are exciting projects coming forward on major sites in our cities like O'Devaney Gardens. The new national regeneration and development agency announced under Project 2040 will also be a great help in getting the most out of our State land. This is a major priority for the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. Some sites may need infrastructural investment and, as such, I welcome the €25 million in funding the Government has set aside to provide infrastructure for local authority sites which need it to deliver affordable housing.

While we may not agree on all the finer details, there is broad consensus regarding the need to ensure that, as housing supply continues to increase and accelerate, it is accessible and affordable, particularly in our cities. Cost rental will play a major role in this but it will take time and we must get it right. That does not mean asking the Defence Forces to leave a key base. It is much better to bring forward realistic projects that have a strong chance of success in the short to medium term from ready to go sites in Dublin and other cities. That is exactly what the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, is doing, working with industry experts, including the EIB. The Government is making very strong progress on housing and plans to do even more to ensure that as supply increases, we deliver access and affordability.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I am sharing my time with Deputy Eamon Ryan. We have still not received a copy of the Minister of State's speech even though many Members requested it at the beginning of the debate.

Once again we debate in this Dáil this Government's most tragic failure - its ongoing inability to deal with an unprecedented housing and homelessness crisis. There are today more than 9,000 people homeless in the State. More than 3,000 of those are children. The numbers suffering on our streets and in emergency accommodation are only going up. The Government, in its isolated wisdom, feels it can tackle the crisis by, among other revolutionary, ground-breaking initiatives, granting tax breaks to developers and paying hundreds of millions of euro to private landlords in rent assistance without requiring fair fixity of tenure for tenants, let alone improving rental living standards and conditions. Where is the equity in all this? These initiatives are not working. It is certainly the definition of futility that the Government continually adopts the same methods and narrow-minded approach time and again to fix the crisis as the numbers of individuals, families and children who become homeless continue to grow. The Government simply does not have the vision or strategy to deal with this crisis. Every day, more people are suffering as a consequence. The Government's approach is not working. We need immediate, effective action. We need new ideas and new thinking outside the box, and then we need to implement the new proposals, not the same old, same old.

The Green Party motion calls on the Government to tackle one of the foremost and fundamental challenges associated with our housing crisis, housing supply, by taking the responsibility to build more houses into its own hands. The motion provides a clear and practical model

for doing so, one that is used in many other European countries. The State needs public rental housing stock of its own to ward off the problems that the private-market, subsidies-oriented approach brings with it. Public cost-rental housing provides security of tenure and affordable rents for tenants of all incomes. We can build these houses off-balance sheet, borrowing against future rental income. This is an investment in our future, our children and our children's families.

The 34 acres of land at the site of the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum, which is in my constituency, Dublin Rathdown, will be perfect for an affordable, State-owned, cost-rental alternative for families who are priced out of the areas in which they grew up. This is once the facility is relocated to Portrane. House prices in my constituency have doubled in the past six years. We are identifying effective, identifiable and practical steps that the Government needs to take. I urge every Deputy in the House to support our motion. I urge the Government to take these ideas to heart and do so with the appropriately extreme sense of urgency needed.

Mar a léirigh mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Eamon Ryan, roimhe seo, táimid ag moladh sa rún seo go dtógfar tithe agus árasáin d'ardchaighdeán ar thalún an Stáit ionas go mbeidh daoine in ann cíós réasúnta réalaióch a íoc le haghaidh a gcuid lóistín. Tá a macasamhail á dhéanamh faoi láthair sa Danmhairg, san Ostair agus san Ollainn. Níl fáth ar bith nach féidir linn é seo a dhéanamh in Éirinn. If the Government is truly honest about this issue, it will admit that its approach is not working. It has been adopting it for seven years and it is not working.

I appreciate that the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, has not been in his portfolio for seven years but the Government has. The approach has not been markedly different since the Minister took office. Therefore, in order to make progress on and ultimately resolve the problem once and for all, the Government must first wake up, be very candid and accept its approach is not working. The statistics speak for themselves. For how much longer, over a prolonged period, must the Government insist upon continuing to implement failed policy - a tried, tested and failed policy? This is not a vanity project and it is not about who is right or wrong. The overarching concern - the only concern - is to tackle this unprecedented crisis head on.

The National Economic and Social Council is recommending the cost-rental approach. The Nevin Economic Research Institute is recommending this approach. Social Justice Ireland is recommending this approach. Will the Government admit a new approach is needed, follow the experts, take on board the view of the stakeholders and abandon, here and now, not just a failing policy, but also a failed response? All the Deputies in this House want a constructive solution to our housing crisis. For that to happen, the Government first needs to realise it must change its approach. It needs to change its way of thinking. Our cost-rental motion is a start in that regard. I urge every Deputy to support it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: What we are hearing from the Government is that it wants to build social housing and carry out some pilot cost-rental projects at a small scale before doing what we require. Nobody is saying cost-rental housing is not a good idea. Everyone I have heard in this debate has said it is. Therefore, the difference of opinion concerns the sense of scale and urgency.

In response to Deputies Barry, Boyd Barrett and others, I agree we need social housing. It will help in lowering rents if we build it at scale, change the terms of entry and do as suggested but it is not enough on its own. We need to complement social housing with cost-rental housing because, rather than undermining the public housing approach, about which Deputy Barry

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is concerned, it actually makes the case for public housing. It makes the case for more mixed development and a different way of doing things.

We need to proceed quickly, for a number of reasons. The first is the scale of the crisis. Second, there will be no access to cheap money relatively soon. Therefore, we need to get in there, think big and be quick. If we proceed by testing pilot projects, it will take us five, six or seven years because the State works slowly. Lord knows what the interest rates will be. Now is the time to obtain long-term cheap money. Now is the time to proceed quickly and at scale.

I listened very much with respect to Deputy Jan O'Sullivan. She is absolutely correct that the Guinness site is a perfect location. There are other locations also. The Guinness site is not as big as the two we picked. I very much appreciate Sinn Féin's recognition that this is now the time to be talking about specific sites. If we are to proceed quickly and at scale, we should not avoid the debate and we should address the hard issues. There are hard issues associated with moving around State agencies. If we do not proceed now and if we just carry out a small pilot project and talk to the EIB for another few months before thinking about what we might do, we will not be addressing the crisis with the urgency required.

There are other sites. Deputy Catherine Martin mentioned the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum, which is a perfect location. I would also cite Dublin port. Perhaps I am thinking of it because it is the area I am particularly knowledgeable about. The docks area in Cork also jumps out to me as an area where there could be development at scale. We need to go to the centre, however. If the national planning framework is to be real, we must then pick central sites in our cities. The Limerick one had the benefit of being central. We pushed very much for the use of the RTÉ site. I am glad it is being developed. I wish it had been developed as a cost-rental site rather than a very expensive private development. I am very glad that the Irish Glass Bottle site is to be used. Before the last election, one of our main campaign planks was based on the use of the site. I regret that the level of social and affordable housing is far too low at the site but I am glad it is being developed.

I would examine whether the entire Dublin Industrial Estate, which is beside the new Luas line, could be used for housing. It is complicated because of various ownership issues. We need to be debating here and now where specifically we are going to build. Thus, when talking to the EIB we will not be talking about just one project but about five, six or seven, with 5,000 to 10,000 units, thereby bringing the price down substantially and changing radically the sense of housing in the country and the market. The houses would be in the market and bring down the market price. This would be in addition to what we do through social housing.

This is, however, a targeted intervention to what is now the worst part of the market for those in the private rented sector. It is not good enough for the Government to say it is doing pilot projects or is talking to the European Investment Bank. We should be talking about sites here and now. It is difficult but it needs to be done.

Amendment put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 8 March 2018.

**Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) (Amendment) Bill 2018:
Second Stage [Private Members]**

Deputy Michael McGrath: I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I am pleased to move the Second Stage of the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) (Amendment) Bill 2018. For too long in this country, private equity or “vulture” funds have been literally above the law. They are unregulated, unaccountable and un-touchable. They have no interest in the long-term health of the Irish economy or the well-being of our people. If enacted, this Bill will ensure that these vulture funds are regulated and can be held to account. Our statutory regulator, the Central Bank of Ireland, will be able to inspect them, investigate them and to impose sanctions on them, as required. Enacting this Bill is a vital and necessary step.

This issue is not just relevant for mortgage holders. It is equally relevant for farmers and small business owners who find their loans being sold on from under them. We all know the business model of these funds. They specialise in buying portfolios of distressed loans at a large discount. They squeeze the borrowers for everything they can and the ultimate objective is often to get their hands on the underlying asset, whether it is the family home, the buy-to-let property, the farm or business property. Their investment horizon is short-term. They have no interest in working their way through a distressed loan over a long period. In a game of pass the parcel between vulture funds, loans, including mortgages, can be sold on again and again with no limit. The 2015 Act is a half-baked measure that only regulates the intermediary, the credit servicing firm. This Private Members’ Bill is not a silver bullet for people struggling with excessive debt but it is a crucial step in the right direction. Other measures are also needed. We have called for a review of the 2013 code of conduct of mortgage arrears and I am pleased that the Minister has agreed with this and initiated a process. There are those who believe that these vulture funds do not need to be regulated directly. We strongly disagree with this view.

I want to put some facts on the record about the current vacuum. Vulture funds are beyond the reach of the Central Bank. When the Government moved to regulate credit servicing firms in 2015, the Central Bank wanted the actual loan owners - the vulture funds - to be directly regulated. The Central Bank has no power to investigate or impose fines on any vulture fund. Vulture funds make all the key decisions regarding loans. They decide what interest rate to charge, whether to restructure a loan or renew an existing restructuring agreement, whether to enforce a loan or initiate legal proceedings. These decisions are merely communicated to the borrower by the middle man. The 2015 Act explicitly excludes these critical decisions from regulation. The Central Bank can take no action against the vulture fund that fails to honour the consumer protection code, the code of conduct for mortgage arrears or a code of conduct for business lending to SMEs. Vulture funds are not covered directly by the 2016 Central Bank SME lending regulations. Credit servicing firms only paid €35,000 in regulatory fees in 2017. Vulture funds paid nothing because they are not regulated. No information is currently available for the number of mortgage restructures entered into by vulture funds, as opposed to restructures which they have inherited. We do not know how many SME loans are owned by vulture funds and how many such SME loans are in arrears. There is no direct contact between the borrower and the fund that owns and controls their loan. The Central Bank has no enforcement power when a vulture fund miscalculates mortgage arrears, as has happened.

Permanent TSB should not be selling on loan portfolios to vulture funds. Permanent TSB

and all the other banks should do what banks are meant to do: work through their loan books and make decisions on a case-by-case basis. This would involve restructuring loans, as a last resort, taking enforcement action, and writing off unrecoverable debt. That is precisely what they were recapitalised to do. It is not the case that the ECB supervisory board has instructed any Irish bank to sell loan portfolios. It is true that there is pressure to reduce the level of non-performing loans, but the chair of the ECB supervisory board has made it clear to me in writing that the ECB has not expressed a preference for some non-performing loan reduction tools rather than others.

We know from evidence given to the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach last September that Permanent TSB has entered into almost 6,300 split mortgage arrangements with owner-occupiers. We do not know how many of these are part of the Project Glas portfolio the bank intends to sell, but it is reported to be several thousand. If a vulture fund buys these loans, it can quite literally terminate that split mortgage agreement at the stroke of a pen for any reason it thinks fit. It is indisputable that a vulture fund is much more likely to do this than a licensed credit institution. We must not throw these mortgage holders to the wolves in this manner.

I will give some examples of how these vulture funds treat their customers. Bank of Scotland Ireland restructured its operations in 2012 and as part of that restructuring it sold around 2,000 mortgages to Tanager DAC. Since then, many of the customers have been living a nightmare. In many cases of which I am aware, customers fell into arrears during the economic crisis but have been making full repayments on their mortgage, interest and capital, for several years now. They have pleaded with the fund to recapitalise the arrears but they have hit a brick wall. They have been told in writing that Tanager DAC does not offer capitalisation of arrears as an option. This is the plain vanilla of mortgage restructures and it does not offer it as a solution. It is in no way unique in that approach as a vulture fund. These are responsible mortgage holders, they have tried to engage with their loan owner, they are now making full repayments and have been for years. Tanager DAC has not attempted to engage or even negotiate with these customers. Lapithus DAC, the regulated credit servicing firm, is passing messages back and forward. There is no direct contact between the mortgage holders and Tanager. Tanager has no interest in entering into any restructuring arrangement. Its line is simple and it has communicated this through Lapithus to the mortgage holders that they must pay the balance on the loan or give Tanager the house. This is its attitude and it is a disgrace. The only protection these customers have received is from the courts. Despite the actions of the courts, Tanager has not changed its approach even when it was found that Tanager was miscalculating the amount by which people were in arrears. Its tactic is simple, which is to intimidate people into giving up their family home and to wear them out so much that they finally succumb and surrender, which many ordinary people will do because of the immense pressure they are under. All of this is being done by Tanager without any regulatory oversight from the Central Bank.

On SMEs, we know that both performing and non-performing loans have been sold to unregulated loan owners. Business expansions have been halted by the loan owner despite the fact that the company has never breached its loan agreement. We have come across the so-called loan to own strategy whereby a vulture fund simply wants the underlying assets of the company and will do anything to engineer a technical default to allow it to enforce the loan agreement. I am aware of these cases. Companies have complained about instances where vulture funds have bought loans in an industry where they already own or manage competitors in the same industry. They play one off against the other. This results in a clear conflict of interest and we

know of cases where the vulture fund has acted on the loan to benefit a competitor. Many of the leading legal firms also have non-compete clauses with many of the vulture funds. This restricts companies from taking legal action against vulture funds.

There is one extraordinary story I must bring to the attention of the House. I have seen the original paperwork and can stand over the facts of this case. In May 2014, an individual was contacted by Pepper Asset Finance on behalf of Stapleford Finance DAC, a unit of the US investment giant CarVal.

The individual was informed that Stapleford Finance DAC had purchased his loan of €1.6 million from the IBRC special liquidators. This individual had no loans with IBRC and he certainly did not owe €1.6 million. This was a case of mistaken identity. Pepper Asset Finance was informed of this fact but the individual was still pursued repeatedly. The letters kept coming and he was threatened with legal action by solicitors acting on behalf of Stapleford Finance DAC. This man had to engage his own solicitors to fight the onslaught. It cost him and his family immeasurable stress and worry. In November 2015, following a freedom of information request, the IBRC special liquidators confirmed in writing to this gentleman that he never had a loan with it, or with the old Anglo Irish Bank. This confirmation was sent to the funds' solicitors and in December 2015 the funds' solicitors paid the individual just over €2,400. Of this, €1,500 was a gesture of compensation and €900 was towards his legal costs. The man asked that his records be deleted from its system. Stressed by the experience the individual agreed to settle in order to move on. To him the case was closed. In January 2017, extraordinarily, he received another letter demanding, again, payment of the €1.6 million. More letters followed. The last letter was received in October 2017. The individual wrote back enclosing confirmation of the fund's error, which the company had sent him through its solicitor, and he demanded that his details be deleted and its record corrected. He has not heard anything back since then. Almost four years on and he is still being pursued for a debt that is not his. The nightmare is continuing. I will conclude with the words of this individual, sent by him to me in an email:

I am around in business a long number of years but never have I seen arrogance, thugery and bullish attitude as I have had with this - ruthless cowboys out to get money from anyone who will part with it. I think this demonstrates the reason as to why they have to be brought in line.

I believe we have a duty to act.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) (Amendment) Bill 2018. I thank my colleague, Deputy Michael McGrath, for all the work he has done in bringing this Bill to Second Stage today. This Bill aims to protect homeowners with mortgages, farmers and small businesses from vulture funds. It is necessary because the 2015 Act specifically did not do so. That Act, brought through the Oireachtas by Fine Gael at the time, specifically excluded from regulation the vulture fund owners of the loans. All the Minister has to do is check the Official Report during the passage of that legislation to see that I called for these funds, as the owners of the loans, to be regulated. I warned what would happen if Fine Gael carried through its approach of only regulating the middleman or the agent. That is what happened. The Government had the numbers to do that in 2015. This is why Fine Gael is here today. It does not control the Dáil and for once the Dáil will be able to get legislation through, and not the legislation that was bullied through by the Minister's predecessors. At that time the Fine Gael response was to merely look after the vulture funds. This does not protect the homeowners who have been making an honest effort

to deal with their loans.

Currently AIB is considering selling off €4 billion worth of loans and Permanent TSB is considering selling off another €4 billion worth of loans. This is a total of €8 billion. The State owns 71% of AIB and 75% of Permanent TSB. Up to 20,000 home mortgages are involved in this situation, at an average of €200,000 for each family home. Vulture funds will not come into this sale unless they are guaranteed a minimum profit of 20% from the €8 billion. This is €1.6 billion. The funds want to take €1.6 billion of profits out of the banking network in Ireland. This will be a loss to the Irish taxpayers' investment in those banks.

Bank of Ireland, on the other hand, is not controlled by the State which only owns 14%. Bank of Ireland is not proposing to sell any of its loans to vulture funds, nor is it proposing to buy any of these loans that may come on the market. The only banks selling are the State banks controlled by the Minister that are too lazy to do the job they are employed to do; collect the money and deal with their borrowers. They would prefer to lose €1.6 billion of taxpayers' money and put homes and homeowners at risk. Houses owned by these banks have been vacant around the State for five, six and seven years and the banks are doing nothing about it.

This is a policy issue for the Minister and not for the board of directors or the chief executive of the banks. It is the Minister's decision and he has a duty to protect the taxpayers' investment in the banks, a duty to not let the banks flitter away €1.6 billion and a duty to protect the borrowers. The Minister cannot blame the EU, the ECB or the banks. The Minister controls them and the State owns them. The Minister is not a disinterested shareholder. The Minister should make the banks do their job and make them collect the money that they want to pass over to the vulture funds. It is a matter of public policy. A decision to sell these loans is the Minister's decision and the only person who can stop the sale is the Minister as he is the controlling shareholder.

Deputy John McGuinness: This Parliament now stands as the last line of defence for people who are threatened by purchase of their loans from the banks by vulture funds. Permanent TSB has defied the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach and this House by not turning up to the committee. If the State banks do not turn up for a hearing with the finance committee what chance have we with the banks that are not owned by the State and what chance have we with regard to the vulture funds? This question is bigger than vulture funds. It is about what type of society we want and what type of banking system we want. I suggest that the citizen has had enough. No civilised society can tolerate the actions of vulture funds. They are here to profiteer on the backs of the ordinary people we represent in this House. These funds are adding further hardship to the cases of families, small businesses and the farming community. We cannot stand idly by and watch what these funds are doing. Their culture is not to engage. They refuse to do it. They leave the customer on the long finger and act through an agent. The agent is not accountable to the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach. The agent is only accountable to the vulture fund. I am aware of a recent case that was being settled. The final straw was that the client had to promise to cash in his sister's pension fund in order to pay in five years' time. These funds are absolute bullies and thugs. The culture they create for the next generation of bankers should not be tolerated by any country.

I fully agree with the Bill but I believe we will shortly find ourselves moving beyond it. That is why the Master of the High Court, Mr. Edmund Honohan, SC, has put a Bill before the Members of this House for their consideration, namely, the national housing co-operative and

fair mortgage Bill 2018. There is now an onus on the Government to look at what Bills are before the House, to consider what is being said by Deputy Michael McGrath, by Sinn Féin and by other parties and to take the best from all the Bills in order to offer a protection of the citizens we represent.

Do we really want the banks to make more than €1 billion each year and at the same time terrorise their own customers? I believe the answer is “No, we do not.” We must find some way to ensure that, in spite of the current arrangements, they pay their fair share of tax into the coffers of the State. This is not happening now. They are disregarding us, they are setting their own rules, they are profiteering and we allow them away with it. I appeal to the Minister to take the best of this Bill to do whatever he can to put in place a system of protection for the vulnerable people in the State who look to us as parliamentarians for help.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: There are many reasons not to accept this Bill but I very much hope the Minister will look for the reasons and the positives to ensure he accepts it. For too long we have been focused on the bottom line of the banks and the systemic nature of the banks while ignoring the systemic nature of people. It is about the human cost to families and not just the bottom line. Some Government some time is going to have to embrace that. I very much hope it is the Minister. There are no excuses for failure in this regard anymore. In the past there may have been reasons but there are no longer any excuses. I commend my colleague, Deputy Michael McGrath, on bringing forward the Bill. The Minister needs to go forward and tell the Central Bank while it is doing the review that he equally needs to put the code of conduct on mortgage arrears on a statutory footing. The reality is that the only thing that is legally binding is the moratorium - nothing else - so banks can, following the 2013 amendment to the code of conduct on mortgage arrears, cherry-pick what they want and tell customers they will do a deal for them and tell them to pay their mortgages off in the next ten years, six months or whatever suits them. They will have offered the customers something, they will claim. They will have theoretically complied with the code of conduct on mortgage arrears and then they will throw the customers under a bus anyway. This is what is really going on. Therefore, at some stage the Minister will have to put the code on a statutory footing. I ask him to check the Supreme Court overturning a High Court ruling on this to show that a moratorium is the only thing that is legally binding. This must be done.

Other Bills have passed through the House. The Mortgage Arrears Resolution (Family Home) Bill introduced by Deputy Michael McGrath in 2017 also passed Second Stage. This Bill would remove the banks’ veto, putting the people central, but no, what have we done? We have done something very dishonest that subverts the spirit of democracy, with the Taoiseach taking refuge in Article 17.2 of the Constitution and not issuing money messages. A hundred Bills passed Second Stage in both Houses over the course of last year. Five were enacted and 41 sit on Committee Stage, 27 of which are being systematically blocked by the Minister’s Government by its not issuing a money message. There is nothing in the Constitution to stop the Bill continuing to Committee, Report and Final Stages. I urge the Minister to tell us what the cost is and to let the House debate the matter but I ask him not to continue in a dictatorial fashion to block tangible measures to protect mortgage holders by invoking Article 17.2 of the Constitution.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I thank Deputy McGrath for the work he has put into preparing the Bill. Before I get into the details of the Bill I wish to give what is a hugely important issue some further context if time allows me to do so. I wish to do so by acknowledging why people have fears about this matter. I recognise their concerns and I am

acting in the best way possible that I can to respond to the concerns people may have about changes that could take place in our banking system in the future. I reiterate that one of my key priorities as Minister for Finance is to normalise our banking system over time, to ensure that our banks are able to invest in households and businesses and to provide the credit and lending that is needed while at the same time putting in place the most appropriate and effective framework of consumer protection. This includes ensuring there is an appropriate framework in place for the resolution of complaints. What I want to do, and it is one of the reasons I have asked the Central Bank to conduct a review of the code of conduct on mortgage arrears, is to ensure we have the fairest and most effective support for any borrower who faces great difficulty. Alongside this, we must be careful that actions we take to offer further protection as and when loans are sold or changed do not have unintended and very negative consequences for either the banks themselves, in which we have a stake, their relationship with the regulator or, crucially for me, all the citizens who depend on a functioning banking system in their day-to-day lives.

I fully recognise the position in which families find themselves when they have arrears, facing firms with which they are not familiar, firms about which they may have concerns. All of this will make people even more concerned about what the future will hold, and I want to put these fears in context. The most recent Central Bank figures show that the number of mortgage accounts for principal dwelling homes, PDHs, in arrears fell further in the third quarter of 2017. This is the 17th consecutive quarter of decline. The number of PDH mortgages that were classified as restructured at the end of September was 119,070. Of these restructured accounts, 87% were deemed to be meeting the terms of their current arrangement, up slightly from the previous quarter. Thankfully, repossession numbers in Ireland remain low in comparison with other countries and repossessions in Ireland take longer. It is important to drill down into the repossession figures in the context of this debate and to refer to the Central Bank's figures which again emphasise the difficulty people experience when facing this final phase of dealing with debt. In 2016, the number of PDH properties repossessed was 1,693. This was made up of 1,452 repossessions by banks and 241 by non-banks. In 2017 up to the end of September, the total number of PDH properties repossessed was 1,106,982 by banks and 124 by non-banks. Much of this is due to the fact that the Government has reformed personal insolvency legislation, changed the relationships in respect of insolvency arrangements and put in place the Abhaile service to help borrowers in arrears, putting a particular focus on those who are in long-term arrears to ensure there is dedicated support for them as they work through these very difficult issues in court. More than 10,000 vouchers have now been issued for the Abhaile scheme since it began in July 2016.

To put this in further context, there have been broader changes in our banking system. Non-performing loans in the banks are now down by 60% to €22 billion from a peak of €54 billion. They are considerably higher than is acceptable in the long run, and this is the view of the single supervisory mechanism. However, even leaving this aside, to have a banking system with this level of non-performing loans causes challenges for those banks and in turn for our own economy.

We have legislation in place to protect mortgage holders, which I have detailed. We put in place the 2015 Act. We have the code of conduct on mortgage arrears, to which I have referred, and which has played a valuable role in alleviating the acute difficulty that so many faced during the crisis. As I have indicated publicly already, I have asked the Central Bank to review this existing code and to report back as soon as is practically possible with its assessment of the implementation of the code.

We have already touched on the status of Permanent TSB. The bank is required to put in place a significant reduction in its non-performing loan ratio, which as it stands is over five times the eurozone average. The relationship that exists between me and the bank is not, as Deputy Fleming has stated, one of control. The loan sales that have taken place in the past and that are under debate this evening do not require my consent as Minister for Finance. The framework in place is a legally binding contract which cannot be changed unilaterally and it was required to be put in place during the depth of our crisis. It is true that I will be consulted on that loanbook sale when it reaches a certain point in the process, and that has not yet occurred.

As I have indicated, the Government has agreed to support the Bill. There are drafting issues on which we will work with Deputy McGrath. We have already begun a period of consultation with the Central Bank which is at an initial stage. It has raised a number of impacts and issues within the Bill that we will have to consider at drafting stage. A further matter that will require consideration by a committee of the House is whether the Bill will require consultation with the European Central Bank. Some of the matters on which I will work with the House refer to what is the definition of a “credit agreement owner” and the potential consequence of this for excluding any form of securitisation. We may need to work on this matter as the Bill is formulated to permit such vehicles as they are currently formulated but to avoid creating an opportunity for more active loan-owner purchasers to structure themselves in a way that would fall outside the scope of the Bill. This is not just a theoretical matter, it is a very important one.

I also have some concerns about how we will square the practicalities of regulating loan owners with commitments on the free movement of capital in the EU and EU competition law, and these are matters that will require further exploration.

There are other technical matters in the Bill that will require drafting and work and I hope many of these can be resolved quickly and without any difficulty. I take this opportunity to make my Department and officials available to provide any drafting support we can in advance of the consideration of the Bill at pre-legislative committee. We may be able to progress the Bill quicker this way than by the line-by-line amendment process which takes place later on Committee Stage. I will work with the Dáil and committee on this matter.

I have already made clear that I have met a number of the main banks as part of my normal engagement process. I made clear to them that they need to be very cognisant of customers’ concerns in relation to their actions.

The framework the previous Government put in place played a very valuable role in alleviating many of the darkest difficulties that many feared would develop then. The framework in place is one that has played an effective role. I recognise strongly the concerns and fears that have been ignited by a decision taken by a bank that is independently regulated, with which I have a very strictly governed legal relationship. Given that I recognise the issues at stake I will accept the Bill on behalf of the Government, work on it through pre-legislative scrutiny and on Committee Stage to deal with the technical issues which I think we can deal with quickly and the more substantial issues that will require work. In parallel with this, we will ask the Central Bank to continue its work in reviewing the code of conduct on mortgage arrears to ensure that if the overall framework can be strengthened in a way to maintain the balance we find a way to do so.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm a bheith ag caint ar an reachtaíocht seo. Cuirim fáilte roimh an reachtaíocht atá curtha os comhair

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an Tí ag an Teachta Michael McGrath. I welcome the Bill and I commit that my party will work the Minister and Deputy Michael McGrath on Committee Stage to ensure it sees its way into law. My party fully supports the Bill and hopes it can progress as quickly as possible. It adds some amount of reassurance to homeowners with regard to who is eventually regulated, and it closes the gap in terms of the regulatory framework.

We all know, and it has been articulated by previous speakers, that vultures are scavengers and need something to scavenge on. What attracted them here was the carcass of an economy that was ruined by a previous Government under Fianna Fáil and the light touch regulation we had at that time. We must remember this and learn from it, but we also need to accept the Bill on its merits. The Bill is one that I have no problem supporting.

I recall standing with the IBRC mortgage holders outside the gates of Leinster House just over four years ago as they found themselves in the clutches of the vultures. They grouped together and demanded action from the Government. Along with others, I supported their campaign and at that time we forced the previous Government, comprising Fine Gael and the Labour Party, to act. What we got was a draft Bill that proposed to regulate the vultures, the owners of the debt, but then there were dramatic changes as a result of lobbying by the same vultures, and instead of regulating the owner of the debt what the Government proposed was to regulate the credit servicing firms, the middlemen, and that was a huge mistake.

Tonight, the Minister gave me a reply to a parliamentary question in which he informed me that ten of those middlemen, or so-called credit servicing firms, that were operating at the time did not actually go through with their applications. They withdrew their applications for regulation. Two of them still operate under the transitional regime, which, in 2015, stated that when the legislation was passed they would be deemed to be regulated until they were authorised after an application to the Central Bank. Three years later, two of them are still unauthorised but are operational in the State and ten of them have been authorised.

We proposed an amendment to the legislation in 2015. During its passage we called for full regulation of the owners of the debt. We wanted the Government to go back to the original purpose of the legislation and not the half measure we were dealing with then. Some of the IBRC mortgage holders were in the room, and they were let down by the Labour Party and Fine Gael, and by Fianna Fáil which did not turn up to vote on the amendment at the time. The Minister knows that in 2017 I tabled a Bill on this issue that would close the regulatory gap. It was in for the lottery. I welcome the Bill that is before us tonight. It is a progressive step forward. I am glad all sides of the House now support what Sinn Féin argued for in 2015.

Let me be clear about this, and I recall introducing the legislation in 2017, this is not the solution in its entirety and if we were to have an honest debate here, everybody knows this. This regulation of the vultures would mean that if they step out of line the Central Bank can prosecute them and hold them to account, as opposed to going after the middleman. The Central Bank has no reach at this point in time to the vultures unless they break the rules or step over the line.

What the Bill does not do, and this is what we need to talk about, is protect homeowners. I am very concerned that the country is being sold a pup. An impression is being given that because of this legislation, which is important legislation that brings us a step forward, somehow these homeowners will be protected. They will not be protected and this message needs to go out loud and clear. It does not give them any additional protection under the code of conduct on

mortgage arrears. It gives them no additional protection under the consumer protection code. It gives them no additional protection - none whatsoever - from the vultures repossessing their homes. It does something different, and that something different is very welcome, but the core issue here is, as has been mentioned, Permanent TSB, which is a State-owned bank, is about to embark on selling 18,000 loans, 14,000 of which are family homes and 4,000 of which have tenants in them.

The problem at its core is that vultures have only a short-term interest. When the legislation is passed it will not make a difference to the homeowner. There is no additional requirement on the vultures. There is no requirement on them to offer any of the options of the code of conduct on mortgage arrears because that code is entirely voluntary with regard to the suite of options. As was mentioned earlier, vultures do not do split mortgages or capital arrears. They do not do the measures taken in 80% of the 120,000 restructures that have happened in the State. If we allow this sale to go through we will throw those families to the vultures. Regulated or not, it makes no difference. The Bill does what it says on the tin. It basically states if the vultures step over the line and do not comply with the code of conduct the Central Bank can prosecute them, but it does not provide any protection. This is why I plead with Fianna Fáil to use the weight it has in supporting the Government to ensure the sale does not go through.

Permanent TSB has done shoddy job at dealing with its loan book. We should not facilitate it, and when I say “we” I really mean the Minister. He can hide behind the arrangement that is there, that technically he does not have to give consent, but he has to be consulted. He is the Minister that holds 75% of the shares in this bank and he needs to stand up and say the Government does not support the notion of our citizens’ loans being sold to vultures, regulated or not, because we know the vultures have a short-term interest and we recognise the citizens’ loans are a long-term product. They simply do not merge. It does not work. Unfortunately, the Bill provides cover to banks, which now think somehow it is okay to sell loans to vultures simply because they are regulated. It is not the regulation that is the issue, but the fact the code of conduct on mortgage arrears and the options thereunder are not mandatory. There is no requirement on the vultures to offer any of those solutions - none whatsoever. That is the problem. I welcome the review of the code of conduct on mortgage arrears, and I put out a public statement to that effect, but the last time that was reviewed, a repossession agenda was pursued. The review gave additional powers to the banks and reduced the powers of the consumer. Let me make it clear. I call on the Minister to stand up and make it clear that he will not support Permanent TSB selling loans to vultures, regulated or not, because we know how it ends up. Moreover, I call on him to appeal to Ulster Bank to follow suit.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: From some of the contributions in this Chamber today, one could be forgiven for thinking that the State is a republic of the people for the banks by their friends in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. At every single juncture in the last 20 years when the interests of the people and the banks came into conflict, the establishment sided with the banks. First, Fianna Fáil facilitated light-touch regulation to allow the banks to make super-normal profits. Then it facilitated a property and credit boom that benefitted the banks at the cost of the owners. When the crash happened, it saved the banks at the expense of generations of Irish citizens, saddling them with tens of thousands of euro in debt. In the shadow of the crash, Fine Gael created a pillar banking system to reduce competition and to allow those banks to once again make super-normal profits. On this occasion however, those profits were to be made free of corporation tax.

The Government stood by while tens of billions of euro in bank loans were sold to the vulture funds, and tax breaks were designed to facilitate those funds. When the Government

was forced to tighten those tax regimes, Fine Gael plastered that legislation with loopholes and exemptions. Of course, the Government also stood idly by in recent times while those banks were stealing money from people through the tracker scandal.

For me, one of the most sickening aspects of the policy that this Government has pursued - a policy I also raised with the previous Minister for Finance - is that it allows for banks to sell mortgages and business debt at cut-price levels to vulture funds, but refuses to allow those homeowners and those businesses to buy those loans at the same rate. That policy is grossly unfair, and it is putting people out of houses and out of jobs.

Today I spoke to a young woman who is one of thousands of victims of the policy of the Minister's Government. Like many women in mortgage distress, she falls under the really strange term that is now used, namely, "a deserted mortgage holder". Her partner has left her to deal with the cost of a mortgage. She has a young daughter, and she has been faithfully covering the mortgage of €1,500 a month since the crisis happened in her life. That has had a massive cost to her with regard to heating, food and every other priority a family should have. She is a nurse, and works all the hours she is given. In the Government's voluntary resolution scheme, the bailed-out bank refused any of the reasonable offers that the woman made. The only offer she has been given so far is that it would extend the term of her loan. That means that the bank would make thousands of euro in extra interest and profit out of her distress. That bank is making billions of euro in profit at the moment and has been bailed out. The worry I have is that the regulation that is being offered here today will not protect her or families like her in the future.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I will start by thanking Deputy Michael McGrath for bringing this Bill, which I hope passes, forward. The Government has said it would not oppose it anyway. The Minister is probably aware, and I hope he is, of the distress caused by continuous announcements by various banks that they are selling parts of their mortgage portfolios to the vulture funds. That is causing huge stress to homeowners, who for a variety of reasons, find themselves in mortgage distress. We do not need to be here. People should not be going through this. The Minister and previous Governments have failed to act decisively on this issue.

In 2015, Fine Gael and the Labour Party failed to put the proper regulation of vultures in place. Their legislation only regulated the middleman. In 2016, as part of an all-party Dáil Committee on Housing and Homelessness, Sinn Féin proposed a number of solutions that could have been enacted quickly to help those in mortgage distress. The Government ignored many of these. The Government failed to legislate to cap mortgage interest rates, legislation that could be designed to lapse at some point in the future if a healthy market emerges. The Government also failed to amend the personal insolvency system to end the banks' veto in cases where the family home is involved, regardless of when the arrears began. It failed to significantly improve the mortgage-to-rent scheme to make it a more attractive option for both lenders and housing bodies, and failed to apply greater pressure on the banks to meet ambitious targets. Any mortgage-to-rent scheme must be accessible and designed to help struggling homeowners. These proposals were also not accepted. Sinn Féin attempted to make sure that the owner, that is, the vulture, would be fully regulated, but our amendment was voted down at committee in May 2015 by Fine Gael and the Labour Party, with Fianna Fáil not present for the vote.

In 2017, Sinn Féin tabled legislation, the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) (Amendment) Bill 2017. It is now desperately needed to protect the homeowners affected by sales to vultures by fully regulating the actual owner of the credit. The Central

Bank has called for this course of action. Obviously, Sinn Féin's ideas will only be accepted as a last resort by this Government, which thinks it has all the answers. However, the most recent homelessness figures clearly demonstrate that the Rebuilding Ireland programme is not working. The Government's housing policies are failing.

Sinn Féin supports this Bill as it is similar to one Deputy Pearse Doherty has tabled and to our amendments when the original Bill was before the Oireachtas. However, regulation by itself will be of limited benefit to homeowners. Vultures operate on a short-term basis, while mortgages are long-term products. The Minister recently announced a review of the code of conduct on mortgage arrears. Our demand is that restructuring options in the code, such as split mortgages and mortgages-to-rent, should be made mandatory and not just voluntary. This would mean that the bank or vulture, when regulated, would have to offer one or both of these measures before any repossessions. This would be a solution. Will the Minister do this? I call on him to stop prevaricating and take action. Deputy McGuinness spoke the truth when he said that vulture funds are bullies and thugs. That is the experience I have had when speaking to families in my constituency office who have been dealing with them.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The Labour Party will also be supporting the Fianna Fáil Bill tonight. The effect of the Bill is to regulate so-called vulture funds that purchase non-performing loans from Irish banks. The Bill, if passed, would ensure that the Central Bank has the power to directly regulate the owners of the loans, while currently only those who deal with the borrowers directly are regulated. However, it is true that it is the owner, in all likelihood the vulture fund, that will make the key decisions around the future of the loan.

The latest controversy arises from the decision of Permanent TSB to sell off thousands of loans, worth up to €4 billion. This sale is likely to be followed by others, including Ulster Bank and AIB. The sale arises from the failure of the bank to manage its loan book properly.

Many people will have read a very good article in today's *Irish Examiner* by Ms Julie Sadlier, who has been advising people threatened with repossession and attending repossession courts since 2008. She has written a very detailed examination from her own experience on this issue. She outlines that since the Personal Insolvency Act 2012, around 2,000 personal insolvency arrangements and around 1,500 bankruptcies have been approved. The number of home loans that have been restructured is appallingly low. That failure has compounded the problem. The lack of consistency in how borrowers are treated is also deeply disturbing.

As has already been said, at the heart of this problem is the motives of the banks. All they seem to care about is restoring their balance sheets by selling off loans rather than writing down debt and working with their customers to find and agree on sustainable solutions. Some 75% of Permanent TSB is owned by the State. It is a bank that has received significant support from the people of Ireland in recent years. However, instead of doing the hard work itself, it now plans to outsource the difficult job of fixing its balance sheet by selling off "non-performing loans", as its representatives call them. Permanent TSB has also failed to provide any clear information on the make-up or type of loans it plans to sell.

The Government has handled this controversy badly. The Cabinet waves through the news from the Minister of the latest planned transaction by Permanent TSB. As Minister for Finance and principal shareholder, it is incumbent on him to seek protection for citizens whose mortgages may be sold on to vulture funds. In his speech, the Minister talked about "normalising" and the need for the banks to "normalise". I question this term. Surely it cannot be normal to

allow the sale of mortgages where people have entered voluntarily into agreements and split mortgages and are paying whatever they can, yet part of this normalisation involves including the loans of such people in the sale. I question that this is “normalising”.

Compelling PTSB to provide more information on the loans it plans to sell would be a good first step. The proposal to hand over large numbers of troubled mortgages to unregulated vulture funds seems perverse. It will add further precariousness to the housing market and the homelessness situation because these people have to live somewhere. It is wrong that the sale would include those borrowers who have engaged with the banks and made the effort to pay their debts, and agreed to a restructuring or a split loan product. This legislation, as Deputy McGrath has acknowledged, will only go so far towards addressing the problem. The reality is that regulation is not the main issue, although it is a step in the right direction.

Based on ECB Single Supervisory Mechanism rules, 28% of the loan book of PTSB is classed as non-performing. However, of the approximately 20,000 loans that PTSB expects to sell, 6,500 appear to be active split mortgage loans. Those split loans are classed under these rules as non-performing. Splitting mortgages was one of the key responses to the arrears crisis and it was promoted by the Government and urged on the banks. It was one of the arrangements that were promoted, yet now the loans are being sold off to these vulture funds. These are homeowners who have engaged with the banks and who have been paying what they can afford. A portion of the loan was warehoused while repayments continue to pay down the capital sum on the rest. It is a betrayal of those homeowners who engaged to the best of their ability with the banks to allow these loans now to be sold off to a vulture fund.

It is hard to have sympathy for those with capacity who have stopped paying their loans completely, but the evidence would suggest that a very large number of people did engage and did pay what they could. However, the other solutions do not appear to be working. Mortgage-to-rent has not delivered enough, although it is a good concept. The main reason for this is that the banks have not actually engaged with it. I am dealing with one case of a person who agreed the very early stages of mortgage-to-rent. The Clúid Housing Association agreed to work with her and her lender apparently agreed, but four years later it still has not signed off on this and it still has not gone through. There is a reluctance on the part of the banks and they are not co-operating, certainly in my experience of this one case, with the mortgage-to-rent scheme.

For those mortgage holders have engaged with their lenders, their loans should not be sold off because of a quirk of the rules. This issue is being examined, but when Deputy Howlin raised this with the Taoiseach over a week ago, the Taoiseach implied that the Labour Party was seeking a loosening of regulations on the banks. However, the Department of Finance has also been seeking a change to the rules that treat those split mortgages as non-performing loans. I hope the change will be made and the Minister should continue to pursue that.

From the height of the arrears crisis, major progress has been made, as the Minister acknowledged, to help those mortgage holders who found themselves out of a job or unable to meet their repayments. From the code of conduct on mortgage arrears to the mortgage arrears resolution process, those policy initiatives have provided some protection to borrowers. The changes in the bankruptcy law pioneered by my colleague, Deputy Willie Penrose, have also made it easier for those with unrealistic debts to seek relief within a year. The additional resources provided to MABS by the then Minister, Deputy Burton, and the establishment of the Abhaile service have ensured support for those families who found themselves dealing with legal letters and the courts. The introduction of court mentors and a dedicated mortgage arrears

service have been central to that. Much has been done. However, for those who have engaged and who have done their bit to meet their obligations, it is essential that their split performing loans are not sold on. It is incumbent on the Government to ensure that does not happen. It is about time Irish banks resolved their problems in-house rather than trying to outsource a solution to vulture funds. That means writing down debts and compelling banks to use the mortgage-to-rent scheme as it was designed.

In the time I have left, I want to quote from Julie Sadlier's article in the *Irish Examiner* today. She states:

So what next? We need to acknowledge that the income and repayment capacity for the vast majority of the tens of thousands still in arrears has never been, and is unlikely to ever be, replaced because of the damage caused to their sectors by the recession.

They are also the cohort being accused of strategic defaulting but from what I see default is not, and never has been, part of their strategy.

Bank claims of strategic default are false, just like their claims that for many years there was no tracker overcharging. This is simply propaganda to alter public perception and influence government policy.

These borrowers do not, however, fit into bank or personal insolvency resolution criteria and so they are facing certain repossession and homelessness unless Government intervenes.

This is from a very experienced practitioner who has been working directly with families in this situation.

We will be supporting Deputy McGrath's Bill but, as has been acknowledged on all sides, a lot more needs to be done to protect, in particular, those people who have engaged with their banks and who are now basically being thrown to the wolves.

Deputy Mick Barry: A Residential Tenancies Board adjudicator will hear a case tomorrow which will show what vulture funds are all about. The case will be heard in Cork city and concerns the city's Leaside apartments complex. The apartments were bought by a vulture fund, Lewis Capital, late last year. Its plan is to evict using major refurbishment as the weapon of choice, to raise rents and to get new tenants in to pay those rents. More than 25 households, many of them young families with children, have been issued with notices to quit at a time when the homelessness levels in the State have surged over the 9,000 mark and are at all-time record high levels. Tomorrow's case is the first challenge at the Residential Tenancies Board to these eviction notices. As soon as a result is known, I will communicate it via social media. The very fact that the point at issue is the eviction of men, women and children for sheer profit is a sign of what we are dealing with when we discuss vulture funds.

The Bill is proposing the regulation of the vulture funds. This is not controversial and I think there will be unanimous support for it in the House. We will support it on these benches. However, for us, regulation does not go nearly far enough. A regulated vulture is still a vulture. The vulture funds, as was mentioned, are not included in the code of conduct on mortgage arrears. PTSB has 18,000 loans that it is putting up for sale and Ulster Bank has 7,000, making 25,000 in total, with other banks still to come. Some 4,000 of the PTSB loans are buy-to-lets. This is an example of what might happen if the vultures get their claws into these houses and these people's lives. Where vultures buy these loans and make settlements with the landlords,

whether it is the landlord paying their price or selling at another price, those residents will inevitably be faced with rent hikes. I am sure quite a few of them will be faced with rent hikes that go well beyond the rent pressure zone limits, with the example of major refurbishments coming into play once again. This again shows the importance of the hearing tomorrow.

Many will face eviction if they are unable to pay the rent increases. In such a situation tenants have a possible remedy in applying political pressure when the mortgages are effectively owned by the State., but it is a far less attractive proposition to try to exert political pressure when the mortgages are owned by a vulture fund. On no condition should the loans be sold to vulture funds. They should not be allowed to get their claws on people's homes and lives. If emergency legislation is required to exclude the possibility of a sale to vulture funds, it should be passed by the House.

To deal with the distressed mortgages underlying this problem in a proper and humane way, it is necessary to have a banking system which provides for the interests of ordinary people, not one which provides for the interests of the markets. For us, that means opposing bank privatisation and supporting a genuine State banking system with boards that serve the people rather than the markets. If such measures were in place, several creative options could come into play: the retrospective revaluation of houses to pre-Celtic tiger price rates, allowing for inflation in the period since; the scheduling of affordable mortgage repayments for those who are able to meet them and the provision of a mortgage-to-rent scheme for those who are not in a position to repay their mortgages, a measure which would increase by thousands the local authority housing stock. When we talk about vulture funds, we talk about capitalism "red in tooth and claw". For ordinary working class people faced with an enemy - vulture funds are the enemy of working people - "red in tooth and claw", it is necessary to push for legislative change, but one also has to be prepared to organise and fight, to use people power to resist evictions on a large scale.

If the Leaside residents win tomorrow before the Residential Tenancies Board, it will be merely a victory in the first round of the fight. They will have knocked back the vulture fund on the issue of notices to quit, but they will still face the threat of eviction by way of rent increases. If they do not win or further attempts are made to evict them, they will have little option but to fight. Where are the affordable rental properties in the cities of Cork, Dublin, Limerick or anywhere else? They will have little option but to stay and I encourage them to do so, to refuse to leave and organise solidarity among their fellow residents and hundreds of supporters in the city to resist evictions, the vulture funds and the agenda of the blood sucking greedy capitalism that so many residents and homeowners are facing.

Deputy Joan Collins: I support the Bill which has been tabled by Fianna Fáil, not because it is a solution to potential repossessions but because all creditors, including vulture funds, should be brought under the Central Bank's regulations and code of conduct. On the tracker mortgage issue, the Central Bank was able to hold the banks to account. It was difficult and it had to bring them in kicking and screaming, but at least it was able to do so. The Bill will make no difference in dealing with mortgage arrears or possible repossessions. The Central Bank's code of conduct is a code to regulate behaviour such as the contact a bank can make, etc. There is, however, no regulation of terms or solutions.

I know a family in Drimnagh who engaged with a lender and applied for a mortgage-to-rent but the bank refused. The Irish Mortgage Holders Organisation took it to court as a test case to clarify whether there was an obligation on a bank to accept a mortgage-to-rent. The court ruled

that there was no such obligation and granted the repossession. Under current rules, banks do not have to accept the solution put forward.

This legislation should be brought forward, but there must be further regulation or, as the programme for Government states, the code of conduct should be put on a statutory basis such that banks would have to accept a mortgage-to-rent or a split mortgage, etc. I am deeply concerned that there is a mixed message and that people might think they will be protected by the Bill. They will not. We in this House must ensure people are protected. Permanent TSB should be told not to sell the mortgages.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: The role of vulture funds in Ireland expanded dramatically when Fine Gael and the Labour Party came to power. The same is true now that Fine Gael and the Independents are in power. They have become a terrifying new breed of landlord thanks to a Government the policies of which lured them here in the first place. Their existence is a symptom of a complacent Government prioritising private sector interests over those of ordinary people. Vulnerable homeowners have become fodder for vulture funds. They are not only struggling to pay off mortgage debt, but they could also face homelessness if the State fails to intervene in the selling off of PTSB loans. While sales such as this are not new, the level of sales sets a new precedent for the behaviour of vulture funds, banks and the Government. Since Fine Gael came to power, Ulster Bank has done the same. In 2014 the former Irish Nationwide Building Society which was under State control offloaded 13,000 home loans to vulture funds. It is important to acknowledge that while the Bill seeks greater regulation of the powers of vulture funds, not just of the funds, it will not be passed in time to prevent the sale of the PTSB loans.

We cannot be naïve about this. We all know how long it takes for even Government Bills to get through the House these days, let alone Private Members' Bills. Therefore, the Government needs to intervene now. Arguments suggesting it could not possibly intervene in the market are nonsense because it has been done before. Need we remind the Minister of the unprecedented level of intervention by the State as part of the bailout? It also seems to have been forgotten that we now own the majority of the banks. The State owns 75% of PTSB. In essence, we can and should intervene. The behaviour of the banks towards its customers, the State and the democratic institutions of the country is simply unbelievable. Writing down debt is the option, although it is far from the mind of Fine Gael. It would make more sense to write down the debt in a State-owned bank than to extract money from homeowners through financial torture. The Minister, on our behalf, could instruct the bank to repay the people who have bailed it out. That is what he should do.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Our constituents, rightly, have been enraged by the proposed sale by Permanent TSB of 18,000 distressed mortgages to unregulated vulture funds. The loans, of course, include 14,000 family homes and are said to be valued at €3.7 billion. The so-called Project Glas reminds us that nearly 49,000 mortgages are now held by non-bank lenders and that more than half of receiverships are now initiated by vulture funds. Like other Deputies, I have experienced making contact with the credit intermediaries of the funds on behalf of families in acute distress at the prospect of losing their homes. We recently read about the experience of Mr. Charlie Weston of the *Irish Independent*.

Going on the track record of vulture funds and their agents, the sale of home mortgage backed securities should simply be banned by legislation. While the takeover of a whole bank or building society by another similar entity is a long-standing feature of capitalist economies, most of our constituents believe - I agree with them - that the bundling and sale of home loans

in speculative instruments is an outrage which should be ended. We saw it flourishing when Mr. McCreevy and Mr. Ahern were running the State and running it over a cliff. However, banning mortgage backed securities is not the subject of this fairly feeble Bill introduced by Deputy Michael McGrath on behalf of Fianna Fáil and, apparently, now supported by their partners in government, Fine Gael. It is laughable and ironic that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the parties which left us at the mercy of vulture funds in 2007-2008 are now sponsoring and supporting this legislation. Throughout the barren austerity years from 2008, I watched Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Deputies, including Deputy Michael McGrath, troop together into the Yes lobby to wreck our national finances, our banks and our households. Deputy Michael Noonan, in particular, bears a shocking responsibility for the situation of the sale of much of our country and for the position now faced by 14,000 Permanent TSB home mortgage holders. It was Deputy Noonan and the then Fine Gael-Labour Party Government, under the leadership of Deputies Enda Kenny and Eamon Gilmore, which greatly accelerated the sale of Irish property assets to vultures after the Davos World Economic Forum in 2014. NAMA was ordered to rapidly dispose of its remaining €22 billion loan book and we became familiar with notorious financial vultures such as CarVal, Cerberus, Goldman Sachs, Deutsche Bank, Apollo and Lone Star. The human cost to families and individuals with split or distressed mortgages already sold or threatened with sale to vulture funds can never be underestimated. Most frustrating of all is that householders tried to engage with one of the pillar banks but the bank refused to engage with them. I fear that this legislation will do little to protect those families and to keep them in their homes.

The Minister for Finance and the Governor of the Central Bank have key responsibility for the welfare of those citizens. I note that the courts have thus far generally played a positive role in keeping people in their homes. The redefinition by the Central Bank and the ECB of performing loans to include split mortgages would be a huge step forward and give Permanent TSB an alternative route to viability. I note the letter published tonight on Twitter by Deputy Michael McGrath. A huge extension of the mortgage to rent scheme would also be very positive and we have all been heartened by David Hall's iCare Housing programme and his arrangement with Allied Irish Banks, AIB. Given the public rescue of the pillar banks, we should require them to work closely to improve their liquidity ratios. Most of all, we must ensure that Permanent TSB, AIB, Ulster Bank and others do not put their home mortgage holders at the mercy of rapacious foreign vulture funds.

Deputy Michael Harty: I thank Deputy Michael McGrath for bringing this Bill to the floor of the House. It is the second important Bill to be discussed this evening. The Government's intention not to oppose the Fianna Fáil legislation to bring vulture funds under the control of the Central Bank is to be welcomed. I hope this Bill will not suffer the same fate as many other Private Members' Bills during this Dáil and come to a halt on Committee Stage.

I would like to make two points. First, homeowners whose distressed loans are sold by banks to vulture funds must not lose any of the protections currently available to them. This is central to this Bill. Second, normalising the banking system by selling loans to vulture funds should not be at the expense of Irish citizens by making families homeless. I have no doubt that if these mortgages are sold to unregulated vulture funds, homeowners will be picked until their carcass is clean to the bone. These unregulated entities will do this swiftly and without compassion. Their *modus operandi* is quick profit. That is the reason for their existence. There should be no prevarication by this Government. It must protect as far as possible the interests of Irish citizens either by not allowing such sales or, if such sales are to be made, by ensuring they are made to regulated entities. This is critical.

The Rural Independent Group is happy to consider any amendments which the Government might table on Committee Stage but the fundamental point of this Bill should not change. Homes and mortgages should be sold to regulated entities and not unregulated entities. Also, the criteria used by the Permanent TSB, Allied Irish Banks and Bank of Ireland to designate mortgages as non-performing must be closely reviewed by the Central Bank. Many families are making honest efforts to repair their home loans yet these loans are still deemed to be non-performing. There should be a distinction between those who are making honest efforts to meet their commitments and those who are making no effort to do so, or those loans which are in respect of investment properties only. No family should be subject to homelessness owing to the sale of their mortgage to unregulated vulture funds. The banks are bleating that if they are allowed to sell off these loans this will free up money to lend to young couples who need mortgages. I do not believe this.

Not regulating these vulture funds is unacceptable and normalising the banking system by selling family mortgages is also unacceptable.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The worry of losing one's home or actually losing one's home is desperate. It is sad that even if a person or family has struck a deal with a bank the bank can decide that it does not want to deal with that person any longer and thus the family or the individual has to leave their home. It does not seem right that these financial institutions are allowed to sell off loans to vulture funds that are in no way connected to this State. By way of example, I know of a couple who owed €350,000 but were unable to make the repayments on it. They were in fear of losing their home but nevertheless they remained in the home for some time. Eventually, the loan was sold to a vulture fund. The family came by money and offered to repay what they owed but the vulture fund would not accept their offer. It wanted a repayment equal to double the amount of what was owed. That is the truth.

The Government and the Minister have the power to put in place laws to prevent these foreign financial institutions doing what they are doing here for profit, thus causing misery to our people. As I have previously stated, where families experience difficulty repaying their loans the local authorities should be funded to buy their loans from the mortgage holders and to allow the families remain in those homes as tenants, with an opportunity to buy back the house in the future if they get back on their feet. We should be doing that rather than allowing mortgages to be sold to foreign vulture funds.

The Irish people will not be happy with this Government if it allows Permanent TSB and Ulster Bank to sell off their loans to vulture funds. As I said, the Government and the Minister have the power to stop that happening. They need to legislate to prevent the sale of mortgages by Permanent TSB and Ulster Bank to vulture funds. I have been contacted by numerous people over the last couple of weeks who are terrified of this happening. Now is the time for the Government and the Minister to take a stand and to legislate to prevent this happening. It should have not happened before but we cannot go backwards. I am pleading with the Minister to not allow this to happen.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill introduced by Deputy Michael McGrath. Any effort to put manners on these so-called vulture funds is very welcome. They are vultures. Deputy Michael Noonan is on record as saying that they were needed at the time when they came here. No vulture funds are needed. The grey crows are not needed in the field of spuds or when a lamb is being born as they try to pick their eyes out of their heads. Grey crows are vultures. These funds are worse. As far as I am concerned, they

are vermin and they should not be tolerated on these shores. The late Deputy Sean Byrne and his late dad and my late dad spent time fighting in the Curragh, Clonmel and Limerick to rid this country of such people but they are back again. We saw what happened last week. The answer which the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, gave me then was nothing short of drivel. The answer I got from the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, was to put it in writing. I did put it in writing, but did I get any acknowledgement from the Taoiseach, from the Minister for Justice and Equality or from the Minister for Finance? No, I did not. Merciless thugs beat up and evicted a family in Balbriggan. Merciless thugs - that is what is going on. These people have no sense of responsibility. We can certainly try regulation. I am all for it and will support the Bill but I do not know if is enough because these people do not respect any regulation; they do not respect borders; and they have no self respect. All they want is money, whether it be blood money or ordinary money. That is all they want and they are wreaking havoc in this country.

Why will the Government not support the Bill proposed by Deputies McGuinness and MacSharry and myself? It was drawn up by Mr. Edmund Honohan and he will be speaking on it tomorrow in the audiovisual room. How many Deputies will attend to hear what he has to say? He is a man who has the experience of the Four Courts. The lads went out to meet people in New York who have organised a social and ethical fund of up to €4 billion at minimal interest which can be used to keep people in their homes. Look at what has been done in Northern Ireland, up the road in the Six Counties. We say we want to take it over and have it as part of our country but they are showing us the way. It takes only 12 weeks in Northern Ireland after a council house has been vacated before there is someone new in it but we cannot do anything like that here.

We are beholden to these people and to certain institutions. I do not know what it is, whether it is the building out the front gate, 100 yards down the street on the right, but I fear it is because there is something sinister going on here. We do not want to tackle these people. The Ministers can talk and giggle all they like but they will not listen. They might say that I am painful to listen to but I am telling the Ministers the facts. We want no more of these people on our shores. The people are not going to put up with it. Lives will be lost which is a serious thing for me to say but people will not accept this third force in Ireland, in balaclavas, and why should they? We had them for long enough in the past. I am telling the Government that it must accept this motion and introduce regulations. I am told that in 2015 the Central Bank asked for such regulations to be introduced but the Government refused. The Government is refusing to do so again and refused to accept amendments to the Finance Bill tabled by Deputy Fitzmaurice and myself. I ask the Government to act in the name of the Irish people and the dead generations.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is probably a book in Deputy McGrath, with all of his agricultural analogies. Deputy Catherine Murphy is next.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: This issue has really struck a chord with people. It is not that people are whipping up any kind of a reaction; members of the public are absolutely outraged to the point that they will single one out and tell one just how angry they are and I am sure the Minister is hearing it himself. The reaction is visceral. Essentially, what they see is the banks that were saved continuing to save themselves at any price and they see a bank that is 75% State owned throwing people to the wolves. Permanent TSB underperformed hugely in terms of working out solutions for some of the distressed loans on its books. It is not clear what exactly the bank is now bundling and we require more information in that regard.

I am meeting people who are very worried at the moment. I have had people come to my constituency office who have acted as guarantors for their children whose loans are in this bundle. They have reached an agreement with the bank that is due for review and they are very worried about what will happen next. These are real people who are making an honest effort. The Taoiseach said that he was concerned about the people who were making an honest effort but a lot of such people's loans are in this bundle of what are described as non-performing loans. The reality is that many of these mortgages have been restructured and a huge number of the people involved are keeping up with the commitments they made. They should be allowed to continue to do that but if their loans are sold on, that will not necessarily be the case. We know that reviews happen every three years. The bank appeared before the Oireachtas committee on finance and said as much. Essentially, it is at the time of a review that people are very exposed.

I remember the answer we got when IBRC offered its loan book for sale. We were told then that the Government did not know who was going to buy the loans and we are hearing the exact same thing now. However, if the loans are being bundled to the extent to which Permanent TSB is bundling them, it is quite obvious who will buy them. We need to define non-performing loans and we need information on that. That is absolutely critical because these funds are not compelled to offer the same suite of solutions as that being offered by the mainstream banks such as mortgage-to-rent, split mortgages and so on. The same rules do not apply.

IBRC acquired mortgages at a massive discount, amounting to almost 60% but these funds can go after people for the full amount. We hear a lot of talk about moral hazard but it is interesting to note that moral hazard was never referred to by Permanent TSB in the context of commercial loan write-offs. Its attitude is very different for mortgages for homeowners. We know that the Mortgage Arrears Resolution Process or MARP is a code of conduct for mortgage arrears but we also know from the High Court it is voluntary. Essentially, it is not the case that other entities are required to offer the same measures as are required to be offered by the banks. An article in *www.independent.ie*, with the headline, "US vulture funds clean up as Nama sells out", quotes the CEO and co-founder of Blackstone, Mr. Steve Schwarzman, thus: "We're basically waiting to see how beaten up people's psyches get and where they're willing to sell assets". His fund is waiting until people are really crushed. That is what he said although he was not talking just about Ireland but was speaking in a wider context.

This will not be without consequences if a sizeable number of people end up losing their homes. There will be also consequences for those who are living in buy-to-let properties because tenants are very exposed in that kind of situation. It is not just the people who have mortgages who may be affected but also those who are living in buy-to-let properties. We all know there is a housing crisis and where are such people to find alternative accommodation? It is also not an inconsiderable issue as far as the State is concerned if people lose their homes, go on the housing list and require a housing assistance payment. In 2017, the HAP scheme cost €152 million. That sum is growing and HAP is unsustainable over a protracted period as a housing solution. This all has a cost but at the same time, the bank will be able to record this as a loss and write off that loss against future tax liabilities. It is not too long ago that we read newspaper articles which detailed the fact that a certain bank is unlikely to have to pay tax for the next 20 years. We need to stop this silo-based approach to looking at this issue. We need to take a more rounded approach. There are measures listed in the programme for Government that could help in this context. Why is the Government not producing its own programme for this?

In terms of the Bill itself, it does not go far enough. Perhaps a combination of this and the Bill sponsored by Deputy McGuinness might be more effective. The critical issue with regard

to the silo-based approach is that people get it; they understand that this is about their next door neighbour, someone who lives down the road or a family member. They know the consequences for them. There are people who are very concerned about this who are not and will not be directly affected. There is something more going on here in that regard and I would urge the Minister to pay attention to it. I know the Minister claims he cannot intervene in commercial decisions, but the reality is that there was an intervention made by the State to make sure these banks survived. They have survived for what? What is the point of them surviving when they will do this and cause absolute misery to people? They underperformed in terms of restructuring the mortgages. I urge the Minister to insist on the information being provided in respect of what mortgages have been restructured and are performing and, critically, also in respect of the buy-to-lets. I urge him to consider just how exposed people are and how precarious their situation will be if they end up being evicted from their homes because they are being sold because there is greater value in selling them than keeping them. These funds are not here to stay. They are here to buy assets, flip them, make as much as they can and get out. This is something that will be regretted and rightly so. The public is right on this.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I commend Deputy Michael McGrath on pursuing this issue vigorously over the course of the past six years. My time is limited. In the interests of transparency, my own mortgage is owned by a fund. I have toured through the correspondence. It is on its third ownership at this stage and I have had a tour of suburban business parks today to find the address of the particular intermediary that is dealing with me. I have never actually found the owner. I am lucky I have never had to engage with them. People who have had to do so, and legal professionals representing them, tell absolute horror stories. One hears of contempt for our legal process and our laws, complete inaction, and a lack of understanding on the part of this intermediary. It really has no interest. Its job is to manage the loan on a daily basis. The people who actually own the loan seem to be beyond any reproach. This is the importance of this Bill.

Among the worst elements is that the funds are buying the loans at a certain rate, much discounted from the actual loan. The person whose mortgage it is, however, is still being pursued for every last penny. It is the ultimate highway robbery. These funds are getting mortgages at a knock-down rate but the person whose house or family home it is, who is trying to live his or her life in that home, is being pursued for every last penny plus.

I came across one case at the weekend in which a family home has been sold and there is still a balance of €17,000. The family involved has gone into a housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme. The €17,000 is being pursued vigorously. That is what is happening because these guys think they are getting away with it.

We have to send out a message that this cannot happen to family homes. The Government has to accept Deputy Michael McGrath's legislation. He has been very fair in working with the Government on the changes that need to be made to the Bill. Let us do that before Project Glas proceeds.

Deputy Robert Troy: Three weeks ago, people were horrified when they read in the *Irish Independent* that Permanent TSB was to sell off 20,000 mortgages. Family homes, small businesses and farmers were going to be left to deal with vulture funds, unregulated bodies whose sole desire is profit at all costs. The bank in which the Government is a majority shareholder was going to stand idly by. Thanks to Deputy Michael McGrath's contribution tonight, we know the EU is not forcing this issue. We should not be surprised, however. This and the previous Government have bent over backwards to facilitate the banks. They welcomed and facilitated

vulture funds into our country. Rather than give the original borrower a deal, they gave an unregulated foreign entity an opportunity to come in here and make a killing. They have enabled the banks to offset their losses against any profits for up to 20 years. They continue to allow our banks to charge huge variable interest rates when the rest of Europe is charging much less.

Banks are not to be trusted. I have been working with couples and borrowers in recent years and have been watching the banks procrastinate, stall, delay and do anything rather than deal with customers who are engaging and who do want a resolution. If that is the behaviour of a regulated financial institution, what would it be like to be dealing with unregulated entities? Behind every mortgage and borrowing is a person and a family. What the banks are doing to ordinary citizens is nothing short of disgusting. While I welcome the Government's decision not to oppose this legislation tonight, what we need to see now is action. The Government must stop coming down on the side of the banks and must start coming down on the side of the ordinary citizens and customers.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: Although I must be brief, I could speak for much longer on this issue as I have received dozens of emails from concerned constituents in the past week. I commend my colleague, Deputy Michael McGrath, on bringing forward yet another piece of impressive legislation in an effort to protect those in mortgage arrears. We are bringing forward this Bill to regulate vulture funds and protect consumer rights when it comes to mortgages and SME loans. Fianna Fáil believes PTSB and AIB should not be selling their loans to unregulated loan owners or vulture funds, as we all know them. They should instead be working through their non-performing loan book. Fianna Fáil is on the side of the mortgage holders who are making an honest effort to pay their mortgages. In addition to the Bill, the consumer protection code and the code of conduct on mortgage arrears need to be reviewed and made stronger.

Unfortunately I do not have time to go into the finer details of this Bill or the positive effects it will have in helping those in mortgage arrears. I want to read into the record three quotations from emails I received in the last week from those who took the time to contact my office to express their concerns. The first says: "It seems crazy that our banks are allowed to sell off loans to foreign, absentee landlords at prices they would not take from a distressed borrower who might otherwise refinance." Another states:

I am writing to you on behalf of thousands of homeowners living in Ireland. Those homeowners live in constant fear of losing their homes and becoming statistics. If we do not take definite action soon, homelessness in Ireland is likely to increase.

Finally:

[T]he news that PTSB is about to sell up to 20,000 mortgages to vulture funds has me very concerned. We already have a huge homelessness problem in Ireland and I think this move could potentially add to it by evicting more people from their homes.

Everyone in this country really helped out the banks by more than €60 billion. Now is their chance to repay the people and the distressed mortgage holders. AIB made a profit of €1.6 billion last year and paid dividends of €300 million to its shareholders, yet we want to bury people who are in mortgage arrears. I think we should start balancing the books here.

Deputy John Curran: I compliment Deputy Michael McGrath on bringing forward this legislation. As we debate the Bill, there are thousands of people around the country who are concerned that their mortgages may end up in the hands of vulture funds. The reason is that

vulture funds do not have the interest to work out long-term solutions. Their sole interest is to move the loan on as quickly and profitably as possible. People are in real concern and fear of losing their homes. In that regard, the Bill offers some line of defence to try to bring a level of regulation to vulture funds that does not exist at present. The intermediaries or agents on behalf of the vulture funds are regulated but not the owners themselves. That is a significant issue. I believe that if a greater level of regulation on the owners of funds was in place, the vulture funds might not have the same level of interest in these loans. That is important.

I listened to the Minister's contribution and have read it again. It is imperative that this legislation is dealt with in advance of the threatened sale by PTSB and AIB of their distressed loans and mortgages. The Minister has indicated that he will work with Deputy Michael McGrath on bringing the Bill to fruition as quickly as possible, maybe redrafting rather than doing Committee Stage amendments. I urge the Minister to deal with it in such a manner that he can be sure and we can be confident the provisions will be on the Statute Book before any of these lending institutions begin to sell their loans. If he does so, I believe the vulture funds will not buy the loans and, more importantly, those who have homes and mortgages and are under pressure at the moment will have some sense of security that a longer-term solution can be worked out for them and they will have the opportunity to remain in their own homes.

Deputy Lisa Chambers: I wish to begin by saying well done to Deputy Michael McGrath on this Bill and on his consistent work over a very long period on this issue. When the news that Permanent TSB was proposing to sell around 18,000 distressed mortgages hit the headlines, the public was angered. It was incensed. The anger was not confined to those who were actually affected but spread across the board, because there was a unity in wanting to deal with this issue. The public was annoyed because Irish citizens bailed out the banks, and it feels as though that has been forgotten. The public is also annoyed because the State is the majority shareholder in this bank and people feel that the State should step up and stop this.

We all know what it means to have a mortgage sold to a vulture fund. It means the mortgage holder will be harassed and tortured. The vulture fund will come after the mortgage holder, hoping for a quick sale, and will squeeze every last cent out of him or her, with no mercy, compassion or leeway. They are unregulated, answerable to no one, and can do what they like. The banks should be working through their loan books, working on a case-by-case basis, dealing with the distressed loans of citizens and doing the best they can to make the mortgage work out. If no solution can be found matters can be properly dealt with through the courts. Instead they are outsourcing their dirty work and are selling off what they are calling underperforming loans. They are not distinguishing between those who are genuinely trying to pay and those who are not attempting to pay. That is wrong. We must differentiate between those people. We must be on the side of ordinary citizens. We must look after those who are making genuine attempts to pay. Vulture funds will not do that.

This Bill must come before the House. It needs to be passed, but it must be *in situ* before this sale takes place, otherwise it will be for nothing. Citizens need to see that the Government is on their side, not on the side of the banks. In this particular instance it is heartening, and telling, that every citizen - even those not affected - feel very strongly about this issue and want to see action taken. They want to see our Government and our TDs back them, instead of the banks.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Michael D'Arcy): I wish to thank Deputy Michael McGrath again for the preparation of this Bill, and the other contributors

to this debate this evening.

As the Minister said earlier in the debate, it is important to put the issue in its broader context. Much has been done by the Government to help keep people in their homes, including the credit servicing legislation, the CCMA, changes to the personal insolvency regime and the Abhaile scheme.

Non-performing loans have reduced by 60% from their peak in 2013. However, the banks, including the banks in which the State has a significant investment, still need to further address their non-performing loan books. One way to do this, and to do this in large numbers, is to sell groups of loans to other entities which may not be regulated by the Central Bank. As things currently stand, if the loan owner is unregulated, they can only operate in Ireland through a regulated credit servicing firm which is regulated by the Central Bank. However, public concern about the possible actions of unregulated loan owners means that we must do something to reassure the public that these funds will not have *carte blanche* to do anything they want, regardless of the effect on the householders.

The fears and concerns of borrowers whose loans are being sold are real, but I would nonetheless encourage them to resume contact with their existing lender to ascertain their position and to see what can be done to help resolve their situation and address their position. I accept that there are issues with the legislation as currently drafted and that we will need to put a significant amount of work in to address these issues. The Minister has made a commitment that his officials will work with the Deputy in order to make the legislation more effective and, where necessary, ensure that it can be implemented on a practical level.

We have to get this legislation right in order to make sure that it does what it is intended to do and does not have any negative unintended consequences. We will have to pay particular attention to the definition of credit agreement owner. The policy intent, as stated in the explanatory memorandum, is that the owners of mortgage loans and of SME loans will be regulated. We could explore this in more detail later. Should owners of consumer loans not also be included? What about corporate loans? What about loans which were never the subject of consumer protection legislation such as intra-company loans? Let us be perfectly clear. The Government is supporting this legislation, but we need to get it right and we will work together to get it right.

As the Minister said, he is meeting with the main banks this week and last week as part of the regular engagement process. He has said that he will take these opportunities to again make it clear to the banks that they need to be fully cognisant of customers' concerns about their actions. The Minister has asked the Central Bank to review the existing code of conduct on mortgage arrears, CCMA, to examine areas where it may need to be strengthened and to report to him on the issue as soon as is practically possible. As things stand, the CCMA is a statutory code which provides a strong consumer protection framework to ensure borrowers in arrears or pre-arrears in respect of a mortgage loan secured on a primary residence are treated in a timely, transparent and fair manner. The code is part of financial services legislation and applies to all regulated financial service providers. This Bill seeks to apply the CCMA to mortgages which are not already covered by the code. Presumably this would include buy-to-let mortgages and mortgages where the borrower is not in any danger of falling into arrears.

The Bill has a number of provisions in relation the Central Bank, and it appears that it may be appropriate that this Bill be referred to the European Central Bank for its observations. Under Standing Order 149(3), it would be a matter for the relevant committee to consult with

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the European Central Bank. I appreciate that there is an urgency in relation to this legislation because of the pending sale of Permanent TSB loans.

I also welcome the Bill as introduced by the Deputy and support the policy intent behind it, but it will take significant work to develop it to a level where it can be an effective piece of legislation. The Government has committed to support this Bill, and I and the officials in the Department will provide whatever assistance that we can to this development.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: The figures I am about to present have been verified by Interest Rate Check Ireland. They relate to a man and his wife, who have five young children, who took out a mortgage in March 2009. It appears that no legal advice was given, as can be seen in the loan letter offer. The interest rate clause is also ambiguous. The APR was 7.8%, with the interest rate at 7.45%. The profit margin for the bank was 5.95% over the European Central Bank, ECB, rate at the inception of the loan. This profit margin rose to 6.76% over the ECB rate. We believe this to be exceptionally high and unjust. As can be seen in the report, the bank was methodical in not applying payments as they fell due. Payments were applied one month after payment.

The bank offered a discount in 2012 and reduced the rate, but this was later reversed in 2014 when the bank increased its rates, again to an exceptionally high level. This had the result of charging the client interest of over €107,000 over an eight year period. The cost of credit for this period, if using the ECB repo rate as the basis of the funding, would have been €8,130.82. This means that the bank made a profit of €99,466.66 over this eight year period. Had the bank offered a reasonable interest rate, for example the ECB rate plus 1%, the account balance would have been €119,241.37. The interest total for this period would have been €20,917.98 had the bank acted thus. The account would then have been €86,679.50 less than what was actually borrowed - some €200,000. It appears that this was a very unfair contract.

The client has made payments of €101,736 to date, and the account balance now exceeds the original loan by over €5,000. We believe that the contract is so unfair that if the client had been offered legal advice and been told what the cost of this product was the advice would have been not to enter into this contract. This contract in effect means that after eight years the client would owe more than what was borrowed while having made repayments of over €107,000. On this basis we believe that no reasonable person would ever have entered into this contract had he or she known the full facts.

This is what is happening out there at the moment. This is legalised robbery. I commend Deputy Michael McGrath on bringing forward this Bill. I hope we will have a successful outcome. The people are depending on us to fight their corner and case.

Deputy Shane Cassells: As we discuss vulture funds and the stress they are causing to thousands of people, I cast my mind back to and reflect on the property advertisements 15 years ago that sold people a utopian dream. Property supplements in the national and local newspapers ended up being bigger than the newspapers and there were advertisements by the banks, one bigger than the next, offering, ultimately, 100% mortgages. The advertisements sold people the dream of owning an idyllic home. In many cases, the homes were outside Dublin in commuter towns such as mine in County Meath. With every passing month, the price of homes included in the advertisements became bigger and bigger, as did the dream being sold. However, what the advertisements were spinning has not come to pass for many of the commuter towns being marketed. In my county, dreams of having things such as a rail line to Navan have been snuffed

out by the Government's new capital plan. Therefore, even for those who can afford to service their mortgage, the supporting infrastructure they were promised for their families is not in place. For the thousands more struggling to finance their mortgages which the banks beat them in the door to give them in the first place, the dream has turned sour. Banks that could not give enough sugar candy to get customers in the door in the first place in order that they could give them all of the money in the world have now, courtesy of the sale of mortgages to vulture funds, suddenly turned into the dentist looking to extract every tooth clean out of their heads. One begins to wonder if we dreamed it. Did we dream meeting the bank manager 15 years ago when he or she was clearing his or her schedule in his diary to bring people in? Now it is not possible to meet him or her; nor is it possible to meet a human being to try to work out an equitable deal because the loan has been thrown at the sharks.

I have raised with the Taoiseach the fact that two weeks ago a viable SME in my home town of Navan was put out of business. At 7 a.m., while it was still dark, a vulture fund seized a manufacturing building. When the staff arrived at 7.30 a.m., they were told to go home. The owner had pleaded with the fund to try to work out a solution to the debt problem, given that he had a viable business. However, it swooped and 15 people lost their jobs. Acting to defend citizens must fall within the remit of the Dáil because their protection from the hell the banks have created is essential.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: I acknowledge that the Minister and the Government will support the Bill in general, for which I thank him and it.

I am delighted to be afforded the time to speak to our party's Bill and commend our spokesperson, Deputy Michael McGrath, for seeking improved regulation of credit servicing firms. What we have seen happen in the past few weeks with some of the financial institutions is nothing short of a Pontius Pilate cop-out. In turn, we have seen the owners of distressed mortgages being thrown to the wolves or, should I say "vulture funds"?

I, too, reiterate that any solution put in place will only be to the benefit of borrowers who have made a genuine attempt to be helpful and co-operative with the lenders within the requirements of the code of conduct. In the Minister's opening deliberations in defending the Government's past performance he played on the reduction in the number of repossessions by financial institutions. Will he clarify if there are other reasons for the drop in the number of repossessions? For instance, it is said Permanent TSB has a difficulty with the enforceability of its mortgage deeds, that is, that bad contracts were drawn up. If they were to be sold to a vulture fund, we would have the worse case scenario. Why? The vulture fund might not be able to go to court to seek repossession on foot of the mortgage deed and would have to sue everyone for the debt due and owing.

We have enough genuine previous mortgage holders who now find themselves without a second chance of ever securing a mortgage again.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I commend my colleague, Deputy Michael McGrath, for introducing the Bill to regulate vulture funds and protect consumer rights related to mortgages and SME loans. Throughout the country people are having sleepless nights and going through the day in a fog of despair, stressed about what might befall them. My colleague, Deputy Shane Cassells, spoke about their dreams going up in smoke and turning into nightmares.

Our core belief is that Permanent TSB and AIB should not be selling loans to vulture funds.

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My party and I are on the side of the mortgage holders who are making an honest effort to repay their mortgage. The Minister is failing to protect adequately borrowers who have found themselves in arrears, despite the majority co-operating with their lender. It is neither acceptable nor good practice to allow vulture funds to be unregulated. We must think of the social and human cost of this behaviour.

It is important to note that the Central Bank of Ireland sought the power to regulate loan owners, not just the intermediaries, but the Government has still not brought forward the legislation to deal with the matter. It is, therefore, up to Deputy Michael McGrath and the Fianna Fáil Party to deal with it. The bottom line is that it is the loan owners who make key decisions such as the setting of the interest rate and, crucially, when to enforce a loan. They do so beyond the reach and control of the Central Bank of Ireland.

As of now, 11,314 family homes and 6,778 buy-to-let properties are owned by unregulated loan owners. Potentially, Permanent TSB could more than double that number. This is not normal banking and the Government cannot wash its hands of the issue. It has a moral, civic and social duty to ensure it deals with it properly and appropriately. In commending the Bill to the House, it must be treated as priority legislation. Deputy Michael McGrath, the Fianna Fáil Party and I will not allow it to gather dust. It must be enacted with speed and haste.

Question put and agreed to.

**Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) (Amendment) Bill 2018:
Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]**

An Ceann Comhairle: As this is a Private Member's Bill, it must, under Standing Orders 84A(3)(a) and 141, be referred to a select committee. The relevant committee is the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Orders 84A(3)(a) and 141.

Question put and agreed to.

The Dáil adjourned at 10 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 7 March 2018.